

Aromatherapy Basics

Essential Oils 101

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A close-up photograph of a green leaf with several clear water droplets resting on its surface. The leaf's veins are visible, and the background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

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The Basics

WHAT IS AROMATHERAPY?

Aromatherapy is a natural, healing modality employing essential oils extracted from aromatic plant sources to treat and balance the body, mind and spirit.

WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL OILS?

Essential oils are extracted from botanical sources by means of steam distillation, expression, solvent extraction, maceration or enfleurage. They may be extracted from every part of the plant: flowers, leaves, fruit, seed, root, bark, gum, etc. They are volatile and evaporate quickly.

PURE VS. SYNTHETIC

Only pure natural essential oils have any therapeutic benefits. Fragrance oils and other scented oils are synthetic unless they specifically state that they are pure essential oils. Otherwise they are chemically formulated in a laboratory and not only contain no natural healing properties, but may cause allergic reactions or irritations in some people.



The Basics

STORAGE OF ESSENTIAL OILS

Essential oils are volatile and very sensitive to heat, light and oxidation. They therefore should be stored in dark glass containers with tight fitting lids away from any heat or light sources.

USING ESSENTIAL OILS

Essential oils are extremely concentrated. They need to be diluted before use. Although it has been said that Lavender and Tea Tree oils may be used neat (undiluted), this is not recommended.. All other oils need to be diluted in a fixed oil (also called base or carrier oils) or water. Some good choices for base oils are: almond oil, apricot kernel oil, avocado oil, grapeseed oil, jojoba oil, walnut oil, wheatgerm oil or even olive oil.

WHAT ARE FIXED OILS?

Fixed oils are extracted from vegetables, seeds or nuts by expeller or cold pressing. They can also be found in refined or unrefined forms. These oils are not volatile and do not evaporate.

The Basics

METHODS OF APPLICATION

There are several ways to enjoy essential oils, including: massage, compress, baths (full, foot and sitz), steam inhalation and diffusion. A word of caution – essential oils can be very toxic and should never be ingested unless under the care of a professional! Avoid contact with eyes and again be sure they are properly diluted.

DILUTION OF ESSENTIAL OILS

A common dilution for adults is 2 % - which would equal approximately 10 drops essential oil to 1 ounce or 2T carrier oil. For an aromatherapy bath add 6-10 drops essential oil to the tub and mix well before getting in. 3-6 drops essential oil in a bowl of warm water wrung out in a washcloth works well for a compress. Use the same dilution in a bowl of steaming hot water for a steam inhalation.

Glossary

Below is a glossary of common terms used in aromatherapy that may be of use to those who are just beginning their exploration of essential oils.

Aromatherapy - Aromatherapy is a natural, healing modality employing essential oils extracted from aromatic plant sources to treat and balance the body, mind and spirit

Compress – Add essential oils to a bowl of water and swish to disperse. Place a cloth in the bowl and then lay on affected area of body with a dry towel on top of it.

Diffusion – A method of using essential oils in which the oils are diffused into the air by means of heat as in a candle or electric aromalamp, or by nebulizing as in a glass diffuser.

Enfleurage – A cold- process method of extracting fragrant oils from plant material by layering in cold fats or oils.

Fixed oil – A non-volatile fatty substance extracted from vegetable matter, especially seeds and nuts.

Essential oil – A volatile material that is contained in plant material. Essential oils are extracted from botanical sources by means of steam distillation, expression, solvent extraction, maceration or enfleurage. They may be extracted from every part of the plant: flowers, leaves, fruit, seed, root, bark, gum, etc.



Glossary

Expression – A process of extracting fragrant oils by squeezing to break open the oil glands, used mainly for citrus oils.

Maceration – A process of extracting fragrant oils from plant material by soaking in warm fluid, usually fixed oil.

Oxidation – The process of combining with oxygen, which, in the case of essential oils, is destructive to its properties.

Sitz – used for soothing and washing the hip and genital area. To use, run a bath to hip level, or use a bowl big enough to lower the buttocks into. Add the essential oils and swish the water around to disperse them before getting in.

Solvent extraction – A process of extracting fragrant oils from plant material by using heated solvents, such as hexane, to remove the essential oil. This process is generally used for the more delicate flowers that cannot withstand the process of steam distillation.

Steam distillation – A process of extracting fragrant oils from plant material by heating in water until the steam causes the volatile oils to release from the plant. The steam and volatile oils are then cooled, turning the steam back into water and the essential oils are poured off the top.

Steam inhalation – A method of using essential oils in which the oils are added to a steaming bowl of water and are inhaled with the head covered with a towel and held 8-10 inches above the bowl.

Volatile oil – An oil that evaporates or vaporizes quickly and easily.

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Vanessa has been studying and using natural medicine for the last 20 years, focusing on medicinal herbs, homeopathy, nutrition and aromatherapy. She studied for 2 years with world-renowned Herbalist, Cascade Anderson Geller, in the 1990's. In 2009, she earned her Diploma in Homeopathy (DiHom) from the British Institute of Homeopathy and has recently graduated from The Avicenna Institute with a degree in Traditional Naturopathy. She is the Mother of 3 adorable girls, ages 15, 14 and 11.5, is the founder, chief formulator and CEO of Herbs of Grace Natural Look Mineral Makeup and is a belly dance instructor. Additionally, she is the owner of Herbs of Grace Healing Arts where she is a Natural Health Consultant. While she currently calls Mossyrock, WA her home, she has spent time living in Japan, India and Germany, with her husband, Brad, and their girls.

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