

Essential Oils



For thousands of years people have used these healing plant oils for a wide range of applications. They are used for natural medicine, cosmetic aids, home cleaning and most notably, aromatherapy. These uses span not only several millennia, but also the globe. From Chinese to Egyptian cultures, essential oils played a part in therapeutic, spiritual, hygienic and ritual purposes. In the modern world, many eastern cultures still rely on essential oils as medicine and an important part of meditation or cultural practices. In the western world, they are commonly used for relaxation, antiseptic and pain relief needs. Of course, superseding all, is the use of essential oils in perfumes and cosmetics.

What are essential oils?

Essential oils are highly concentrated plant extracts, called so because they deliver “the essence” of the plant. Specifically, they are naturally occurring volatile aroma compounds and are not “oil” in the usual sense of the word. Volatile, meaning that they are readily vaporized or disperse freely in the air. When walking amongst flowers, it is their essential or volatile oils that permeates the air. While commonly found in flowers, some plant’s volatile oils occur in the leaf, bark or roots. Worth noting, not all plants produce volatile oils that can be extracted. In contrast to herbal supplements, essential oils predominantly deliver the aroma compounds of a given plant, but not vitamins, minerals or other non-aroma compounds.

How are essential oils extracted from the plant?

These precious oils are typically extracted via steam distillation or sometimes with cold pressing, such as with citrus oils. Other methods include using a solvent/chemical, in which the end preparation is referred to as an “absolute”. Solvents allow for the extraction of certain plants, or compounds within a plant, that other methods can’t effectively capture. While this does have obvious advantages, the use of toxic solvents and their possible residue in the end product make this option less than ideal. Recent technology has allowed for a new form of extraction called supercritical or simply “CO2” extract. This seems to be the perfect solvent-based extraction, as it uses a non-toxic solvent and the end product is entirely solvent free.

How does an essential oil compare to an herbal supplement?

There are two primary differences. One, as discussed above, is that essential oils are simply the essence or aroma of the plant. They do not typically contain nutrients or anything other than the aroma compounds of the plant. A common misconception is that citrus essential oils, pressed from vitamin C rich peels, will contain vitamin C—but that is certainly not the case. Herbal supplements on the other hand, typically offer a wide spectrum of nutrients found in that plants. Most herbal products will contain vitamins, minerals, amino acids and much more, including small amounts of essential oils.

The second difference is sheer concentration. Herbal extracts can be concentrated to 10-200 times beyond the original plant, sometimes by simply removing water or fiber from the fresh plant. Essential oils on the other hand, often achieve much higher levels of concentration. While all plants are different, most essential oils are hundreds or thousands of times more concentrated than the plant they were sourced from. With a fairly rich source of volatile oils like in Lavender flowers, only 200lbs of flowers are need to produce 1lb of essential oil. Rose petals, on the other hand, can require 4,000lbs of petals to produce the same amount of essential oil. These differences often impact the rarity and expense of the oil.

How can I use essential oils?

Essential Oils have an endless variety of uses, from simply enjoying their fragrance, to more therapeutic uses. For aromatherapy purposes, utilizing a diffuser to disperse the oils into the air is very popular and recommended. Options range from placing oils on a necklace with cloth inside, to more advanced devices, like modern electric diffusers. Recently the most desirable of these, ultrasonic diffusers that use vibration rather than heat, have become available at an affordable price. Virtually silent, they produce a fine mist that delivers the full potency of the oil.

Essential oils are also applied to the skin, but as a general rule, should always be diluted first. Professional aromatherapists recommend diluting 5-10 drops of essential oil per one ounce of a carrier oil, such as almond, coconut or jojoba. Remember that different guidelines apply to different oils. When cooking, you might add a large amount of basil to a particular dish, but you'd be more sparing when adding habanero peppers, for example. It's the same with essential oils and until you're savvy, it's best to proceed with caution. Please consider consulting an essential oil book, from a trusted author.

You may also hear some people advocating for using essential oils internally, but professional aromatherapists are unanimous in strongly discouraging this practice. In short, without an intimate knowledge of essential oils, it is far too easy to do harm. While this may seem overly cautious, remember the difference in potency between essential oils and supplements. In some cases, a few drops of essential oils could be compared to swallowing an entire bottle of pills. In addition to the need to be familiar with each individual oil and its properties, their sheer potency makes diluting them properly much more difficult than common sense would suggest. Please consider looking for quality supplements, utilizing essential oils, that have been professionally prepared and tested safe for internal use.

Therapeutic uses of essential oils

Oils of Tea Tree, Manuka, Thyme and Clove (to name a few) all show potent antibacterial activity. These oils are often used in topical applications or in diffusers to purify the air.

Chamomile, Lavender, Sandalwood and Frankincense are all regarded as relaxing and grounding scents. They are commonly used for assisting with sleep, general stress and meditation.

Eucalyptus and Ravintsara are excellent for clearing congestion and may have anti-viral activity. Next time a bug is making its rounds, look for these oils!

Quality of essential oils

When trying to determine the quality of a particular oil, a good start is looking at who you're getting it from. Does the retailer or manufacturer have a solid reputation? How long have they been in business? For those who want to dig deeper, ask about the manufacturer's quality control practices and consider requesting a laboratory analysis.

Some companies will use terms like "therapeutic grade", but what does that mean? Unfortunately, not much! There isn't an official standard for grading essential oils, outside of verifying that the oil is from the correct plant. Terms like therapeutic grade are literally marketing terms without scientific backing and are not subject to verification. The more you learn about each oil, the better you'll be able to determine it's quality for yourself. Until then, start with a trusted source.