



Consulting for the Natural Products Industry

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Aromatherapy

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Aromatherapy is an ancient art using the essential oils of plants in medicine, spicery, and perfumery. The essential oil is often the part of the plant that we smell. It is formed in the plant petals, leaves, roots, resin, barks, stems, seeds, grasses, stalks, and rinds. Depending on the plant, the essential oil can be stored in special resin cells, glandular hairs, pockets and reservoirs, and even in the spaces between cells. For a plant the essential oil is just that: essential. It performs necessary functions such as attracting certain bugs and birds for fertilization, and repelling other bugs that could cause harm. The evaporation of these essences from the plant surfaces shields the plant from the invasion of natural bacteria and is even considered to be the warming aura that surrounds and protects from temperature fluctuations. It is sometimes attributed with the spiritual quality of life's energy, so to use the essential oil of a plant is to use the very best of what a plant has to offer.

History

Aromatherapy has appeared in recipes since the beginning of recorded history and has been steeped in magic and mystery ever since. The Egyptians are attributed with the first writings on aromatherapy in about 1580 BC and also, appropriately, with developing a society and culture deeply connected to the sense of smell. They became very creative and adept in using essential oils to stimulate this sense. Their most practical recorded use was to embalm their dead with the oil of cedar wood, though on a more romantic note, and no less important to their culture, men prepared for a "date" by bathing with particular essential oils. As traveling opened up isolated cultures, new uses for the oils became popular and the importance of scent increased. Babylonians and Arabs perfumed the mortar used to build temples and mosques to surround themselves with healing and cleansing aromas. Ancient Greeks believed sweet smells were of divine origin and developed the aromatic bath to drench themselves in purity. Romans, following the precepts of Hippocrates, used the oils in the bath for healing purposes: "the way to health is to have an aromatic bath and scented massage everyday."

As the modern age of the 19th century progressed, aromatherapy and essential oil use became a quaint story of past cultures. Not until a French cosmetic chemist of the early 1900s began scientific research did it start to revive. Rene-Maurice Gattefosse devoted his life to researching the healing properties of essential oils after a providential accident in his perfume laboratory. After burning his arm badly he thrust it into the nearest cold liquid which happened to be a vat of lavender oil. The pain decreased substantially and, rather than becoming a normal burn site of inflammation and blistering, the injury healed quickly without a scar. Shortly thereafter Gattefosse coined the term "aromatherapy".

Essential Oils

Essential oils are found in different parts of the plant in varying concentrations. Oil production depends on the same things that affect a plants growth: sunlight, nutrients of the soil, air quality, altitude, etc. This means that to get a good quality essential oil the best plant-specific growing conditions must be known and followed. Essential oil manufacturers generally distill their oil right at the growing site so that the time between harvesting and processing is short. This preserves the quality and the quantity of the harvest. The primary method of extraction is steam distillation whereby steam is passed through hundreds of pounds of plant material

in a stainless steel vat to diffuse the oil. As the steam condenses in a cooling chamber the oil, which is lighter than water, is easily separated and collected. Citrus fruits yield their oils through cold pressing. Here, intense physical pressure is applied to the rind and the oil is squeezed out. It takes an enormous amount of plant material to produce a small amount of essential oil. For example, 220 pounds of lavender produces only 7 pounds of oil and 60,000 pounds of rose petals produce 1 ounce of precious (and very expensive) rose oil.

Another aromatherapy product called an “absolute” is often confused with essential oils—absolutes are not pure essential oils but are precious fragrances from plants that do not create enough essential oil to collect. These fragrances are made by dehydrating the flower petals to remove the water and to create a concentrate called a concrete. This gooey mass is then washed in an alcohol solvent which takes on the fragrance. The alcohol is distilled off and the remaining product is the absolute. This is a pure plant fragrance and retains certain therapeutic properties but is not an essential oil.

Synthetic fragrances are distilled with petroleum and turpentine. They are often made in an attempt to duplicate essential oils but this is rarely possible as there are hundreds of chemical components in an essential oil and not all have been isolated. Synthetic fragrances are similar only in aroma, not in actual chemical make-up or in therapeutic action.

Using Aromatherapy

Essential Oils are most effective through inhalation or absorption through the skin into the body. They are therapeutically least effective when taken orally. They are very efficient in leaving the body through exhalation and perspiration which means they are generally non-toxic.

Diffusers and atomizers are the usual way of putting an essential oil mist into the air for breathing. Diffusers, either the electric or candle variety, heat the essential oil until it evaporates into a mist or fog, dispersing the aroma into the air. Atomizers are affixed to the top of a bottle of water mixed with an essential oil; give the pump a little squeeze to spray the aroma mist wherever you want. Also available are ceramic rings that fit around light bulbs. They have an indentation to hold a few drops of oil which heats up with the light bulb and diffuses into the air.

Lotions and oils: When essential oils are used on the skin they must be put into an oil based carrier first. If sensitivity to an oil occurs it is generally because it was applied full strength onto sensitive skin. (Tea tree oil, with its wonderful antiseptic properties, is one of the few oils safe to apply full strength on a small area.) Dilution in carrier oils not only protects you from a reaction, it spreads the oil over a larger area and so stimulates a greater response. Essential oils tend to increase circulation at the surface of the skin which opens up the pores. This is the key to overall absorption, and consequently to the overall health of the skin. Of the pure vegetable oils available to use for this dilution, jojoba is the heaviest, almost liquid wax, and grape seed oil is the lightest. Sweet Almond oil is the best all purpose carrier oil, and apricot kernel, also very light, is easily absorbed by mature or damaged skin. Massage therapists report wonderful results with grape seed oil because it is so thin, glides easily, and is completely absorbed. To use an essential oil on a small, specific site mix a drop into each application of a scrub, mask, pack, or cream. Or, for larger coverage, add 10 drops per 4 ounces of an unscented lotion. For the hair add a few drops of oil to whatever shampoo you are currently using, or add to carrier oils and work into the hair as a deep conditioner.

Baths and massage are the age-old, tested, and reliable way to reduce stress. Particular oils mixed directly into the bath water or the massage oil have been reported to increase the stress-reducing effectiveness of these therapies. Consult the many books available to learn the oils and recipes that best suits your circumstances and condition.

In the kitchen essential oils are an easy way to enhance the aroma and flavor of your culinary delights. As a general rule of thumb use only two drops of oil for every teaspoon of a spice called for in the recipe. In baking always add the essential oil to the wet ingredients before mixing with the dry—this allows for complete dispersal of the oil. Not all essential oils are safe for consumption. Those that are include: anise, basil, bergamot, cinnamon cassia, clove bud, ginger, lemon, lime, orange, pepper, rosemary, sage, spearmint, and tangerine.

Medicinal Properties

The term aromatherapy is also used to describe a medicinal action on the body. Today's research is slowly validating the century old practice of using the oils in antibacterial, antiseptic and antifungal treatments. The antiseptic properties of Tea Tree oil and the sinus clearing action of Eucalyptus oils are well known, effective uses that only now are being substantiated by science. Mr. Gattefosse's experience with lavender oil on his burn is another old story that is being retold in the laboratory setting. There is a wealth of information in the books and articles about these home remedies. Look there for specific uses, attributes, and properties of all plant oils.

Care of Essential Oils

A little care must be taken in handling your essential oils as they are very volatile. Keep them in dark, air-tight, glass bottles and do not expose them to heat or heavy metals. You can tell if they are deteriorating when they become darker and more viscous. Store them out of children's reach as some oils are dangerous when swallowed. Essential oils remain potent for 6 months to 2 years with proper care. If you are unsure of the freshness, throw them out.

Breathe Deep!

Every living thing has its own characteristic scent. We cannot always be conscious of all the scents that surround us but we do perceive them on a subconscious level because of the direct connection between our olfactory nerve and the subconscious part of our brain. This perception has a certain amount of influence over our feelings, thoughts, and attitudes which makes for the sometimes unexpected attraction to certain people, places, and things. Aromatherapy is a way to recreate those feelings, thoughts, and attitudes naturally—it can be used to stimulate and energize, to relax and make tranquil. Essential oils have properties with great potential to protect and heal the body and may one day be better understood and used commonly for our greater health. Meanwhile, breathe deep, heighten your sense of smell, and enjoy the therapy of aroma.

Recipes adapted from *The Complete Book of Essential Oils and Aromatherapy*, Valerie Ann Worwood, 1991.

Facial Masks

Normal Skin 1 TBSP unscented mask
 1 egg yolk
 1 tsp water
 1 small drop Geranium oil
 1 small drop bois de rose oil

Dry Skin 1 TBSP unscented mask
 1 egg yolk
 1 tsp Almond Oil
 2 drops Carrot oil
 2 tsp water
 1 small drop Chamomile oil
 1 small drop Rose oil

Oily Skin 1 TBSP unscented mask
 1 TBSP brewer's yeast
 1 TBSP water
 1 small drop Rosemary oil
 1 small drop Lavender oil

For the Bath

Basic 2 tsp Avocado oil

2 tsp Apricot kernel oil
2 TBSP Sweet almond oil
50 drops essential oils of your choice
Add 1 tsp of this mixture to your bath

Bubble Bath

8 oz soap flakes or grated unscented soap
2 TBSP Witch Hazel
2 cups Almond oil
2 cups spring water
Boil spring water and melt the soap in it. Mix the witch hazel and almond oil together and slowly add to the cooled soap mixture. For each bath: 15 drops of the essential oil of your choice mixed with 2 TBSP of above mix.