

2012 Toyota Prius V Test Drive

Toyota scales up its iconic hybrid to woo young families and people in search of a fuel-efficient cargo hauler. But can the Prius work as a family car?

By Eric Tegler

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On-Sale Date: Fall 2011

Price: \$25,000–\$35,000 (estimated)

Competitors: Ford Fusion Hybrid, Ford Escape Hybrid, Honda CR-V, Volkswagen Jetta Sportwagon TDI, Mazda 5

Powertrain: 1.8-liter I4 with electric hybrid, 134 total hp, CVT, front-wheel drive

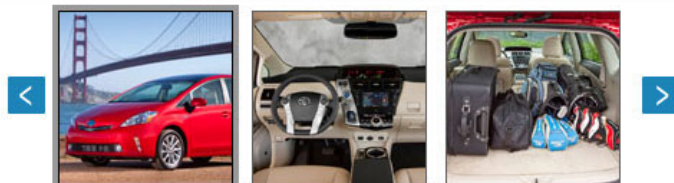
EPA Fuel Economy (city/hwy): 44/42 (estimated)

What's New: This is the first member of the new Prius family unveiled at this year's [North American International Auto Show](#) to hit the market. The Prius V (the "V" is for "versatility") joins the standard third-generation Prius in the U.S. this fall, to be followed by the 2012 Prius plug-in hybrid and a smaller Prius C entry-level hybrid.

The Prius V is all about space, offering 50 percent more cargo room than the standard hatchback. To make all that extra room, Toyota

stretched out the design of the standard Prius: The V is 3 inches longer in the wheelbase, 6 inches longer overall, 1 inch wider and 3 inches taller. However, the tradeoff for those larger dimensions is 200 extra pounds, and so fuel economy falls from 50 mpg with the Prius to a still-excellent 42 with the Prius V. On the road, the V looks like a tall wagon, and in most respects its performance lives up to the perception. Comfortable second-row seats slide forward and back. Wide rear-door openings and second-row 60/40 fold-flat capability show that the V can serve drivers and families for whom the standard Prius is too small.

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Tech Tidbit: The Prius V is the first Toyota to feature the new Entune multimedia system. Entune combines navigation and audio with Internet-based information services and entertainment linked via your smartphone. Paired with your phone via Bluetooth, Entune can access applications including Pandora, Opentable, iheartradio, Movietickets and Bing without the need to handle your phone. The system can call up stocks, sports, weather and fuel prices, too. Available on the two top Prius V trim levels, Entune works well where cellphone coverage is adequate. However, if you roll out of your carrier's network, some Entune features go out of service.

Driving Character: The Prius V drives like its forebears, but you can feel its higher center of gravity. The steering feels somehow muted, though the optional 17-inch wheel package sharpens it. The V's regenerative brakes still need better calibration and a software refinement. Several times we noticed a "stepped" effect, in which the driver pushes the brake pedal and the car doesn't respond immediately.

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pedal another inch, then more resistance and so on. The acceleration is, shall we say, leisurely.

The V isn't just a Prius—it's a Prius that's been made into a family car. So while the car's performance fulfills its mission, it's no performance machine. On our test drive on the Pacific Coast Highway south of San Francisco, the most satisfaction came from the gentle ride and watching the stellar fuel-economy readout.

Favorite Detail: Toyota crow's that the V offers more cargo room than 80 percent of vehicles on the road while returning higher mileage and 66 percent fewer emissions. Indeed, with the second-row seats folded down, the big Prius has more room than the Jetta Sportwagon TDI or the Ford Escape Hybrid. Even your taller passengers can stretch out in the back.

Driver's Grievance: The whole idea of Entune is to make useful apps available without fumbling with your phone. However, the driver distraction gains are offset by Toyota's insistence on putting all primary instruments and multimedia in the center dash and center stack. Entune simply requires too much eye focus away from the road. Locating the multimedia screen on the empty dash above and behind the steering wheel might help.

The Bottom Line: Just 19 percent of Prius owners use it as their sole vehicle. But with its plentiful cargo space and sterling fuel economy, the Prius V is an entirely practical daily commuter and family hauler. Hybrid enthusiasts will likely warm to the V as a more spacious car that's still a socially responsible automotive statement. And for those core fans, the new V's exterior design may be its most successful attribute: It still looks like a Prius. The rest of us will judge the "versatile" V on its utility and gas mileage versus its purchase price, which Toyota has yet to announce.

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