

Nourishing Scents for Dismal Winter Months

From hot cocoa to cheery clementines, the winter months are associated with delightful smells. Whether you revel in the pungent aroma of a holiday tree or a sprinkle of cinnamon on a festive dessert, aromatics have a positive effect on wellbeing.

The days are short during the cold months, and that means most of us don't wrap up the work day in time to have a chance to soak up some sunlight. Less sunlight affects our mood, and the reason goes way beyond the dismal tone of gray days. Serotonin and other feel-good neurochemicals in our bodies are stimulated by natural, full-spectrum light, and without it, sadness, depression, and lassitude can become a problem.

Seasonal Affective Disorder, also known as SAD, is a form of depression that accompanies the change of seasons and can be debilitating. Seasonal Affective Disorder is often dismissed as the "winter blues", but for many individuals, it is an annual descent into deep melancholy and moodiness. SAD can be treated with light therapy, medication, herbal supplements, and clinical aromatherapy. The latter is a delightful and nourishing tool for self-care during the winter months.

Aromatic medicine is not only ideal for improving mood but also for boosting immunity. Lung-supporting steams, fragrant baths, invigorating showers, cold-soothing chest rubs, and delicious-smelling potpourri take only minutes to create and can make winter an easier passage.

Looking at the scents we most commonly gravitate toward this time of year validates the deeper wisdom of our sense of smell. Here are a few:

Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*)

Balsam fir, the quintessential scent of the Christmas tree, is an uplifting scent that has a wonderful effect on frazzled nerves. Its superpower is the ability to lower excess cortisol in the body and support the adrenals, the body's stress glands. Balsam fir is the ideal aroma to reach for when exhausted, emotionally spent, fighting a cold or battling the flu, or feeling off kilter from stress. It can be applied to a tissue and inhaled, diluted in unscented lotion or vegetable oil and rubbed on the chest, or added to distilled water in a spray bottle for disinfecting surfaces or clearing the air of unwanted odors. Balsam fir is an uplifting oil that can be inhaled to soften the edge of SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) and other forms of depression.

Cacao (*Theobroma cacao*)

Cacao, the euphoric aroma of chocolate, stimulates serotonin and dopamine within seconds, therefore, flooding the brain with feel-good chemicals and inducing a better mood. Cacao is a good scent to reach for when irritability and holiday stress take the joy out of winter festivities. It is also invaluable in helping to ease cravings for chocolate, white-flour carbs, and sugary treats. Inhaling cacao when a craving comes on can reduce the need to grab the nearest cupcake or candy bar.

Cinnamon Bark (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*)

The scent of artificial cinnamon is often sprayed on pine cones and potpourris during holiday time. These chemical imposters greet shoppers at the market and florist, but the real thing is not only better for your health but a great way to increase energy and fight viruses. Cinnamon bark essential oil is a powerful substance and must be used with caution, but

its benefits are worth investing in a little know-how. 1 drop or 2 applied to the soles of the feet can ward off influenza and other nasty illnesses. It can be sprinkled onto dry leaves and pine cones for a spicy potpourri that not only delights the nose but uplifts the mood, increases vitality, and wakes up sluggish minds. When diffused into the air via a nebulizer, cinnamon will kill bacteria, molds, and viruses upon contact. ***Caution:** *Cinnamon can irritate the mucus membranes, so please do not inhale directly or allow it to come in contact with the eyes. Do not apply to any other part of the body, only the soles of the feet. **Tip:* *cassia is a great substitute for more expensive cinnamon for scenting the home or office.*

Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*)

Menthol, the major component of eucalyptus, is most commonly used in chest rubs and cough drops. Its slap-you-in-the-face coolness is excellent for bronchial and sinus congestion, aches and pains, and boosting immunity. Add a few drops in Epsom salts or evaporated sea salt for an invigorating, nourishing bath. For a healing steam that can unblock sinuses, ease colds and flu, and improve the effects of winter depression, add 1-3 drops to a bowl of hot water and inhale with a towel over the head. A drop or two is a wonderful addition to natural potpourri: sprinkle 3 drops of eucalyptus, 5 drops balsam fir or pine needle, and 4 drops of sweet orange oil on dried leaves or pine cones. ***Caution:** *do not use near the face or on the chest in cases of asthma, for menthol can trigger asthmatic attacks in some individuals. Avoid the eyes.*

Frankincense (*Boswellia carteri*)

Frankincense, most commonly associated with biblical times, is derived from a resilient desert tree that exudes a fragrant resin when the bark is wounded or slashed. The essential oil is supportive to the lungs, endocrine system, and nerves. It

is also a wonderful scent to inhale to increase oxygen in the brain and other tissues. Frankincense is a fine oil to use during meditative times to deepen relaxation and spiritual connection. This oil may be blended with lavender, ylang ylang, and myrrh to enhance its nerve-calming abilities. ***Tip:** *Frankincense is one of the most important essential oils in modern clinical aromatherapy and is used for everything from panic disorders to cancer prevention and treatment.*

Peppermint (*Mentha piperata*)

Peppermint is such a part of everyday life, it is easy to forget its deeply medicinal properties. Found in everything from toothpaste to candy canes, this essential oil is useful for every facet of life and health. It is invaluable for digestive woes, especially after eating too rich foods during holiday time. A few drops can be added to a little vegetable oil or unscented lotion and rubbed on the belly for fast relief of gas, bloating, cramping, intestinal distress, and general indigestion. A speck under the tongue can relieve nausea. Add a few drops in Epsom salts or evaporated sea salt for an invigorating, nourishing bath. For a healing steam that can unblock sinuses, ease colds and flu, and improve the effects of winter depression, add 1-3 drops to a bowl of hot water and inhale with a towel over the head. ***Caution:** *do not use near the face or on the chest in cases of asthma, for menthol can trigger asthmatic attacks in some individuals. Avoid the eyes.*

Tangerine (*Citrus reticulata*)

Tangerine, similar to sweet orange essential oil in scent, is a delightful citrus aroma that induces happiness, calm, and hope when inhaled. It is a gentle oil, especially beneficial for irritable children and a lovely addition to bedtime. It is a great pick-me-up when added to household cleaners, room

sprays, potpourri, and air fresheners.

Essential oils are the ideal choice for aromatherapeutic inhalation, but if you don't have any on hand, simply crush an orange peel or pine needles and inhale deeply; brew a pot of tea with a couple of cinnamon sticks and inhale the steam. With a little fragrance, winter and its challenges can be tamed, and life, just a little bit sweeter.

Sources:

- **Multidimensional Aromatherapy: Clinical, Practical, and Vibrational Applications** by Marlaina Donato