Article published on December 6th 2011 | Auto

Early fall, before cold weather sets in, is an optimal time for car care, according to the experts at the nonprofit National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE).

There's time to undo summer's wear and tear and prep for icy conditions ahead. The following checklist is provided as a courtesy of ASE:

* Follow the service schedule recommended in your vehicle's owner's manual.

* Have engine driveability problems (hard starts, rough idling, stalling and diminished power) corrected at a reputable repair shop. Cold weather will make existing problems worse.

* Replace all dirty filters. You'll see better gas mileage, too.

* Change your oil as specified in your manual.

* Flush and refill the cooling system as recommended. The level, condition and concentration of the coolant should be checked periodically. (Do not remove the radiator cap before the engine has cooled.) A certified auto technician also should check the tightness and condition of drive belts, clamps and hoses.

* Have a professional check the condition of the battery. The only accurate way to detect a weak battery is with professional equipment. But do-it-yourselfers can scrape away corrosion from posts and cable connections, clean all surfaces and re-tighten all connections. Wear eye protection and rubber gloves.

* Examine tires for remaining tread life, uneven wearing and cupping, and check the sidewalls for cuts and nicks. Remember to check tire pressure once a month. Let the tires "cool down" before checking the pressure. Don't forget your spare, and be sure the jack is rust-free and working. Have your tires rotated as recommended.

* Let the pros handle complex tasks. Look for shops with modern equipment, neat surroundings, polite staff and certified technicians.

* Be prepared for emergencies. Carry gloves, boots, blankets, flares, a small shovel, sand or cat litter, tire chains, a flashlight and a cell phone. Put a few "high-energy" snacks in your glove box.

ASE was founded in 1972 to improve the quality of automotive service and repair through the voluntary testing and certification of automotive professionals. ASE-certified technicians wear blue and white ASE shoulder insignia and carry credentials listing their exact areas of certification, while their employers often display the blue and white ASE sign. They can be found at all types of repair facilities, from dealerships to independent garages and franchises.

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http://www.articleside.com/auto-articles/take-advantage-of-gentle-weather-for-car-care.htm - Article Side

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Article Keywords:
Take Advantage of Gentle Weather for Car Care

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