

ADD TO
SHORT
LIST

By Joe Sage



Subaru has always proudly been a bit of a different breed—a little out of the mainstream. But that has not prevented huge success: the brand has a famously devoted fan base. Elsewhere in this issue, you will find the 2014 Subaru Forester: a neat little rig that's part SUV, part turbo racer and all personality. All the more interesting, then, to spend some time with the Subaru Legacy, which turns out to have plenty of Subaru individuality, of course, but also turns out to have evolved into a mainstream option that puts it on the same shopping list as the biggest sellers in the midsize sedan category.

And what a category this is—the most popular in the US, at some 25-30 percent of total sales. (Crossovers are in second place, in the high teens.) Competitors include everything from Ford Fusion and Chevrolet Malibu, to Kia Optima and Volkswagen Passat, Mazda6 and Nissan Altima, Honda Accord and Toyota Camry—and other midsize giants.

Park the wagon out back

Even among that stiff competition—or oblivious to it—the Subaru Legacy has consistently sold well for decades. With its all-wheel-drive foundation, it has been an extremely popular vehicle in such places as Colorado and New England, to the point of ubiquity. A classic iteration in many people's minds was surely the Legacy wagon with a Thule rack, box, skis and mountain bikes on top. The vehicle's position was further cemented when the Legacy Outback wagon came along in the late '90s, a body-clad, heightened, strengthened version quickly echoed by the Volvo Cross Country and Audi allroad. Along the way, the Outback lineup has split off from Legacy. There have been Outback Sport hatchbacks and briefly an Outback sedan. But since 2007, things are pretty clear: Outback has emerged as the wagon and Legacy as the sedan.

And the Legacy sedan is what we're driving here. It's that clarification of names, shapes and functions that has brought us a Legacy you can think of along with all those other top-selling midsize sedans.

Choosing your Legacy

The Subaru Legacy starts as low as \$20,295 for a base model with 2.5i four-cylinder boxer engine. The 2.5i also comes in Premium, Sport and Limited models, reaching a base of \$25,895 for the 2.5i Limited shown here. (Outback wagons are generally about \$3,000 higher than Legacy sedans.) There is also a PZEV (partial zero emissions) \$300 option.

The 2.5i base model is the only one available with a 6-speed manual transmission; all others are outfitted with a DAF continuously variable transmission (CVT), with 6-speed paddle shift manual mode, if you have the urge to surge through faux gears. Fuel mileage is 24/32/27 MPG (city/hwy/comb) for the CVT and drops to 21/28/24 for the manual. The manual has a higher final drive ratio (4.444 vs 3.700).

Two 3.6R models with a six-cylinder boxer engine range from \$25,395 to \$28,895. These are rated at 18/25/20 MPG, but horsepower is 48 percent higher at

256 hp (with 247 lb-ft of torque) and they have a five-speed paddle-shift automatic.

The engine decision is clear: 3.6R models are geared toward power and 2.5i models toward fuel economy.

Wheel time in the Subaru Legacy

Our 2.5i in top Limited trim had the top option package, with [a] a power tilt/slide glass moonroof; [b] a high-res 7-inch voice-activated touchscreen for GPS nav, audio and Bluetooth® connectivity; and [c] Subaru's EyeSight® Driver-Assist System, with adaptive cruise control, pre-collision braking and lane departure warning.

The Legacy is very spacious inside. Ivory tones of our test car's leather seats, pillars and headliner contribute to the feeling, and the greenhouse is big—there is great over-the-shoulder rear visibility, plus ample legroom and easy access. Our logbook repeatedly noted the volume of space inside and the nice cabin experience.

Controls on the center stack are elegant and clear. There are additional controls on the steering wheel—cruise, audio, two stalks, paddle shifters—more on the door, a group on the lower left instrument panel (including an unusual button for the parking brake, which could use a night light), and more on the ceiling, above the mirror, including collision and lane warning controls.

The 173-hp four-cylinder doesn't deliver neck-snapping acceleration, but once rolling had the power we needed, easily clearing freeway bottlenecks. The logbook noted that "we realized we were driving fairly aggressively to see how much power we could squeeze out of this car, then realized we had been having a heck of a good time, with very precise handling and control, as we darted among lanes and tight turns and so on."

The Legacy's speed-sensitive rack-and-pinion steering feels solid and smooth, with none of the disconnect feeling of many electric steering contemporaries.

A growing number of 8-speed automatics (and even some 6-speeds) work hard to create perfect shift points for performance and fuel economy. Even before you get to the first corner you may have shifted 3 or 4 times. With this as reference, we find the CVT enjoyable. We accelerate through a turn, give it more gas and are happy not to have any hunting for a shift point. We thought we'd miss punching it to induce a downshift, but the power was always there within its continuous flow—smooth and consistent. We had a good experience with the Legacy's paddle shift mode, though it will not override you if you forget to shift.

Logbook nitpicks mention widely separated audio power and volume knobs. The center stack screen could use some shading, while its finish easily falls victim to fingerprints, two issues that can impact the backup camera in particular. Crash alert and lane warning alarms were hypervigilant, alerting us even at stop signs or on routine pavement markings at times.

At night, a small upper instrument panel showing time, temperature and miles to empty, along with the center stack, main binnacle and other controls, with their relativity of color, light and placement, all come together very well. The instruments have a level of inclusion yet simplicity on a par with some of our



favorites. The 440-watt 9-speaker Harman Kardon premium audio system includes a 7-channel equalizer and is adjustable to deliver more than decent output. This ensures that our driving experience rocks, day or night.

Choosing your next midsize

All Legacy models offer a considerable level of style, function and amenities, especially well executed in our top-of-the-line (among 2.5i models) Limited.

If you're choosing among all those other midsize sedans you've been so used to and hadn't thought about the Subaru Legacy, you will find it an intriguing option.

We might fine-tune the body styling a little bit—it's a little awkwardly tall, but that gives you fabulous interior headroom and overall volume—and we might make a couple of changes in minor features, as with any. But behind the wheel is where it counts, and behind the wheel, this car is a clear winner. Styling has started to get a little sexier—and the car is a great provider. Once you spend some time in the Legacy, it's easy to see how the typical Subaru owner moves in and never wants to move out. And—all-wheel drive is standard. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	2.5L 4-cylinder boxer
HP	173
LB-FT	174
DRIVETRAIN	Active AWD with electronically managed continuously variable hydraulic transfer clutch
TRANSMISSION	CVT with 6-speed manual mode and paddle shift
WHEELS/TIRES	17" alloy / 215/50R17
TRUNK (CU.FT.)	14.7
WEIGHT	3427
MPG (EST)	24/32/27 (city/hwy/comb)
FUEL TANK	18.5 gallons
FUEL	regular unleaded gasoline
BASE PRICE	\$25,895
OPTION PACKAGE	Moonroof + Navigation System + EyeSight® System.....\$3,940
DESTINATION	\$770
TOTAL	\$30,605