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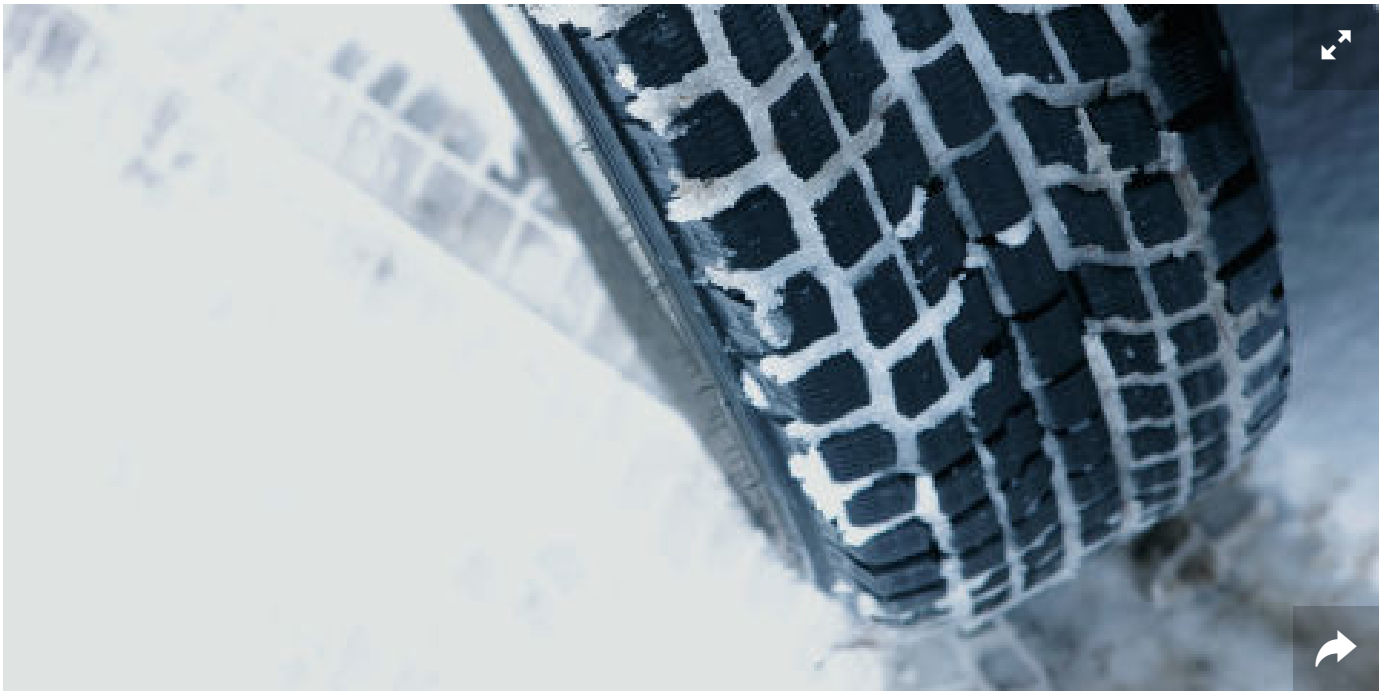
THE CODE

The Ultimate Winter Tire Guide

Everything you wanted to know about getting your tires ready for winter, but were afraid to ask.



BY NELSON IRESON



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Chances are good that you don't think about your tires as much as you ought to. Whether you're driving on the factory-specified all-seasons or tempting fate on the cheapest pizza

cutters your local garage could dig out of storage, you'll probably benefit from a quick course in what tires are best suited for keeping you and your family safe in any weather. As we make our way through fall and towards winter, tires become more important than ever, especially to truck and SUV owners who may be asking more of their vehicles than the average driver. So, here's what you need to know.

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Tire 101

The rubber compound, it turns out, has a great deal of influence on how a tire behaves in a given temperature range. Summer-specific tires, for instance, can lose grip once the mercury drops below 45 or 50 degrees, potentially becoming less safe even in dry conditions. While all-season tires are typically rated to work in sub-freezing temperatures, they also have to work in the heat of summer, which means that they have to make a compromise to span such a huge range of environment; they too begin to lose grip once temperatures fall below 45 degrees. Winter and snow tires, on the other hand, don't have to make that compromise. They're designed specifically for low temperatures, they can deliver superior grip on days when the thermometer drops below freezing — and even when it keeps dropping.

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Another factor that plays a large role in grip and flexibility is tread design. Some designs are ideal for clearing slush and snow, some are aimed at getting mud out of the way to provide better off-road performance in the wet, still others are designed to keep road noise to a minimum while clearing away standing water with aplomb. Bottom line: The tread you choose can drastically affect the grip you'll have in any given condition, so it's important to choose accordingly.

Snow tires typically have deeper treads than all-season tires for superior slush evacuation and, seemingly paradoxically, superior traction in the white stuff because snow packs into the tire tread and increases grip. Likewise, snow tires have even more sipes—auto jargon for tiny slits in the tire surface—that provide thousands of edges to enhance grip for both acceleration and stopping.

Speaking of tread, drivers who live in more extreme winter climates, where snow and ice will be on the ground a significant portion of the year, may want to consider studded tires—if they're legal in your area. Studded tires have small metal studs embedded in the tread surface, intended to enhance grip on the hard, slick surface of packed snow and especially ice. But studded tires can damage the road surface when it's not covered in ice, so some states have outlawed their use. As of this moment, seven states ban them outright and most others have at least some restrictions. (To check your state, see [this list](#).) Also, because they have hundreds of tiny pieces of steel embedded in the rubber, studded tires can make for a very noisy ride. On the other hand, even if studded tires are legal in your area, you may not need them—rubber compounds have made big leaps in capability over the past decade, and the conventional belief in the superiority of studs may no longer apply. Still, in the most

extreme environments, studded tires are often the best choice.

Finally, there's a category of tires known as "studdable," which feature a tread designed to work without studs but which can accommodate the addition of studs down the road if



1 example of this type of tire.



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So What Should I Buy?

For those states blessed with weather that doesn't include snow and ice, winter can still bring more rain than usual, not to mention colder temperatures. In these environments, good all-season tires are the smart choice. And when in doubt, go with the major brands: Bridgestone, Michelin, Pirelli, Continental, BFGoodrich, Goodyear, Firestone, Hankook, Kumho, Toyo, and Yokohama, for example. All of these brands offer excellent all-season choices that will provide a balance of ride comfort, quietness, traction, and longevity. Sticking with the tire recommended by your truck or SUV's manufacturer is always a good move, too, unless you need winter-specific tires and the manufacturer has recommended no suitable tire. In that case, consult a trusted tire shop to find something tailored for your specific vehicle.

As for price, you should expect to spend about what you'd spend on normal tires, probably

somewhere between \$400 and \$600 for a good set of snow or winter tires. It's possible to pay as little as \$250 for low-end tires in certain sizes, or as much as \$1,000 or more for larger wheel diameters or higher-performance models.

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If you know you're going to have to deal with snow and ice this winter, you should seriously consider investing in a spare set of inexpensive wheels sized appropriately for your vehicle, mounted with a set of winter-specific tires. It's important to reserve your winter tires for use when it's actually cold (average temperatures at 40 degrees or colder) or there's a serious chance of snow on the ground, however, as their cold-weather compound won't stand up long in warmer, drier climates.

While many of the major tire manufacturers also make excellent winter/snow tire options, there are some smaller brands you might want to consider as well, including Nokian. For all-around winter tire use on trucks and SUVs, long-time favorites include Michelin's Latitude line and Bridgestone's Blizzak range.



Courtesy of Ford

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Storing Your Winter Tires

Winter tires on a spare set of wheels can last several seasons before they need to be replaced, allowing you to get the most value out of your investment in safer winter driving —provided you store them correctly. Stored incorrectly, you may find the tires you put away last winter have dried out, cracked, become deformed, or otherwise become no longer safe for use.

Correct storage of winter tires, thankfully, is simple and inexpensive:

-Keep the tires out of direct sunlight, as the ultraviolet light and heat absorbed from the sun can age them before their time. This can be as simple as putting each tire into a large black trash bag in your garage. Be sure to seal the bags tightly to minimize ozone exposure, which can also prematurely age the tires.

-Clean the wheels and tires before putting them into storage. Getting all that road salt and grime off will keep both tires and wheels from corroding while they sit during the spring, summer, and fall.

-Keep the tires cool and dry. If your garage gets hot in the summer, or there's any chance of water intrusion, you'll do well to put your winter tires in the basement or other climate-controlled environment.

These same tips also apply to storing all-season tires if you choose to put higher-performance tires on your SUV or pickup during the summer months.

If you follow these simple guidelines, you'll not only be able to choose the tires best-suited to your climate and auto usage, but you'll know how to take care of them when they're not in use to maximize the tires' life, your budget, and the safety of you and your loved ones all year round.

* This article is part of The Code, an editorial partnership between Road & Track and [Ford F-150](#).



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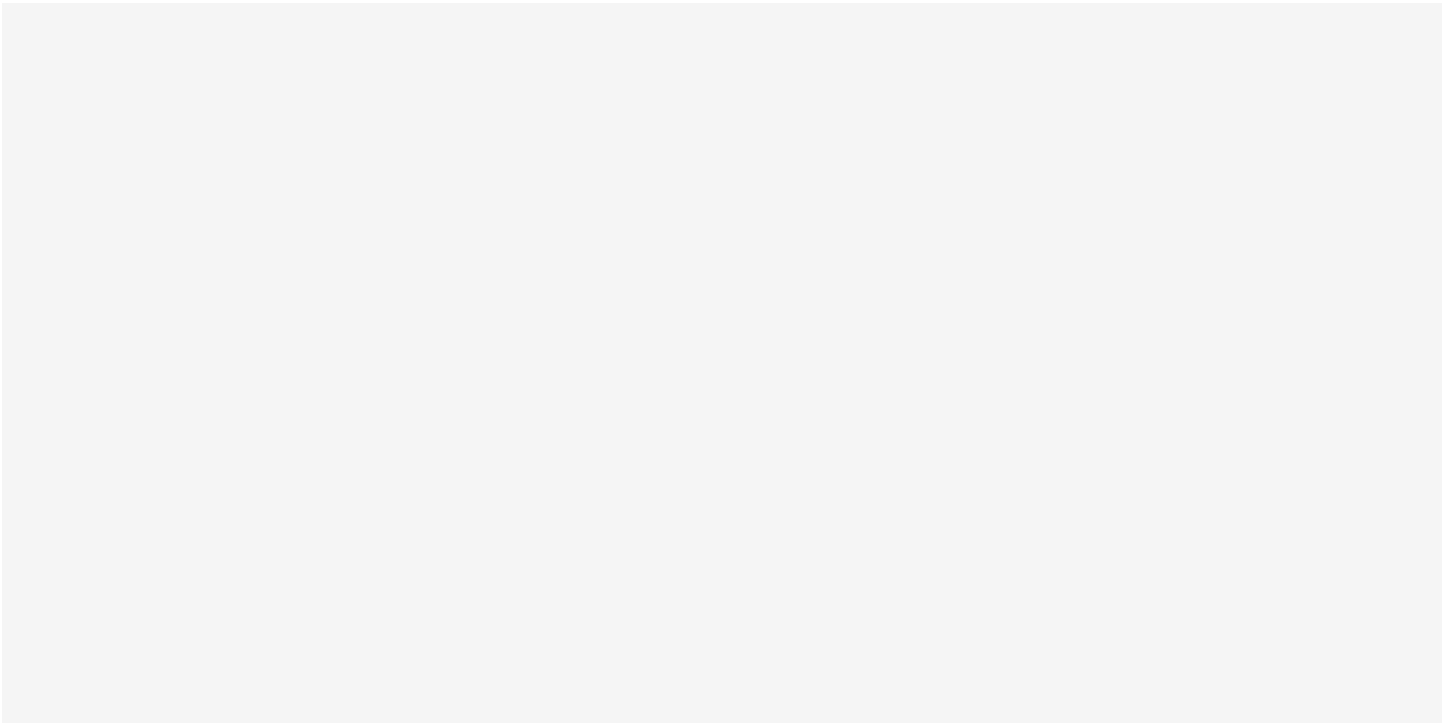
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