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Winter traction and visibility essentials

by Paul Williams

Although some parts of Canada don't get much snow and ice in winter, most Canadians battle severe weather conditions and slippery roads for almost one-half of each year.

This winter, I did the full number on my 2001 Ford Focus, replacing the tires, rims, windshield wipers, washer fluid and trying **a brilliant new product, called Tire Totes, which I'll describe further on.**

I also had a winter service and checked the battery, so I'm ready (I hope).

Winter tires

A winter tire provides up to 25% better traction than all-season tires. In cold weather tests by the Ministère des Transports du Québec and CAA Québec, a small car with four winter tires experienced an improvement in braking by 23% (11.5 metres) over similar cars with all-season tires (that's nearly three car lengths).

CanadianDriver continues to suggest a set of four winter tires (following Transport Canada and CAA recommendations), as opposed to two. Their use in cold weather can transform the handling of some cars, and will provide an improvement for all cars. Tires like Michelin X-Ice are designed to provide superior traction in both icy and snowy conditions. Their directional tread pattern pushes water aside and digs down through snow to the road surface, maximizing your ability to start, turn and stop.



Michelin X-Ice mounted on Paul's 2001 Ford Focus. Click image to enlarge



Mounting tires on rims.

The sipes (small grooves that cross larger tread blocks) act as a sponge as the tire travels over the road surface. The softer rubber compound of winter tires like these permits them to squirm over icy surfaces, optimizing grip, and maintaining traction (all-seasons will stay soft down to -15 C, but winter tires can tolerate -40 C before hardening).

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Marking the summer tires
Click image to enlarge

www.Tiretrends.com, and other retailers, and come in sizes from 13"-17". Like all dedicated winter tires, the soft compound will wear faster than an all-season tire. But don't forget, using winter tires will extend the life of your all-seasons by three years because you'll be on them only half the time each year.

Do make sure you rotate front to back when seasonally changing tires. Garages will typically mark the tires, so they know where to put them on. You should, too.

Wheels

Along with the tires, I'm using a set of steel rims. If you factor in the cost of removing tires from your rims, the stress on the tire when doing this, and the potential damage to an expensive alloy rim that may be on your car, a set of steel wheels will pay for themselves over two seasons (the rims for my car were \$240 for the set).

Additionally, it's so much easier to swap rims rather than tires, although admittedly, black steel doesn't do much for the look of your car.



Stack of Tires in Totes



Putting on a Tote

However, it is a hassle to store your summer tires and haul them from your garage at changeover time in the spring (it's even a hassle hauling them out of storage if you're changing them yourself). Enter Tire Totes, one of the most obvious products that hasn't existed until now.

These are effectively luggage for your wheels. They're made from ballistic nylon (same as knapsacks) and come with Velcro ties and carry handles. Simply roll your wheel/tire onto the Tire Tote, and wrap it around the tire. It's one-size-fits-all, tough and washable.

Tire Totes are currently found at select Canadian Tire locations (they're trying them out to gauge interest), and from what

I could see, interest is high. They're \$19.95 for a pair. Don't you wish you'd invented them?

Wiper technology

The last two items on my winter list were a pair of Teflon winter wiper blades and some washer fluid with Teflon additive. Winter wipers with a rubber boot are so much better than summer wipers with an open frame. They stay flexible and are less



likely to warp.

The winter washer fluid freezes at a lower temperature than summer fluid, and contains additives that help the wiper slide over your windshield.



Teflon blades. Click image to enlarge

It's surprising how much fluid you can use, so keep a spare container in the car.

Postscript

After writing this article, my car was driven at a fairly slow speed into a curb (not by me, I should point out). The conditions were slick, and control was lost.

The result was a bent steel rim that deformed the tire, which was not noticed upon subsequent (brief) inspection. Fortunately, the car could be driven, but it was not safe.

Two points: first, if you are in an accident, even a small one, carefully inspect your car. Do this in a safe place, of course, but check the wheels and tires, the lights, make sure the exhaust is not blocked, make sure there's no debris under the car. Take your time. Make sure everything works as it should.

Second: even winter tires cannot fully protect you against losing traction in all road conditions. In winter, they are a definite improvement over all-season or performance tires, but they're not infallible.

Paul Williams is an Ottawa-based freelance automotive writer and senior writer for CanadianDriver.

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