

Ralph Seekins

Question: I'm having a lively argument with my brother about the benefits of "snow tires." My car came with "all-season" tires. Are they good enough for winters here in Interior Alaska?

Answer: Personally, this is kind of a tough question to answer. On my own truck – an F-350 Crew Cab – I drive year-around on "allweather" (also known as "allseason") tires. My wife's car is set up the same way. However, I'll tell you that the safest set up for winter driving in Interior Alaska is driving on today's high tech studless "winter tires" (also called "snow tires").

The most challenging conditions a driver is going to face during Alaska winters are when we encounter snow and ice. And during those long winter months, you should want tires that give you the optimum traction on snow and ice for three basic maneuvers - starting, stopping and turning. And, frankly, some tires simply don't provide for any of those maneuvers very well on Alaska roads.

Summer tires are generally made

Snow (Winter) Tires

for optimal ride on dry or wet pavement. The rubber compounds are engineered for warm weather and the tires get extremely hard with cold temperatures. The tread designs are made for and they do a good job handling dry or rainy weather. They do not perform well on snow or ice and should not be used up here at all in winter. They don't start, stop or turn well on slippery surfaces.

All-season tires are the most costeffective. These tires use rubber compounds that retain reasonable flexibility in colder weather and have tread designs that enhance traction on snow and ice. Additionally, they deliver long life and a smooth ride with little increase in road noise. As I said earlier, I generally equip our family vehicles with this type of tire on a year-around basis. But, there is a better choice.

The absolutely best choice for winter driving in Alaska is a set of the newer high tech studless snow tires. The rubber compounding of these tires provides firmness at high temperatures for operation on dry or wet pavement while it helps them remain flexible at lower temperatures for better performance on snow and ice. Three good examples for cars, vans and crossovers are the Bridgestone Blizzak, Goodyear Ultra Grip Ice and Michelin Xice. All are excellent winter tires.

On light trucks, we've had good results from BF Goodrich,

Firestone and General brands. All provide good all-season performance. Unfortunately, the high tech studless tires are not yet available for trucks like my F-350.

No matter how you choose to proceed, it is extremely important that all four of the tires on your car or truck are the same brand and the same size. And it's important that you keep the tire pressure equal in all four tires. Imbalance or a difference in rolling resistance is not good when you are driving on ice or snow. Consider having your tires filled with nitrogen rather than compressed air and make sure you check the pressure regularly.

I know I've neglected studded tires. A lot of Alaskans install studded tires on their vehicle during the winter months and get a very safe ride as a result. However, I've found the newer winter tires very acceptable for winter driving and they don't give the driver the dreaded "studded tire overconfidence" that results in a whole lot of work for body shops around town.

Proper winter tires will help keep you and your family safer on our Interior Alaska winter roads. What's better than that?

Ralph Seekins has more than 40 years' experience in the automotive industry. He started as a mechanic, worked in sales, and for the past 32 years, has been the owner of Seekins Ford Lincoln Mercury.