



essential oils



what are they?

An essential oil is a highly-concentrated aromatic liquid, composed of chemicals that are relatively non-soluble in water, and that evaporate with ease. They are produced from either a fresh or dried plant source (e.g. flowers, leaves, seeds, roots, fruits or bark) by means of distillation, using a still. Many essential oils are non-oily, though most have an oily feel to them when applied to the skin.

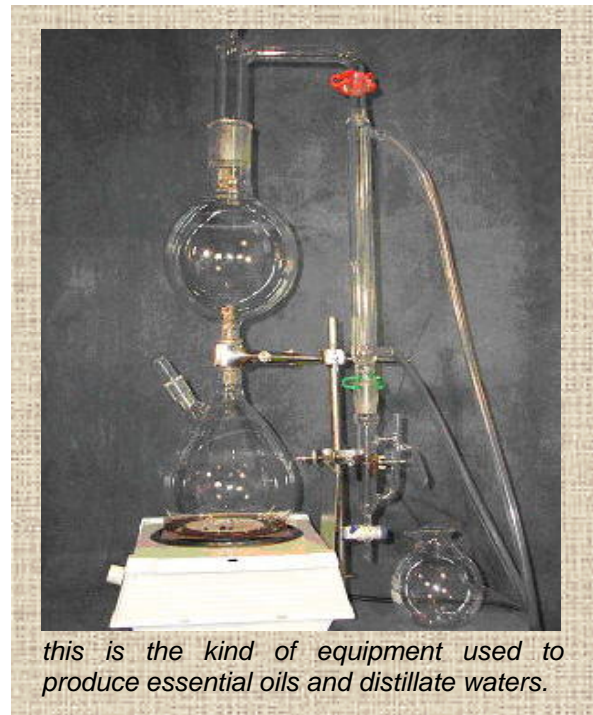
Essential oils capture not only the fragrance of the herb that they are distilled from but also many of the medicinal properties. This has produced a field of complementary medicine known as aromatherapy, where individual prescriptions of essential oils are blended and incorporated into creams, salves, massage blends etc, to meet the unique needs of the patient.

Although essential oils are produced from plant materials they are nevertheless highly concentrated medicinal products and should never be taken internally or applied to the skin neat. If used incorrectly they can in some instances be quite dangerous, so it is therefore advised that anybody thinking of using essential oils medicinally should first consult a local qualified aromatherapy practitioner (look for the letters MIFPA after their name to ensure quality of practice).

A word about aromatherapy. It's not all about 'curing people with smells', and many of the more 'spiritual' claims for the therapeutic properties of plant essences are unproven. However, the fact that some plants have antiseptic or healing properties doesn't require a leap of faith.



lavender in flower. Flowers are distilled to produce lavender oil - a relaxant; the distillate water is good for burns.



this is the kind of equipment used to produce essential oils and distillate waters.

Plants do have powerful properties – some of them healing, and some of them damaging. Go and grab a stinging nettle or eat some deadly nightshade to find out (only joking – please don't do that!).

Making essential oils is a way of condensing these properties and incorporating them into creams, lotions, balms and other skin-care and medicinal products. For example, eucalyptus oil has been used for years to clear airways in cases of flu, colds and congestion.

Smells do come into it of course. Aromas can either relax or stimulate, depending on the plant source – like incense. The use of essential oils can help to maintain health, and complement conventional medicine, but not replace it – especially in the case of serious illnesses. However, they can relieve painful or irritating symptoms.

what are the benefits?

better than using the alternatives

Essential oils can be put to many uses (see below). They are natural, non-toxic and biodegradable, unlike many of the synthetic alternatives that cause environmental damage and pollution in their manufacture and use.

Some have antimicrobial properties (e.g. Damask rose), and can be used instead of environmentally-damaging pesticides or fungicides.



making your own is even better

We always think that DIY is good – you can gain new skills, save money, learn a lot, have fun, and perhaps even start a small business.

Other benefits of making your own could be:

- saving on transport fuel
- you know that your products are pure
- the production of essential oils doesn't have to be in the hands of a few giant cosmetics companies
- you don't have to rely so much on drug companies to maintain health
- if you grow your own herbs to make oils, you can ensure that they are grown organically, and that you only use fresh material

what can I do?

using essential oils

Each essential oil has its own distinct properties (e.g. stimulant, antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, relaxant) that can sometimes help improve the body's natural functioning and so help alleviate and prevent disease.

As with herbal medicine, it is rare that a single essential oil is used to treat a particular patient. By carefully combining different essential oils to form a unique prescription, the effects have been found to be greater than by using each of the essential oils individually.

Essential oils capture the aroma of the herb they are distilled from, and so many people like to use them as natural room fresheners / deodorisers by gently heating them in specially-designed oil burners, or incorporating them into candles.

Other uses:

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| cosmetics | moisturisers |
| shampoos | soaps |
| shower gels | pesticides |
| insect repellent | washing-up liquid |
| household cleaners | first aid |
| increased libido | perfumes |

There are many books available on using essential oils.

buying essential oils

See 'resources' for suppliers. But - the quality of many commercially-produced essential oils is not as high as it could be. Many of them are 'perfume grade' or adulterated with other oils or synthetic

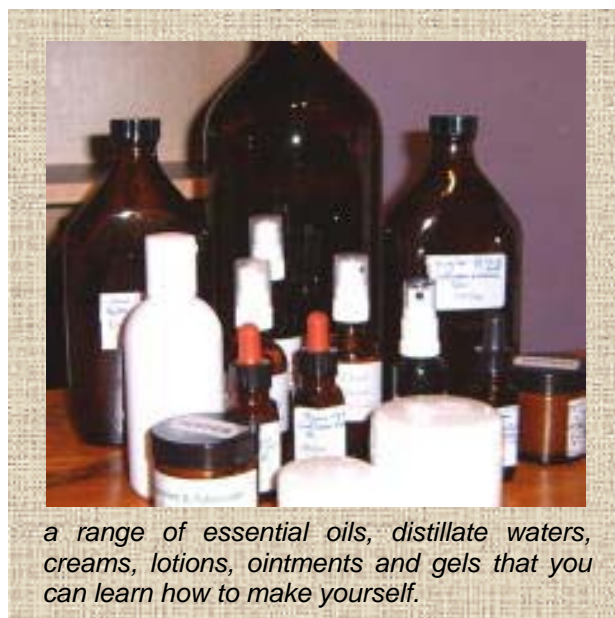
chemicals to meet the highly-standardised needs of the fragrance and flavour industry. These second-rate oils do not have the full therapeutic effect that 'clinical grade' oils do. If you purchase essential oils for medicinal use from commercial producers, ask for proof of quality control measures employed; better still, you could produce your own.

making essential oils

If you have the right distillation equipment, you can make your own essential oils at home, and from them, your own skin-care products such as creams, ointments, balms, lotions, tinctures and gels. LILI has a course and a book to help you do so, and will be selling the equipment soon.

resources

- LILI (see box below) run a weekend course on making your own essential oils
- *Make your own Essential Oils and Skin-care Products*, by Dan Coaten - published by LILI
- *The Aromatherapy Bible*, Gill Farrer-Halls. The definitive guide to using essential oils; available from LILI, plus many more books.
- Aromatherapy Trade Council, 01473 603630, a-t-c.org.uk; regulatory body for the UK essential oils trade
- see LILI's links page for suppliers of oils, plus herbs and equipment to make your own



a range of essential oils, distillate waters, creams, lotions, ointments and gels that you can learn how to make yourself.

Contact us or visit our website to find out more about our factsheets, books, courses, online shop, links, forum, events and volunteering on organic farms. You can also become a 'Friend of LILI', and receive our e-newsletter, discounts on our courses, and help us to make a difference.

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