

How to: Winterize your Motorcycle

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We may not want to admit it, but winter is just around the corner. And as the air cools off and the snow starts falling, most of us begrudgingly store our bikes and impatiently wait for spring to ride again.

But storing your bike in the winter isn't as simple and just throwing a cover on it and hoping in the car. In order to keep your motorcycle in running condition, there's quite a bit of work that needs to be done before you can put it away. Talk about adding insult to the injury of not being able to ride. However, if you properly get your bike ready for winter storage, it'll make getting it running again when the warmth returns a whole lot easier. Plus, proper storage procedures will help you avoid any costly repairs come spring.

Of course, with every motorcycle there are different things that will need to be addressed before you put it away, but here are a few general rules on how to properly winterize your motorcycle and get it ready to be stored for the winter.

Wash it up: You may think that there's just going to be dust gathering all winter long and you might as well put off washing it until you use it next, but letting bug guts and grime sit on your paint finish can damage the paint. Removing any corrosive contaminants that are on your bike will help to keep your bike looking as pretty as the day you bought it. Just make sure that your motorcycle is completely dry before you store it.

Oil it down: Moisture is your number one enemy when it comes to winter and your motorcycle. You may not be able to see it with your naked eye, but the cold winter air is perfect for moisture to gather in your engine and cause damage and rusting. In order to keep your engine and spark plugs from having to battle with moisture, coat them in engine oil or engine fogger. It usually helps to warm up your engine before you oil anything to get rid of any moisture that may already have gathered. Remove the spark plugs, put a little squirt of warm engine oil into the holes, and then turn your engine over by hand to coat the cylinder walls. Be sure to also get your piston rings and valve seats. Once everything is coated, replace the old spark plugs with some fresh ones.

Change the oil: Over time, the chemicals in engine oil have a tendency to become acidic and will eventually harm your engine rather than help it. So even when your bike is sitting during the winter, you want to make sure that the oil sitting in it isn't going to wreck your engine. Before putting your bike up for the cold season, give your bike an oil change. It's best to also change it again when you take it out for spring as oil goes bad with time and not necessarily with riding. If you plan to change your oil again before your first ride after the snow has thawed, you won't need to change your oil filter. If you're going to just hop on and go in the spring, change your filter as well as your oil before you store it.

Lube it up: If it's ever been lubed, lube it again. Any part of your motorcycle that needs to be lubed at any point such as your throttle and clutch cables and even your motorcycle pivot points such as the shifter and kick stand should be lubed again before storage. Keeping your bits and pieces lubed during the winter will help keep moisture from building up and rusting or binding to parts. For a helpful tool for cables, check out the BikeMaster Cable Luber. If you run off of a chain drive, give it a scrub down then lube it back up. For belt drives, inspect the belt for wear and tear and change it if you see any cracking, damage or tension. With a drive shaft you'll need to inspect it for any leaks as well as change the rear end fluid.

Give it a little gas: Gas tanks are a prime area of damage during winter storage as they have a tendency to rust when not in use. There are two ways to keep your gas tank from pesky rust damage: you can either drain your gas tank and make sure it is completely dry before storing your bike or you can fill it completely and add a fuel stabilizer. There's a healthy debate in the motorcycle world about which way is actually a better way to store a bike but we're pretty big fans of using Sta-Bil Fuel Stabilizer with a full tank of gas. On your last ride of the season, stop in at the gas station nearest to where you will be storing your bike and add the proper amount of fuel stabilizer and then top the engine off with gas. A full tank will keep moisture from building up while the stabilizer will keep the gasoline from stratifying. Plus adding the stabilizer before topping off that last little bit of gas and the short ride home will help mix the gas and stabilizer together before storage. It will also run the stabilizer through the carb and injectors. Once you hit home, turn off the petcock.

To drain or not to drain? There's a bit of healthy debate about what to do with carburetors during winter storage. Some people feel that it is best to drain the carbs completely in order to keep the fuel from turning to varnish and clogging them up. But with leaving your carbs empty, you run the risk of your seals and gaskets drying out and becoming brittle. Plus it is common for carb floats to stick in the open position after a carburetor is left empty for long periods of time. On the other hand, if you've mixed your fuel with a high quality stabilizer such as the Gold Eagle Sta-Bil Fuel Stabilizer and have ran your engine enough to allow the fuel and stabilizer mix to run all of the way through your engine including your carbs, many people believe that the stabilizer will be enough to keep the fuel from turning to varnish. If you're storing your bike for only a few months, the stabilizer should be enough to keep your carb from clogging. If you'll be storing your motorcycle for an extended period of time, you might want to consider draining the carb completely.

Keep it charged: Batteries are a fickle beast. You never want them to have no charge and you certainly never want them to over charge. But when your bike isn't in use, it can be easy to forget about keeping those cells happy. Still, batteries have a tendency to self-discharge if let sit over time. Keep your battery hooked up to a charger to make sure that it doesn't die out while you're bundled up by the fireplace. But be sure not to let it overcharge or you'll completely wreck the cells. Use a battery tender that will charge your battery but shut off when it's done so that it won't overcharge and will require no maintenance from you. If you notice that the posts are corroded at all, clean them off before hooking up the charger. Before you leave your bike to charge in solitude, check the levels on the cells (unless you have a maintenance free battery). If your levels are running a little low, top it off with distilled water.

Tired tires: If your bike is left sitting for a long period of time, you'll probably return to some very tired tires come springtime. In order to prevent extra tire wear during storage, check your tire pressure and fill them to just below the maximum pressure that your tires specify. This will keep your tires from becoming under deflated as the air inside them cools down. Then you should put your motorcycle on a center stand in order to keep the tires off the ground. If your tires are let sit in the same position all winter long, they could develop flat spots. Keeping the tires off of the ground will allow them to keep their shape for the spring. If you don't have a center stand, at least get the rear tire off of the ground with a rear lift stand or be sure to rotate your tires by rolling your motorcycle back and forth every couple of weeks. Also, if you need to leave your tires down, put a piece of carpet under them to keep any moisture from seeping into the tires from the concrete.

Anti-freeze: If you happen to live in a place that gets way below freezing, check your antifreeze to make sure that it's still working properly to avoid your engine from freezing. Test it with a hydrometer and be sure to replace it every two years when you go through the winterizing checklist.

Plug out pests: Mice and other rodents are notorious for hiding from the cold inside exhaust pipes and making homes out of air filters. In order to avoid any furry surprises when it's time to ride again, plug up your pipes with an exhaust plug like the Moose Racing Exhaust Plug.

Cover it up: With your motorcycle fully decked out for the cold winter season, invest in a nice motorcycle cover. A good motorcycle cover will keep the moisture out without letting moisture build up under it and on your motorcycle while keeping any dust or dirt off of it. If you're storing it outside, be sure to get a cover with a safety feature to keep away from any wondering eyes. If you're storing it inside, it's still important to keep your bike covered but you can invest in a lighter.

With your bike fully prepared for a long lay up, you'll find that the winter is the perfect time to get done any maintenance or upgrade projects that you've had on your mind. Throw on some new exhaust pipes or switch out those handlebars, that will make you feel like you're hopping on a whole new motorcycle come springtime. You may not be able to ride through the snow, but nothing is stopping you from getting your hands a little greasy and actually starting one of those projects that you've been dreaming about all summer.