

A FULL MATRIX

BY JOE SAGE

Mazda3 and Miata are the only remaining “cars” in Mazda’s lineup—the rest being crossovers (currently six, as one-digit models e.g. CX-5 migrate to a new generation of two-digits e.g. CX-50, with both available this year for some, plus their first MX-designated EV). But have no fear—Mazda3’s lineup is so complex, it’s like having a whole stable of car alternatives within itself.

Variables, as noted in the detailed breakout at right, include a sedan-hatch choice, engines, transmissions and drivetrains, adding up to a whopping 14 different Mazda3 builds. The hard part is that you can’t just pick and choose from among these variables. A case in point would be the very welcome presence of a manual transmission, but with

the unfortunate limitation of it only being available with front-wheel drive and only with the smaller engine (two heartbreakers), and only on the hatch.

There are likely engineering tradeoffs, as well as sales projections, that determine such things. And most people may not fall into this crack at all, simply choosing by the basics and their budgets. Tough enough and easy enough, at the same time.

Our sample has the more powerful turbo engine and all-wheel drive. Much as we love a manual, with this powertrain in hand, we might be hard pressed to stand by that as an absolute. On the other hand, we know that if we had the manual in hand, we would be unlikely to give it up. Or would we? We may prefer AWD as much as the manual,

and they are not available together. We really need to drive them back-to-back-to-back in depth (which we don’t get to do often enough), then face the music on which to buy (we’re usually largely just speculating about this, but it’s a reality you could be more immediately facing).

As for the lower-powered non-turbo engine (on most versions), it gains five horses this year, while fuel economy also scoots up a little. The turbo, on the other hand, can run on either premium or regular fuel (for either about 19 or 31 percent more power than the base 2.5L), so turbo buyers can save money or increase power at will, at the pump.

In Soul Red—one of the finest factory paints on the planet—ours was pretty much a rocket, with plenty of power on tap and hugging the curves like the best AWD performers. Though the hatch for-

2023 MAZDA3 LINEUP VARIABLES

(See lineup pricing chart, lower right sidebar.)

This is one of the more interesting lineups you will find:

ENGINES: There are a 191-hp base 2.5-liter and a 250-hp 2.5-liter Turbo (premium fuel, or 227-hp with regular).

TRANSMISSIONS: Only one out of 14 builds offers a manual transmission—the 2.5 S Premium Package—but this is non-turbo, hatchback-only and, sadly for us, FWD-only.

DRIVETRAINS: The first three trims of the non-turbo S are front-drivers. Only one non-turbo S (Carbon Edition) gives you a choice of FWD or AWD. The only manual is FWD-only and non-turbo S (Premium) only; non-turbo S Premium is otherwise AWD. All turbos are AWD-only.

SEDAN OR HATCHBACK: There’s both a sedan and a hatchback of most, but it’s hatchback-only for the only manual transmission or the base Premium AWD turbo (for a turbo sedan, you can go with Premium Plus).

That’s a lot of apples and oranges, especially in terms of some of the basic options many of us will care about the most—those who seek the manual transmission and AWD, preferably with a choice of trim levels and body type.

Thus ours, a 2.5 Turbo Premium Plus Package Hatchback, is the top model in the matrix. And it is also available as a sedan. However, as with all but one, you can’t get it (or any turbo) with a manual transmission. You also can’t get the turbo’s Premium Plus top level of features with the non-turbo S engine, nor as a front-driver.

Prices are all reasonable, and we’re happy enough with all of that, except for the impossibility of a turbo with manual trans or a non-turbo manual without AWD. That obviously exceeds either engineering limits or possibly just their sales forecasts for this particular niche. These are all elements of many a common conundrum, but the other variables in this mix make this really stand out—at least to us.

mat limits over-the-shoulder visibility (especially notable as we had it during Motorcycle Safety Awareness Month), its cocoon-like experience is distinctive and just plain cool. A hatch also provides more cargo volume and, though not as lockable as a trunk, your contents are air conditioned.

Even if you have a few nitpicks with some of the little details in the interface—as of course we always do—you’ll make friends with them all. The Mazda3 AWD turbo hatch is a blast, a real pleasure to drive. At the end of our week, we hated to see this one go. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY	Hofu, Japan
ENGINE/TRANS BUILD	Japan / Japan
PARTS CONTENT	US/Can 0% / Japan 85%
PASSENGERS	five
ENGINE ...SKYACTIV-G 2.5L turbo-4, Dynamic Pressure, G-Vectoring Control Plus	
HP/TORQUE	(prem fuel) 250 hp / 320 lb-ft (reg fuel) 227 hp / 310 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	10.5:1
TRANSMISSION	6-spd Sport auto
DRIVETRAIN	AWD
SUSPENSION	F: indep MacPherson strut; R: torsion beam axle
STEERING	elec power asst
BRAKES	F: 11.61 vented; R: 10.43 solid
WHEELS	18x7J Black Metallic alloys
TIRES	215/4518 M+S
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	175.6 / 107.3
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.5 in
TURNING CIRCLE	curb-to-curb 34.8 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	37.5 / 36.5 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	42.3 / 35.1(L) 34.4(R) in
CARGO CAPACITY	20.1 cu.ft
WEIGHT	3393 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	premium rec / 12.7 gal
MPG	23/31/26 (city/hwy/comb)
BASE PRICE	\$35,300
PREMIUM PLUS PKG (INCL): leather-trimmed seats, front/rear parking sensors, 360-degree monitor, traffic jam assist, auto-dim driver side mirror, Homelink®, front air guides, nav, traffic sign recog, Sirius traffic & travel (3 yr), smart brake support-rear, rear cross traffic w brake, front air dam, black rear hatch spoiler..... <i>incl</i>	
SOUL RED CRYSTAL METALLIC PAINT	595
DESTINATION CHARGE	1395
TOTAL	\$37,095

2023 MAZDA3 LINEUP

Mazda3 2.5 S	SEDAN	HATCH
AT / FWD		
(base S)	\$22,550	\$23,550
Select Pkg	23,950	24,950
Preferred Pkg	25,550	26,550
AT / FWD / OPTIONAL AWD		
Carbon Edition	27,200	28,200
AT / AWD		
Premium Pkg	29,400	30,400
OPTIONAL 6MT BUT FWD		
Premium Pkg: 6 MT		29,150
Mazda3 2.5 Turbo	SEDAN	HATCH
AT / AWD		
(base Turbo)		32,450
Premium Plus Pkg	34,000	35,300

