BALANCE POINT

F DESCENDANT IS HOT AND STYLISH, NOT OVERLY SO, AND NOT OVERLY EXPENSIVE BY JOE SAGE

A number of brands with super-performance "halo" models have gone on to introduce more accessible versions with derivative names, built atop more conventional upper powertrains, with styling cues and higher-end features. At Lexus, it started with the "F" models, then added F Sport. As of now, only the F Sport versions survive.

In short, the F name derived from the spirit of the extremely rare Lexus LFA V10 supercar (just 500 units globally, 2010-2012). As a concept, L stood for Lexus and F for Future.

Broadening into an F family from there, IS F was the first, in 2007 for 2008, packing a potent 416-hp 5.0L V8, plus performance brakes, suspension and so on, into the IS compact sedan (otherwise a 204-hp V6 IS 250 or 306-hp V6 IS 350). That V8 IS F wrapped its run in 2014. Also with a GS-F four-door midsize sedan along the way, the Lexus RC-F Coupe was the last full F, discontinued just last year.

And F Sport is where you find a halo today. These have evolved through various derivatives including F Sport Handling, F Sport Design and F Sport Performance (the term we might think anchors it all). These names have waxed and waned, sometimes still going as simply F Sport, even when there are others (presumably the Performance part can speak for itself, though it seems they all could).

That last setup is the case with Lexus IS this year—in generation three since 2013 and receiving its third refresh in 2025 (cosmetics and electronics, plus speed-related steering for tighter in-town maneuvering. While other approaches have been taken (IS had both Design and Performance just prior) the current system has an F Sport Design and, above it, just F Sport. Intriguing, but we just roll with it.

And here we are driving the top trim, 2026 Lexus IS 350 F Sport (not Design), though the lower-cost RWD drivetrain. Both trims do offer RWD or AWD, for four versions total, all in a tight spread from $46,895-51,345.

Shopping among the four versions thus boils down to two decisions.

The choice between F Sport Design and the pure F Sport is more subjective, personal. The upper F Sport build includes performance seats, adaptive suspension, red brake calipers, three levels of Sport driving modes, Mark Levinson premium audio, 19-inch black BBS wheels, upgraded headlamps and additional details, as well as a new available rear spoiler—a lot of content for its $2450 bump.

While what's available on the lot may decide for any number of people, we suspect those who parse both in detail will pause to ask, "What are all the differences again?"—and just jump into the full F Sport.

The rear- vs all-wheel drive decision brings specific statistics into play. At just $2,000 more than rear-drive, AWD has its own advantages, such as being able to know you can dash up into high country snows on a whim or with a plan. You won't feel a one percent difference in weight distribution (55/45 AWD vs 54/46 RWD, opposite what we might expect). Nor will many if any feel a one-tenth difference zero-to-60 (5.6 sec RWD, 5.7 sec AWD). Interior capacities are all the same. And fuel mileage is almost the same (same for city and combined, one point diff on highway, 27 RWD, 26 AWD), despite the AWD carrying another 132 pounds. In this case, however, there's at least one specification working against AWD—a turning circle with an over-a-foot tighter advantage for RWD, which is huge.

But here's a wild card—while the engine is the same in all, the rear-driver has an 8-speed automatic, the AWD a 6-speed, with considerably different gearing between the two. Our experience is that this is not always a more-is-better situation, so for this, we would truly have to try them back-to-back in a variety of conditions. Then again, maybe it's an indication that this just isn't that critical.

Want one more variable? If you're lucky, you may still find one of just (350) 2026 Lexus IS 350 F Sport Special Appearance Package versions. This, in fact, is the one we were lucky enough to be driving here (ours a rear-driver, though we are not clear on whether these all are). While very similar to the not-Design-just-F-Sport fitment, this build is especially notable for its Hakugin Matte White paint and striking white-and-black interior.



The general drive experience in our sample was strong and tracked accurately, and power delivery was smooth with no downsides to its transmission activity at all.

Still wish you could buy an IS F V8?

The state of Lexus F is pretty simple. In today's climate, volume (and regulations) apparently won't support a full F, but Lexus has been able to beef up the existing F Sport approach to provide broad appeal. And the fact that, this year, the entire Lexus IS lineup comprises F Sport variants guarantees that these versions will maintain high interest. ■



SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY.....Tahara, Aichi, Japan
ROWS / SEATS.....two / five
ENGINE.....3.5L V6, 24v DOHC, EFT, alum/alum, dual continuously var VVT-i
HP/TORQUE.....311 hp / 280 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO.....11.8:1
TRANSMISSION....(RWD) 8-spd auto /paddles
DRIVETRAIN.....RWD
0-TO-60 / TOP SPEED...(RWD) 5.6 sec / 143 mph
SUSPENSION.....**F:** dbl wishbone type w high- mount upper arms, coils, gas shocks, stblzr bar; **R:** multi-link w coils, gas shocks, stblzr bar
STEERING.....elec pwr rack & pinion
BRAKES.....**F:** 13.2 vented; **R:** 11.7 vented; w Vehicle Dynamic Integrated Mgmt
WHEELS.....(opt) 19-in black BBS forged alloy
TIRES.....**F:** 235/40R19 92Y; **R:** 265/35R19 94Y (ours: Bridgestone Potenza S001L)
LENGTH / WHEELBASE.....185.8 / 110.2 in
GROUND CLEARANCE.....5.51 in
TURNING CIRCLE.....(RWD) 34.2 ft
HEADROOM (F/R).....38.2 / 36.9 in
LEGROOM (F/R).....44.8 / 32.2 in
CARGO CAPACITY.....10.8 cu.ft
WEIGHT.....(RWD) 3748 lb
WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION (F/R) ...(RWD) 54 / 46 %
FUEL / CAPACITY.....premium / 17.4 gal
MPG.....(RWD) 18/27/22 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE.....**$47,950**
SPECIAL APPEARANCE PKG: Hakugin Matte White paint, white & black interior, 19-in black BBS forged alloy wheels, adaptive variable suspension, Torsen limited-slip rear differential, power rear sunshade, Mark Levinson premium audio, power moonroof, front cross-traffic alert, lane change assist, traffic jam assist (subscrip req'd, trial incl), SmartAccess card key, unique key globes.....12,140
CARPET TRUNK MAT.....130
WHEEL LOCKS.....99
DESTINATION CHARGE.....1295

TOTAL.....**$61,614**
(Our sucker pricing above; prices have increased; see below.)

2026 LEXUS IS LINEUP

	RWD	AWD
IS 350 F Sport Design	$46,895	$48,895
IS 350 F Sport	▼ 49,345	51,345