Kim’s Tips; Springtime Checks – Make sure your vehicle is sound, safe and ready for the coming spring and summer!!

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With welcome sunshine after a prolonged dull, wet winter, now is a good time to check your vehicle, writes Kim Henson.

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Cold, wet weather (such as we in the UK have experienced for many months!) is unhelpful in terms of encouraging drivers to inspect their vehicles, but with sunshine making an appearance again and temperatures rising a little, it is worth investing a little time now to make sure that your car (or commercial vehicle) is in good condition and roadworthy.

As I have often said before (on Wheels-Alive and elsewhere), such checks don't take long, will help your vehicle perform better and more economically, and, importantly, it is worth noting that if it is checked at fairly frequent, regular intervals (say once a month), it is easier to spot any defects before they become serious and expensive to fix.

You don't have to be a mechanic to carry out these checks, but of course if you are unsure about any aspect (especially safety-related), it is wise to take professional advice from a competent mechanic/garage operation.

Here are 10 suggested checks to carry out – deliberately chosen so that these can be actioned by drivers/owners, regardless of technical ability… However, if in doubt seek professional assistance.

I realise that some of these aspects may be well-known to some of our readers, but I am including them here in an attempt to help others who might find the information useful.

1. Tyre condition and pressures

Tread depth is crucial to good grip, especially on wet or icy roads (still prevalent in springtime), and for car tyres the legal minimum is 1.6 mm over the central three-quarters of the tread width, and all around the circumference.

It is unwise to allow the tread to wear down to the minimum permissible; greater depth means better grip!!

Make quite sure too that tyres that look good, tread-wise, from the outside edge, are equally okay on the inner edges; wear on one edge may be due to incorrect tracking (consult a tyre specialist or a reputable garage).

While in this area, inspect the wheels too for cracks and other damage.

Check your vehicle's handbook for the correct tyre pressures (recommendations can vary with the load on board and temperature), and make sure that all your tyres are properly inflated.

A footpump, pressure gauge and tyre tread depth gauge are all inexpensive and useful.

Note that electric vehicles (EVs) are much heavier than conventional models, and much harder on their tyres, which should be inspected more frequently. For EVs it is also especially important that the tyres on the vehicle are of the correct type as specified by the manufacturer of the vehicle.

2. Screenwashers and wiper blades

Check the screenwash reservoir fluid level, and if it is low, top up with proprietary screenwash mixture in the recommended proportions with water – ideally use de-ionised or distilled water to minimise limescale blockages in the pipework and jets, especially in 'hard' tapwater areas.

The screenwash fluid will help to cut through grease and road grime. Don't use washing-up liquid as this can clog the system and is not great for paintwork.

Closely examine the wiper blade rubbers (front, back and headlamp wipers, where fitted), and if you can see or feel any rough sections of the blade, or indeed signs of the blade

breaking up, fit a new set.

Ensure too that the windscreens and side windows are cleaned often, for a clear view at all times.

3. Lights and other electrical aspects

Assessing whether lamps are working is straightforward enough for most of the lights around the vehicle. For easier checking of the indicators, hazard warning flashers and brake lamps, it is helpful to have an assistant on hand to confirm whether the bulbs are illuminating as designed on command – or not.

Even if you are working on your own, the indicators/hazard lamps can be viewed during a quick walk-around of the vehicle, and the brake lamps can be activated by temporarily and very carefully wedging a suitable length of wood (or similar 'prop') between the brake pedal and the forward face of the driver's seat. Alternatively, wait until darkness falls, when a gentle prod on the brake pedal should light the brake lamps, which may then be seen reflecting off a vehicle, walls or doors (etc.), behind your vehicle.

Of course, the brake lamps and indicators will only operate with the ignition turned 'on'.

Check too that all electrical circuits and warning lamps are operating as designed.

4. Engine oil

It is essential that the engine oil level is maintained at the correct level, and with modern vehicles it is vitally important that only the correct specification lubricant is used (your handbook should be able to help you in this respect).

Several respected trade sources advise that is best to change the engine oil and filter at least every 6,000 miles, or once a year (whichever comes first), rather than using the extended oil/filter change intervals sometimes advocated by the vehicle manufacturers.

Experience shows that the engines that just carry on working longest (and trouble-free) are those that have had their lubricant and filter changed often!

5. Suspension and steering

A look beneath each corner of your vehicle, with the aid of a bright torch or inspection lamp, should help to highlight any problems that are developing. In particular, look for signs of physical damage (especially to coil springs that may have been fractured by pothole impacts), and watch for signs of leakage from shock absorbers (dampers), the steering rack (oil or grease escaping from damaged/worn-out rack gaiters) or driveshafts (again dodgy gaiters are a likely cause). Such problems need to fixed right away.

6. Bodywork structure and paintwork

Washing, rinsing and drying off the exterior paintwork is always worthwhile in springtime, before attending to minor scratches/areas of damage, and polishing the paint will make it more resilient to exposure to sunshine and rainwater.

After winter use, accumulations of damaging road salt are likely to be present under the vehicle, and especially around the wheel arches. Washing away salt-laden mud from these areas is a good idea. Personally I like to use a bucket of warm water, car shampoo and a soft brush to shift such deposits, then rinse off the debris with clean water.

If you decide to use a pressure washer be VERY careful. Some of the water jets produced by these machines are so powerful that they can damage paintwork, dislodge brake system components (etc.) and, especially, can wreck electrical systems by forceful water ingress.

For the same reason, it’s wise to avoid introducing water, particularly at high pressure, around the engine bay, and it’s especially crucial to keep water away from electrical plugs/sockets and the vehicle’s Electronic Control Unit (E.C.U.). There may be more than one control unit too; just be very cautious! Mistakes here can be very expensive; if in doubt, don’t do it!!

7. Hinges and catches – plus sun roof mechanisms

Often overlooked, the hard-worked hinges and catches around the vehicle can suffer in time due to lack of lubrication. The application of a little engine oil or ‘spray’ grease from an aerosol will help to prevent seizure or ‘reluctant’ operation, but check in the vehicle’s handbook for specific lubricant recommendations here.

If your car has a sun roof, open it fully and make sure that the rainwater drain tubes are not choked with debris (if so, carefully flush them through); overflows can result in water ingress into the car. Make sure too that the sun roof’s operating mechanism operates freely; sparing lubrication of the slides and pivots will help in this respect. Check your vehicle’s literature or ask your dealer about specific lubrication recommendations.

8. Carpets/floor coverings – including within the bootspace

It is wise to check the floor coverings (and beneath them) for signs of dampness, which can result in the formation of mould and ultimately may also cause the floor pans to rust. If the floor coverings are damp, ascertain where the moisture is coming from – and fix the leak!

9. Air conditioning systems

It is a good idea to have your vehicle’s air conditioning system checked (by specialists or by your vehicle dealer) at the start of the spring/summer season. If the system is not operating effectively, the car can become an uncomfortable place in which to travel (and the demist system will almost certainly be ineffective), and a strange smell may be emitted; in this case get it assessed as soon as possible.

10. Tow bars, trailers and caravans

If your vehicle has a tow bar fitted, inspect the mountings and check the security of the attaching nuts/bolts (also the ‘chassis’!!) and ensure that the electrical sockets are in good condition and firmly attached too.

Assessment of trailers and caravans is is a wide-ranging subject (and many modern caravans are bristling with electronic circuitry that requires diligent checking!) but in particular make sure that the tyres are in good condition (if in any doubt, renew them!), and correctly inflated. Check too that all the lights are operational; this is easily accomplished by plugging the trailer/caravan electrical system into that of the tow vehicle.

Important Note: Don't activate a circuit (by turning it on) until the trailer/caravan plug(s) has/have been connected to the car's socket(s). It is very easy to blow a fuse or worse if connecting up, or indeed disconnecting plugs/sockets, while a circuit is 'live'.

I hope the above helps give you peace of mind to enjoy your springtime and summer motoring.