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What Features Should I Look For On A Used Car?

Liz Gorham

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A weekly question/answer column

What Features Should I Look For On A Used Car?

Liz Gorham answers:*

You can tell a lot about a car without driving it an inch. When you find a car that meets your year, make and model requirements, here are some things to check. Look the car over on a clear day so that rain, darkness or the glare of the car lot's lights don't mask symptoms of trouble.

- Check fluids and look for leaks. When the engine is cold, check the radiator to be sure the coolant isn't rusty. In cars with automatic transmissions, be sure the transmission fluid is pinkish and smells a bit like chestnuts. Check the ground under the car as well as the car's underside for dark stains or puddles. Watch for leaks or stains around brake cylinders, brake hoses, valve- cover gaskets and other engine parts.
- Check the body. While you're looking under the car, check the frame for fresh welds or heat- discolored areas. Look for fresh undercoating. Check the car for body panels that don't quite match the rest of the car or fresh paint on a car less than 3 years old.
- Check the interior. Look for traces of water leaks in the trunk and passenger space, around the windshield and rear window. Try out all interior hardware. Check window controls, safety belts, seat adjustments, and examine doors, windows and trunk lid. Turn on ignition and check the oil light, wipers, washers, radio, heater, air conditioner and any other gauges and controls. Check lights and signals as well as rubber pedal covers.
- Take it for a drive. Check steering and alignment. Be sure the car starts easily and picks up smoothly. Apply the brakes firmly on a deserted road at 45 mph, but don't lock the wheels. The car should stop evenly, quickly and in a straight line in three consecutive stops, and brakes shouldn't grab or vibrate. Check for burning oil by driving at a highway speed, taking foot off the pedal, then accelerating for a few seconds. If blue smoke appears, it is probably burning oil. Billowy white smoke indicates that water is getting into the combustion chambers, probably from a crack in the engine or cylinder head.
- For more information on inspecting a used car, check with your local county Extension office (listed under Utah State University Extension in the white pages) to borrow the video "Getting a Car on the Road: What to Look for When Buying a Used Car."

Next week: What sources should I check before buying a used car?

* Liz Gorham is Utah State University Extension Family Resource Specialist