

While many manufacturers have seemed to step away from that collection of categories broadly thought of as “cars” (in favor of SUVs and crossovers), Mazda does a solid job of populating the segment. Miata, a rarity itself, of course qualifies. And then there’s Mazda3, a wide lineup in its own right, so diverse that it offers not only a choice of 186-hp S or 250-hp Turbo powertrains, some FWD, some AWD, most of them automatics, but with a manual also in the mix ... then building two distinct body types, sedan and hatchback, all in one premium-grade yet affordably priced range of six trim levels. There are a total eleven versions from \$24,550 to \$37,890. Not only does Mazda offer you a car, but you can pick your lane.

Driven here is a standard-engine, top-trim, AWD sedan, with only a top-trim-only turbo above it, yet sitting firmly at mid-price. This is already a deal.

While about eight inches longer than the hatch, the sedan has the same wheelbase and turning circle—not only curb-to-curb, but even wall-to-wall—magical packaging for gaining a lockable trunk.

All-wheel drive, simple in concept but varying in implementation, is an attribute we often favor, when done well. Attractive for lossless grip across all wheels, AWD is often a pavement performance build, without deep snow clearance as on a big 4x4, though still carrying a degree of winter capability and advantage in its back pocket.

Mazda3 definitely has one of the notably better implementations, with a high level of acceleration, road hugging, handling precision and overall performance, at a fraction of the cost of, say, Europeans with generally comparable drivetrains.

Mazda3 has just two trims with AWD (Carbon Edition with the base engine or Premium Plus with the turbo)—times two, for sedan or hatch. This puts standard-engine AWD in your hands for just \$5,660 more (sedan) or \$5,900 more (hatch) than the least expensive base trim in a tight price walk—very reasonable for AWD *plus* four trim levels’ worth of added features. And we marveled at the performance from this, the less powerful engine.

Among the AWD versions, the price bump from

standard-engine Carbon Edition (only) AWD—as we’re driving here—to Premium Plus (only) turbo AWD is \$6,530 (sedan) or \$6,440 (hatch). We’re also fans of horsepower, but if you have to choose, starting from base trim, the bang for the buck for staying with the standard engine while moving to AWD may well be of more significance than the move to the turbo—and it’s a smaller price difference. This seems a win-win, or at least a solid rationalization, if you can’t swing top-top.

Of course, if you don’t much care about AWD (we’d like to drive them back-to-back, suspecting both are top performers), you can go with the one and only 6-speed manual, which is front-drive-only (a somewhat common scenario) and also a hatch only (which is a good fit, with its own distinct appeal, and also shaves some more off the price tag).

Now, if you’re an audiophile, you can add one more apple-and-orange factor. As is typical for us, we deep-dove audio settings in pursuit of perfection, with an impressive set of controls and equalizers we continued to fine-tune. You can save your

Choices and more choices, some forcing tradeoffs. Sedan or hatch. Two engines. Two transmissions. FWD or AWD. Then we get into Mazda’s famously cool paints, including Machine Gray Metallic and Soul Red Metallic (as shown on the Mazda3 Sedan and Hatchback at right), Polymetal Gray Metallic (on our Carbon Edition below) and a few more, but with not all paints available on all versions. Fun!

audio profile(s), so it’s easy to continue perfecting some more. Ours has a Mazda Harmonic Acoustics 8-speaker system, but our attention also drifted to a 12-speaker Bose system only available in Premium and Premium Plus. And right there, the tail of audio variables wags the multiple dogs of drivetrain, transmission, power and even body form.

We would want AWD, but we would wish for the manual (only available with front-drive).

We are ambiguous on sedan versus hatch—in so many specs the same, but with such different personalities (okay, so one of each?).

And the balancing points between the five-level standard engine lineup and the sole turbo level speak for themselves. The turbo has more power, but the base engine is already very responsive. The turbo has a higher cost at purchase and a bit higher cost for gas, ongoing (2-3 points lower MPG



across the board), although the latter is baked in the cake, and the real world has ways of leveling things out, anyway. Again, they need to be driven back-to-back (and bank balance doublechecked).

It’s a game of 5D chess, but the good news is, every possible combination is a winner.

There’s something about a sedan that can seem sort of mainstream, but a counterpoint can be made in an era where they’ve become rare. There are rumors that more manufacturers, notably Detroit and Germany, may be considering getting back into this segment. But why wait? This is a great option right now, with all systems proven. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY	Hofu, Yamaguchi, Japan
ENGINE/TRANS BUILD	Japan / Japan
PARTS CONTENT	US/Can 0% / Japan 85%
ENGINE	SKYACTIV-G 2.5L 4-cyl DOHC, 16v VVT, adv dir inj, alum alloy/alum alloy
HP/TORQUE	186 hp / 186 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	13.0:1
TRANSMISSION	SKYACTIV-Drive 6-spd auto w manual shift mode, sport mode
DRIVETRAIN	i-ACTIV AWD
ASSIST	hill launch assist and auto hold; off-road traction
SUSPENSION	F: Macpherson strut, stblzr bar; R: torsion beam; twin-tube shocks
STEERING	elec pwr-asst rack & pinion
BRAKES	F: 11.6 vented; R: 10.4 solid
WHEELS	18x7J alloy, black metallic finish
TIRES	205/60 R16 all-season
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	183.5 / 107.3 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.5 in
TURNING CIRCLE	37.4 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	(mnr) 37.6 / 36.7 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	42.3 / 34.4-35.1 in
CARGO CAPACITY	13.2 cu.ft
WEIGHT	3283 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	reg unl / 12.7 gal
MPG	26/34/29 (city/hwy/comb)
BASE PRICE	\$30,210
DOORSILL: illuminated trim plates	575
NAVIGATION: SD card	500
DESTINATION CHARGE	1235
TOTAL	\$32,520

All-wheel drive adds 172 pounds to the sedan or 130 pounds to the hatchback. On top of that, the AWD turbo adds 130 pounds to the standard-engine AWD sedan or 170 to the hatch.

What’s not to like?!

Mazda3 is proof that the sedan can still be a packaging tour de force

BY JOE SAGE



2026 MAZDA3 LINEUP

2.5 S	drivetrain	SEDAN	HATCH
(base)	(FWD)	\$24,550	\$25,550
Select Sport	(FWD)	25,440	26,740
Preferred	(FWD)	27,090	28,440
Premium	(FWD/6MT)	28,440	
Carbon Edition	(AWD)	30,210	31,450
2.5 TURBO	SEDAN	HATCH
Premium Plus	(AWD)	\$36,740	\$37,890