

Convertible Top Care

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by Prentice St. Clair

The article below is the property of "Detail in Progress", which is owned by Prentice St. Clair. Mr. St. Clair provides consulting and training in automotive reconditioning. He can be reached directly at pstc875437@aol.com or (619) 701-1100. Please also visit Rightlook.com for more information on training and products for automotive interior care. Mr. St. Clair strongly recommends RaggTop Cleaner and RaggTop Protectant for cloth and vinyl top care on all vehicles. This excellent product is available at Rightlook.com. The Corvette Action Center would like to thank Mr. St. Clair for allowing us to include his work on our site. This article was written with professional automotive detailers in mind.

In our daily work as detailers, we are not exposed to convertible tops far less often than other vehicle surfaces. Even so, maintenance of convertible tops is relatively straightforward. They may seem fragile at first, but with adequate precaution can be kept looking as new as the rest of the vehicle.

There are two primary types of convertible top material--canvas (i.e., "rag top") and vinyl. If there is windowing, it is usually made of plastic and less frequently glass. Maintenance of these surfaces, as with all vehicle surfaces, is part of a systematic approach to detailing the entire vehicle.

It is always a good idea to check the owner's manual on the vehicle for manufacturer's recommendations regarding care of the top. Also ask the customer if he or she recalls any specific instructions from the dealer. (Please note that doing so does not show knowledge weakness but instead, if done with confidence and authority, demonstrates that you are a professional who is not afraid to conduct appropriate research so as to properly maintain this customer's vehicle.) This information, combined with your general knowledge of vehicle surface maintenance, will allow you to do the job correctly.

First, let's talk about the inside of the convertible top. Check for accumulations of dust, especially in the folds and corners near the back of the soft top. This can be removed by a vacuum with a duster brush attachment, compressed air, or a damp towel with just a hint of your favorite all-purpose interior cleaner. Also wipe any rods or rails that might be part of the top's frame. Clean any window according to its composition--if glass, just as you would any other window glass. However, if the window is made of plastic, special care must be taken as this material is easily scratched. I recommend using just a damp, clean chamois (no chemicals!) followed by a smooth (not terry) 100% cotton cloth, ideally flannel. (Note that most window cleaners are not recommended for clear plastic.) If there is heavy grime on the plastic window, use a cleaner specially designated for clear plastic.

Somewhere between cleaning the inside and the outside of the top, open the top and clean the surfaces that are unreachable when the top is up (covering the car). These surfaces include the rear window deck, which sometimes is a painted surface that can be waxed, as well as plastic and vinyl panels that are often ignored in maintaining these kinds of vehicles.



The method to use for cleaning the outside of the convertible top depends on the material with which it is made. During your detail prep wash, vinyl tops can be cleaned with a medium strength dilution of all-purpose cleaner and a scrub brush. Often, vinyl tops have an accumulation of dirt and grime that needs to be scrubbed off using repeated steps. Be sure to spray down the entire vehicle first to reduce the likelihood of the cleaner streaking down the painted panels of the vehicle. (Also, be careful with your brush around plastic windowing--any brush will scratch this surface in an instant!) This kind of strong cleaning of a vinyl top should always be followed by an application of dressing.

Canvas tops are actually easier to maintain than vinyl tops. Usually, it is sufficient to wash a canvas top using a mitt and the car wash formula that you are using on the rest of the vehicle. In the case of stains like bird droppings and others, use a mild dilution of all-purpose cleaner and start with a soft brush. If the soft brush does not adequately remove the stain, go with a medium brush and scrub lightly. It is unlikely that even the strongest all-purpose cleaners will cause immediate damage to a canvas top, but in the case of stubborn stains, it may be wise to explain to the customer that the stain can be removed but not without weakening the fibers of the canvas. Let the customer decide which is more important--no stain or the longevity of the top. Canvas tops require no dressing, although dressing will not harm the top, especially if you consider that most canvas tops are constructed of nylon (plastic) fibers.

Clear plastic windows that are not so clear anymore can often be polished back nearly to their original transparency. Considering the cost of replacing this kind of window, not to mention the safety issue of driver visibility, the detailer can make a hefty profit on this type of service. There are clear plastic cleaners and polishes that, combined with careful use of a small-head random orbital polisher, can produce amazing results.

Finally, if the customer complains of squeaking or rubbing noises emanating from the top, use your favorite dressing to lubricate the seals, grommets, and other places where the top joins the frame of the vehicle.

With a small amount of caution and common sense, maintaining convertible tops is a simple part of the detailing process.

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From Chris Johnson, Nov. 2003:

The Corvette Museum and General Motors recommends using RAGGTOPP products for cleaning/protecting Fabric and Vinyl convertible tops. Mr. St. Clair's article is outdated or he needs to update it. DO NOT USE an all-purpose cleaner. The Haartz Corporation is the OEM for every American and European convertible automobile manufactured throughout the world. They told me to only use RAGGTOPP products. www.haartz.com

Chris Johnson

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