



S H A R P

S E D A N

2012 BUICK LACROSSE
E-ASSIST

MSRP: \$32,440 (PREMIUM 1)
AS TESTED: \$36,685

LaCrosse is Buick's big, four door sedan. This body style ruled the American road for decades; since overtaken in the large vehicle segment by variations on the Sport Ute/crossover theme.

To drive a full size sedan again is to rediscover many of the traits that we've lost as we stepped up (literally) into crossovers and SUVs. One is, it's a car — and it drives like one, not a truck. Lower but not low, smoothly sprung but not flabby, it's simply more comfortable riding and more stable feeling than many of the taller Ute variations that populate the roadways.

Though the body style is traditional, in many ways, this car is not. For one thing, LaCrosse is front wheel drive (old school big sedans were less winter friendly rear wheel drive). An All Wheel Drive version is also available, though only with the V-6 engine.

That's no small trade off, because the four cylinder engine in the 2012 LaCrosse is one of the car's highlights. As little as a year ago, that wasn't the case. But for 2012, LaCrosse has been upgraded with an all new, 2.4 liter Ecotec four cylinder engine with E-Assist, linked to a six speed automatic transmission. Buick refers to E-Assist as a "light electrification" system. It uses a lithium ion battery and an electric motor generator to add 15 horsepower to the gas engine's 182 horsepower.

The battery-powered boost is replenished by regenerative braking, and it doesn't need to be plugged in. E-Assist provides a stop/start function too, allowing the gas motor to shut off when at a stop light, for instance, and switch back on instantly when you touch the accelerator.



The difference in fuel economy is dramatic. Compared to the outgoing engine, LaCrosse with E-Assist posts a 25 percent improvement in mileage. EPA estimates 25 mpg's in the city, 36 on the highway and I averaged 31 miles per gallon in a mixed bag of driving conditions. Buick claims a 0-60 time of 9.2 seconds, but the car feels much quicker.

Despite the car's full-size status, the four cylinder LaCrosse pulls smartly off the line and feels responsive 'round town — thanks largely to the high torque, battery boost (+79 lb. ft.). You only realize that you're in a four cylinder car when pulling the Buick out to pass at highway speeds, a point at which the electric motor's added nudge is no longer enough to offset the combination of the

gas engine's small size and the car's substantial (4,026 lb.) curb weight. LaCrosse is light on its feet for its size, with stable, confident handling. The interior is quite quiet, and ride quality is smooth for the passengers without handling being numb for the driver.

Most interesting about LaCrosse's stout mileage numbers is that they come not with a knees-in-your-chest back seat of a compact car, but the room-for-five-adults space of a large sedan.

Beyond the welcomed space, LaCrosse's interior is handsomely finished and well crafted. Buick replaced the former three trim level CX/CXL/CXS lineup with seven product equipment groups. I'm not sure I see the merits of making things more



complicated for car-buyers, but in any event, my test car was a Premium I level, which is about mid-way up the options food chain.

To this was added the Entertainment Package (includes 384 watt, 11-speaker harmon-kardon sound, \$600), Driver Confidence Package (Adaptive HID headlights, Blind Zone Alert, Head's-Up Display, \$1,440) and the Audio System/Navigation/back-up camera (\$1,345).

A LaCrosse so spec'd is very well equipped, with comfortable (if flat) leather wrapped seats, and a large (8 inches), legible screen for the navi. Legible too is the instrument panel (large analog gauges). While main controls are easy to find and use, lesser used functions are less easy to find, consigned to a sea of same size buttons on the center stack.

The E-Assist battery takes a bite out of the LaCrosse's trunk. While the 11.4 cubic feet of cargo space is deep, access to it is complicated by the trunk opening (small) and the lift over height (high).

Prior versions of LaCrosse have demonstrated the car's competence, and invited comparisons to well regarded, largely imported competitors. The addition of the E-Assist powertrain technology elevates the 2012 edition to must-drive status, for

large car shoppers.

Pick a lower trim level, don't overindulge on options, and you have a car that's long on value, strong on mileage, with impressive overall skills.

A 30-year resident of the Capital District, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 125 calendars. A regular contributor to the Times Union, his web site is www.LyonsOnWheels.com.

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