

Driving the hottest Subaru's of all Time

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In the rarefied world of car collections Subaru Australia's

garage is fairly minor. Half a dozen cars — with room for a couple more — hardly registers on a radar at a time manufacturers such as Alfa Romeo, Ferrari, Citroen and Mercedes-Benz display hundreds of cars over hectares of dedicated museum floor space.

"A while ago I was disappointed to learn that some of Australia's most significant cars — great performance cars from Ford and Holden in the '70s — are no longer in company hands," Subaru Australia managing director Nick Senior says.

"It was disappointing but it moved us to keep cars we consider significant within our organisation."

The cars Subaru has pulled together track the history of the performance cars, particularly the Impreza STi, in Australia from the toe-in-the-water 1997 WRX STi Type R through to the 2006 2.5-litre WRX STi.

The pink STi performance badge had been in the Japanese domestic market since 1994, highlighted on popular PlayStation games. "We knew there was an awareness of the STi badge already through game playing so the decision to bring a Type R to Australia was a one-off just to test the waters," Senior says.

"We took it, the Yellow Terror, down to Rally of Canberra and from the reaction there it was obvious we had to get these cars here somehow or other."



The result was the first limited import of 400 two-door STis in January 1999.

"They went pretty quickly," Senior says.

The cars were in such high demand that they were being on-sold for as much as \$20,000 over the \$60,000 rrp almost before they were off the boat. Another limited shipment of 400 four-door STi cars followed — only 399 landed with one being dropped off the wharf in Japan — and the rest is history.

The Impreza STi was added to the standing model range and has become the Subaru halo performer with around 20 per cent of WRX sales the high-performance model.

"A big part of the success of the WRX is that it is affordable ... the man in the street has access to a true performance car."

That accessibility in early models led to the WRX earning largely unwanted publicity as the ram-raider's car of choice, something that modern security measures have addressed. "They have gone from being the most desirable car for some of society's less desirable members to one of the most secure (cars)," Senior says.

Subaru's collection is far from complete.

"There are a couple of other cars we are looking for," Senior says. "A nice low-kilometre Liberty RS Turbo would be nice and there is room for an SVX Series II, particularly the only red one brought into Australia. We might also add one of the Rally cars — still thinking about that one."

As important as the cars are to Subaru, it is not Senior's philosophy to wrap them in cotton wool behind glass.

Unleashing the real beast within

Ok, so the Subaru STi is pretty good — but you want that bit extra you know is hiding under the bonnet. How do you get it? You go and see an after-market tuning house. When it comes to Subaru, one of the first that comes to mind is MRT Performance.

Principal Brett Middleton has been working on Subaru powerplants for more than 10 years, mainly dropping in the 2.5-litre engine.

Subaru Australia's decision to make the larger engine standard for 2006 models means Middleton's cup is running over.

"The block in the new cars is the same one as we have been using in upgrading for the past couple of years," he says. "There is nothing we don't know about that engine."

The ultimate result from the MRT garages is the P-25 power kit, which takes the "basic" STi's 206kW and 392Nm to a ballistic 297kW and 514Nm at the wheels.

"That's not putting the engine on the thin edge at all," he says. "We'll fully warrant the engine for that output. It isn't a case of running the thing at maximum stress."

Subaru has done some of its own WRX upgrades, notably the WRP10 limited edition, which sits between the basic WRX and STi, but has no plans to try to match the figures from after-market shops.



"We are doing some work, of course, with STi in Melbourne, and I suppose it is fair to say that we err on the conservative side," Subaru Australia managing director Nick Senior says. "It's not our role to push the (performance) envelope. We need to give our customers a car best suited to the widest range and that satisfies warranty reliability."

Middleton says he would love the opportunity to work with Subaru Australia on a red-hot model, but will continue to offer the top-end of performance.

"The P-25 kit, or whatever part of it the owner wants, is suitable for any WRX STi from 2002 onwards," he says.

"Anyone with a 2006 car can just take \$4000 off the price as we don't need to supply the block for that one."

The full P-25 kit doesn't come cheap. Before the kit can be fitted, an XB upgrade needs to be done (\$4295), which includes exhaust, in-tank fuel pump and retune of the factory ECU using EcuTek technology.

With that in place, \$29,695 (\$4000 less for the 2006 car) will get you the rest of the goodies — forged pistons, forged rods, dual VCT-compatible inlet and exhaust cams, heavy-duty clutch kit, MRT billet fuel-rail kit, custom extractors, 500hp Garrett turbo with twin ball-bearing core and more.

You can complete the makeover with a \$5495 P-25 suspension upgrade from Whiteline — adjustable strut kit, adjustable sway bars front and rear, sports anti-lift/castor kit, heavy-duty steering rack bushes and alloy front strut brace.

On the road, a fully-kitted P-25 Subaru is a thing of wonder. You can drive it like a weapon should the need arise — tested at 4.4 seconds for 0-100km/h — but it is also very compliant in a city environment.

There is urge almost from idle and serious urge from around 3000rpm. The only drawback on the test car was a double clutch fitted, according to Middleton, for durability on the show car. The steering is razor sharp, ride a little harsh but fully-adjustable through the Whiteline kit and turn-in is almost telepathic.

According to Middleton, owners who drive in the same way they did before the work will enjoy better fuel economy. You just have to fight the urge to nail the right foot.

The Daily Telegraph

Specs

1997 Impreza WRX STi Type R

Engine	2.0-litre turbocharged DOHC horizontally opposed four-cylinder; 206kW@6500rpm, 343Nm@4000rpm
Transmission	5-speed manual; AWD
Weight	1240kg (unladen)
Wheels	16-inch alloy
On the track:	This is the car that launched a badge. Brought to Australia to judge acceptance but never sold here. Has all the raw joy that characterised early STi cars. Poised, quick and with unbelievable track manners. Gives the distinct impression that the stated 206kW is only there to comply with Japan's old 300hp moratorium.

1999 Impreza 22B Coupe

Engine	2.2-litre turbocharged DOHC horizontally opposed four-cylinder; 206kW@6500rpm, 363Nm@3200rpm
Transmission	5-speed manual; AWD
Weight	1270kg
Wheels	17-inch alloy
On the track:	As scarce as hens' teeth, this is the star of the Subaru collection and one Subaru managing director Nick Senior believes could be a million-dollar baby within a decade. Sensational track manners and unbelievable grip. Buckets of torque arrive early enough and hang around long enough to fix a smile to your face. The claimed 206kW is well short of its potential.

1999 Impreza WRX STi

Engine	2.0-litre turbocharged DOHC horizontally opposed four-cylinder; 206kW@6500rpm, 353Nm@4000rpm
Transmission	5-speed manual; AWD
Weight	1270kg
Wheels	16-inch alloy
On the track:	First STi model sold in Australia. Has grip and poise of the Type R but needs to be stirred a bit harder to get the best out of it. Really nice exhaust note.

2000 Impreza WRX STi

Engine 2.0-litre turbocharged DOHC horizontally opposed four-cylinder;
206kW@6500rpm, 353Nm@4000rpm
Transmission 5-speed manual; AWD
Weight 1270kg
Wheels 16-inch alloy
On the track: Essentially the same car as the 1999 STi but with two extra doors.
Capable of putting the 0-100km/h sprint behind in 4.9 seconds.

2000 Impreza WRX

Engine 2.0-litre turbocharged DOHC horizontally opposed four-cylinder;
160Nm@5600rpm, 290Nm@4000rpm.
Transmission 5-speed manual; AWD
Weight 1270kg
Wheels 16-inch alloy
On the track: The last of the first generation WRX to hit our shores. Down on grunt
and some of the fancy bits against the STi but holds its own on the track.
Surprisingly nimble with only a hint of early body roll before it settles
into corners.

2005 Impreza WRX WRP10

Engine 2.0-litre turbocharged DOHC horizontally opposed four-cylinder;
175kW@6000rpm, 302Nm@4000rpm
Transmission 5-speed manual; AWD
Weight 1415kg
Wheels 17-inch alloy
On the track: The first of the 2.5-litre engines for Australia lifts the base
WRX. Adequate power, plenty of torque and available from a very
usable mid-range. Ride is comfortable with the trade-off of an initial
feeling of roll under load.

2006 Impreza WRX STi

Engine 2.5-litre turbocharged DOHC horizontally opposed four-cylinder;
206kW@5600rpm, 392Nm@4000rpm
Transmission 6-speed manual; AWD

Weight 1415kg

Wheels 17-inch alloy

Yippee. Short of the 22B, this is the pick of the litter. Likes to be revved
On the track: and rewards with great vigour. Ride and handling superb. Open the
driver control centre differential and the car becomes a drift monster