Understanding Essential Oils: A Complete Guide For Beginners

Have you relied on a plant for healing today? You probably did without even realizing it. It’s easy to take these anchored down organisms for granted, but the truth is that many plants are filled with an arsenal of chemicals that can help or hurt us, depending on how we decide to put them to work. Humans have been using plants for their medicinal properties for thousands of years, but no part of a plant has ever been more valued than its essential oil.

Used medicinally, recreationally, and even religiously, essential oils have been an important part of cultural rituals since the beginning of human history. You too can benefit from the potent powers of healing plants, so long as you take the time to learn the facts about essential oils. From this guide, you’ll learn what essential oils can do (and what they can’t) for your health, how to use them and the kinds you should buy. No matter what your long term goals are for using essential oils, this guide will get you started.

What Makes an Oil Essential?

Put simply, an essential oil is the part of a plant that smells strongly. The aroma comes from the chemical content of volatile oils, which means that they are made from terpenes, or hundreds of carbon and hydrogen-based compounds intermixed. Unlike “true” oils (like olive oil), essential oils are far lighter and tend to vaporize when exposed to air.

A good way to understand essential oils is to think of them as the blood of plants. Like blood, essential oils seal cuts and trigger hormonal responses in plants when they are threatened.

These oils are so essential for plant vitality that without them, plants would die.

Unlike human blood, essential oils only come from specific parts of plants. Some, like cardamon, can be found in seed pods, while others, like ginger, come from the root. Tree resin (myrrh), fruit peels (citrus oils), petals (rose), tree bark (cinnamon), and leaves (eucalyptus) also contains essential oils for some species.

On average, every essential oil contains over 100 components, many of which can change between plants themselves. Once distilled, essential oils become highly concentrated, meaning you need an incredible amount of plant material to make them. For example, one ounce of rose essential oil requires over 60,000 roses, and an ounce of peppermint oil requires more than 16 pounds of fresh leaves.

Looking Closer at the Essential Oil Extraction Process

It’s no simple task to pull essential oils out of plants, but there are several methods that tend to work best. The most popular method is steam distillation, which involves suspending fresh plants over boiling water so that steam can pull out their essential oils. These oils are captured in a vessel that pushes it through a tube, where it cools down and condenses back into a water-oil mixture. Because water and oil don’t mix, the oil can be carefully harvested, leaving 100% pure essential oil.

Another extraction method is expression, which is how citrus essential oils are made. Just like the process of cold pressing olive oils, citrus peels are mechanically squeezed until every last drop of essential oil comes out.

The Benefits of Aromatherapy for Your Body

Plants use their essential oils to keep themselves safe, but humans have long put them towards a different use: aromatherapy. In 1928, the French chemist Rene-Maurice Gattefosse found that his burnt hand felt better when he put some lavender oil on it. He decided to test these benefits out farther and soon stumbled upon the science of aromatherapy, which is the use of essential oils to promote healing and wellness.

Aromatherapy didn’t take off in the United States until the 1980s, but these valuable plant extracts were soon added to lotions, candles, and makeup for their aromatic benefits. Today, there are trained professionals (aromatherapists, physical therapists, and natural medicine doctors) who use aromatherapy to promote healing for a range of ailments.

More than 100,000 aromas exist in nature, but the human nose only recognizes a few hundred. Even so, certain smells can dramatically influence your emotions, feelings, and overall well-being. Many are capable of stimulating immune responses to help you fight off a cold and can dry out mucous to clear your air passageways. Others have nervine properties that calm anxiety, promote relaxation, and soothe tension headaches before they get out of control. Some have stimulating effects that work to wake you up, sharpen your focus, and eliminate mental fatigue.

The Three “Notes” of Essential Oils

Most essential oils are categorized as being a top, middle, or base note. The best blends of essential oils involve mixtures of all three notes to get a well-balanced scent.

Top Notes: Because they are made from young leaves, fresh

herbs, and delicate flowers, top notes are the most volatile and fragile. These oils evaporate quickly, but they can quickly stimulate your senses in order to wake you up or snap you out of a bad mood. Some examples include peppermint, cinnamon, and sweet orange.

Middle Note: These well-balanced oils are good for the entire body. They are normally made through distilling the entire plant and tend to create a strong connection between the mind and the body, making them ideal for treating physical problems like stiffness and arthritis. Common examples are nutmeg, juniper, and lavender.

Base Notes: Robust and earthy, base notes are the richest form of essential oil and often come from tree resin. Their heavy, distinctive scents are great for calming anxiety and nerves. Some well-known varieties are vanilla, myrrh, and patchouli.

Benefits of Different Essential Oils

Because there are hundreds of essential oils, this article can’t delve into the benefits of each one. However, below are some of the most common essential oils and their benefits.

- **Rose:** As one of the most valuable essential oils in the world, rose oil is great for reducing skin inflammation and as a facial moisturizer.
- **Cypress:** Reduces the visibility of varicose veins, helps heal broken bones, and improves blood circulation.
- **Grapefruit:** Helps to reduce cellulite when blended with coconut oil, and can work to rev up your metabolism.
- **Frankincense:** Works to build up the immune system and reduce inflammation while supporting the brain and possibly helping you fight off cancer.
- **Clove:** Protects your body against bacteria and parasites and provides you with antioxidants.

- **Lemon:** A powerful ingredient to add to homemade cleaning products, lemon oil can also cleanse your body.
- **Tea Tree:** Works to stimulate the immune system and can eliminate bad smells. Also renowned as an anti-bacteria, anti-fungal oil.
- **Myrrh:** Can help prevent infections and promotes beautiful skin while minimizing stretch marks. Myrrh is also a natural antiseptic.
- **Ginger:** Relieves nausea (especially from traveling) and improves digestion while supporting the health of your joints.
- **Eucalyptus:** Improves respiratory issues, especially sinus infections and colds. Also used as a natural way to wake up your mind when you're tired.
- **Oregano:** Helps you recover faster from a cold and is an anti fungal and antimicrobial as well.
- **Sandalwood:** Known for boosting energy and renowned as a natural aphrodisiac to increase libido.
- **Lavender:** Great for healing wounds, calming nerves, and improving moods. A natural choice for adding to personal care products.
- **Peppermint**: An instant way to boost your energy, peppermint also reduces fevers and headaches, supports digestion, and helps you focus on tasks in front of you.
- **Rosemary:** Improves brain function and memory and helps thicken hair when added to natural shampoos.

Buying Essential Oils: What You Need to Know

Because essential oils are natural products, their overall quality will change depending on where and how the plant was grown, the age of the plant when it was extracted, and the extraction method used. This means that not every oil is created equal. The best way to ensure you are avoiding inferior, low-grade products is to search for pure, uncut oils

that were grown as close to nature intended as possible. Because essential oils are the most concentrated part of a plant, it can be disastrous to invest in some that were exposed to pesticides and other chemicals when alive. For this reason, it’s always smart to buy organic essential oils whenever possible.

Make sure to pay attention to the purity grade of the oil you intend to buy, choosing pure essential oils over synthetic whenever you get the chance. Sometimes cheap oils are diluted with true oils like olive oil, which you can test by dabbing a little on a tissue. If the oil doesn’t evaporate, it’s not truly essential. Price point often isn’t a good indicator of quality because low-grade oils can be sold for more than their value. Another red flag is when every oil from a company costs the same because true essential oils considerably vary in cost. The best thing to do is to read reviews from previous buyers and learn where a company sources its oils in order to ensure quality.

Oils should be stored in tight closing, dark glass containers (some oils can dissolve plastic) and kept in a cool place. It’s also a smart idea to write the date on the bottles after opening them so that you can gauge their potency over time. When you use them, be sure to use a separate glass dropper for each bottle to prevent contamination, and tightly seal every bottle immediately after use. When stored correctly, most essential oils will last between one and three years.

Tips for Getting Started with Essential Oils

Knowing where to get started in the world of essential oils can be tricky. The best advice is to start small; invest in ten or fewer oils and see how you can incorporate them into your daily life. As you learn about the benefits they provide, you can slowly start expanding your collection to fit your

needs.

Because essential oils evaporate so quickly, they usually need to be mixed with a carrier oil before use and many practitioners recommend mixing essential oils with carrier oils to dilute them. Carrier oils are true oils that come from the fatty parts of plants, meaning that they last longer on your skin and prolong the benefits of aromatherapy. Some common carrier oils include olive oil, coconut oil, and jojoba oil.

The most common methods for using essential oils are described below.

Inhalation

The simplest way to experience the benefits of many essential oils is to simply breathe them in. It’s possible to open a bottle and breathe deeply, but you can also use an electronic diffuser to spread the scent around a room. Another option is to create a potent steam by pouring 2-3 cups of boiling water into a bowl and adding several drops of oil. Keep your nose within a foot of the water and cover your head with a towel, breathing deeply to fully inhale the steam.

Topical Application

Many (but not all!) essential oils are also useful and safe to apply directly to the skin. The ears, temples, feet, and upper back are all popular places to try. Just put a few drops in your calm and carefully massage them into your preferred spot with gentle, circular motions. It’s usually best to dilute the oil with a carrier oil, so make sure to do your research first.

Internal Consumption

Some essential oils actually have nutritional benefits that

make them safe to use as a food flavoring or dietary supplement. However, this is not an area where you should be experimenting. Before tasting an essential oil, be sure to read the instructions carefully and seek the advice of a medical professional. When in doubt, find another way to enjoy the benefits of your oil.

Therapeutic Bath

If you want to ease the stress of your day away, a bath infused with essential oils can’t be beat. Simply blend several drops of essential oil into a few scoops of Epsom salts (to help the oil spread through the water) and dissolve the mixture into your bathwater for a relaxing experience.

Aromatherapy Massage

Ease tension from your body and clear out your mind by experiencing an essential oil based massage. Just make sure to mix the oil with a carrier oil so that you can actually feel the benefits. Stronger blends are best, so plan on using up to 20 drops of oil per ounce of carrier oil.

Remember: More is Not Always Better

It’s easy to overdo it when it comes to essential oils, so keep in mind that these compounds are extremely concentrated plant chemicals. A little goes a long way because there’s a lot contained within each drop of oil. In fact, just one drop of peppermint oil has the same strength has 28 cups of peppermint tea. So use your drops sparingly and you’ll have plenty of oil left to enjoy for months to come.

In Summary

Essential oils are a world of aromatic goodness. Once you start experimenting with blends and scents, you’ll realize how addicting they can be and keep expanding your collection. No

matter if you’re trying to ease some health problems or you’re simply trying to relax, there’s bound to be an essential oil out there that can help you out.

Related Reading:

- *Heal Gum Disease and Cavities Naturally – Step by Step*
- *How I Replaced Medications With Essential Oils*
- *How To Correctly Use Essential Oils To Prevent the Flu and Other Illnesses*
- *How To Relieve Allergy Symptoms With Essential Oils*
- *Five Essential Oils That Help Fight Infections*
- *Eleven Essential Oils That Help Fight Lyme Disease*

Related Products:

- Essential Oils

Sources:

- *Steam Distillation* – Wikipedia
- *How Are Essential Oils Extracted?* – National Association For Holistic Aromatherapy
- *What Are The Best Essential Oils For Inflammation?* – The Fusion Model
- *The 9 Very Best Essential Oils For Treating Colds and Flu* – Off Grid News
- *19 Essential Oils For Beginners* – Mother Earth News