

You Don't Need a Hybrid to Drive a Fuel-Efficient Car

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Perhaps you've been thinking "Green" lately and have looked at one of those new hybrid models as a way to stretch your gasoline dollar (especially in these days of record high gas prices) and reduce your CO₂ footprint to help cut greenhouse gases. But maybe you weren't entirely convinced the extra cost of a hybrid vehicle was feasible at this time or you are having difficulty finding one since they are in such high demand. Perhaps you are waiting to see how well they work out for the long haul or planning to buy one when they are more affordable.

There is a prevailing myth that you will save money due to the improved fuel economy of a hybrid even though the initial purchase price is more – this is false (mostly). On average, the "hybrid premium," the extra cost of a hybrid, is about \$6950 (ranges from \$2715 to \$21,455). Some of this extra cost can be offset by a federal tax credit. The tax credit is calculated based on the mile per gallon (mpg) improvement, but each manufacturer faces a quota limiting how many cars they can sell before the tax credit starts to be reduced and eventually eliminated. You will find a listing of the current tax credits on www.fueleconomy.gov. The sales leader in hybrids, Toyota, has used up its quota, so none of its vehicles qualify for the tax credit anymore. The credit is already being reduced for Honda vehicles too. When considering "how many years does it take to recoup my initial investment" (the "hybrid premium") the average is near 26 years, and most of us don't keep our cars that long. These calculations were performed using 15,000 miles per year, \$3.78 per gallon for regular, and \$4.01 per gallon for premium. Only vehicles with both hybrid and conventional models were used.

You don't have to buy a hybrid to get great fuel economy. Keep in mind, however, that the heavier the vehicle or the faster and more aggressively you drive, the more fuel you will burn – in any vehicle – whether hybrid or conventional. Many hybrid vehicle manufacturers employ sophisticated engine designs across their entire product line, and in so doing non-hybrid fuel sippers reap the benefit from many of those designs.

Starting with 2008 model year vehicles, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is employing a newer, more accurate method to calculate fuel economy – one that takes into consideration current, more typical faster and more aggressive driving conditions as well as air conditioning use and temperature extremes, than the outdated and obsolete method used for 2007 and earlier models. As a result, there has been a marked reduction in the posted MPG rating that you see on new 2008 model year vehicle window stickers when compared to previous models. The mpg ratings are still presented as two numbers, one for the "city" and one for the "highway". For comparison purposes, these numbers are often combined into one composite mpg by weighting them 55% for the city and 45% for the highway.

For small cars (subcompact and compact as defined by EPA), the Honda Civic Hybrid clearly gets the best mpg with a combined rating of 42.3. However, a number of the competing and generally less expensive small cars get good mpg without the hybrid technology. Cars including the Chevrolet Aveo (manual transmission), Ford Focus



(manual transmission), Hyundai Accent (manual transmission), Kia Rio (manual transmission), Toyota Corolla (manual transmission), and the Toyota Yaris (manual transmission) have combined mileage ratings between 27.1 and 32.2 mpg.

The midsize category (as defined by EPA) has quite a few hybrids in it and their mileage ratings vary significantly. They are led by the Toyota Prius (the 2008 mileage champion) at 46.7 mpg. The Nissan Altima Hybrid and Toyota Camry Hybrid take the middle of the hybrid pack at 34.1 and 33.5 mpg, respectively. The Chevrolet Malibu and Saturn Aura hybrids both get 27.6 mpg. The conventional Kia Spectra (automatic transmission) also gets 27.6 mpg and the Hyundai Elantra (automatic transmission) and Nissan Versa (CVT transmission) get 28.6 and 29.7 mpg, respectively, better than the lower mileage hybrids!

For SUVs, the Ford Escape/Mercury Mariner/Mazda Tribute hybrid clones all get an impressive 32.2 mpg and the Saturn Vue gets 28.2 mpg. Several conventional SUVs get good mileage too. The Jeep Compass and Patriot (manual transmissions) are rated at 25.3 mpg and the Chevrolet HHR (automatic transmission) beats that with a rating of 25.6 mpg.

Many people consider hybrids for more than their superior fuel economy. They generally also have very low emissions. However, several of the conventional cars above (the Ford Focus, Kia Spectra, and Hyundai Elantra) meet the same super stringent Partial Zero Emission Vehicle (PZEV) standards and as such are just as clean. So you see, you can be “green” and save some green at the same time! For more information on fuel economy and emission ratings, go to www.fueleconomy.gov.