



Buying Essential Oils

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Aromatherapy is one of the most popular complementary therapies. Consequently the aromatherapy essential oil trade has escalated over the past few years with new and sometimes questionable suppliers taking advantage of the current consumer demand. Since the late 1980s, the modern consumer has embraced the concept of natural products and opportunities for incorporating essential oils as an important and active part of product formulations in cosmetics and toiletries have increased. Many essential oil suppliers and some of the large "multiple stores" have leapt on the success of aromatherapy to expand their product range and take advantage of current consumer demand. Just how many of them either supply natural or unadulterated "pure" essential oils or use them in their products?

The word "aromatherapy" is a generic term and is not defined in law. This has allowed companies producing products ranging from tobacco, washing up liquid and ironing aids to take advantage of the popularity of the therapy in their marketing ploy and lay claim to some unique aromatherapy properties for their products – regardless of whether they contain true essential oils or synthetic copies.

Essential oils are widely available under various forms of labeling and packaging, sometimes with insufficient regard for safety. Many are of poor quality, some are totally synthetic and there are companies that specialise in making nature-identical essential oils and then offering them as "pure" essential. Others are bulked out with cheaper oils and synthetics, or ready-blended in a carrier oil and sold as pure essential oils.

Here are a few basic facts to take into account when buying essential oils.

Who Uses Essential Oils?

Only a very small percentage of essential oil production is used in aromatherapy. The majority of essential oils are produced for the cosmetics, perfumery, toiletries, pharmaceutical and food and flavouring industries, which require standardised raw materials to ensure the same aroma and flavour from each batch. This means that essential oils are often blended from different growing regions and then adulterated by adding synthetics and sometimes cheaper, poor quality oils to standardise them for those particular industries

The Importance of Purity.

In their purest form, these natural plant oils possess distinctive and unique healing properties, which can improve health and prevent disease. Their therapeutic properties were well known by the great civilisations of the past and the oils have been used in fragrances, flavours and medicines for thousands of years. The extensive use of aromatic plants for religious and medicinal purposes can be traced back to at least 3,000 BC in Persia, Egypt and India.


To achieve optimum therapeutic results in aromatherapy and influence health, essential oils need to be of the highest quality – pure, unadulterated, natural and repeatable – and not altered in any way since being distilled or expressed from the original plant material. Poor quality products simply do not work and they may lead to skin irritations and side effects.

Natural Variations in Plants.

As manufactured products, essential oils vary like wines - from year to year and crop to crop. There will always be a natural variation in plants dependent on country of origin, soil type, altitude, climatic conditions, cultivation methods and time of harvesting. Their yields, together with their chemical composition and aromas, will therefore vary from season to season. The whole oil contains many chemical components, some of which are present in such very small quantities that they cannot be identified. It follows that it is impossible to make a synthetic oil that is a complete mirror image of a natural essential oil.

Oil Yields and Price

It is just not possible to purchase high quality essential oils and real aromatherapy products at a cheap price. Essential oil yields within plants vary enormously, with some plants, like Rose, yielding as little as 0.01% while others, like Tea Tree, yielding up to 15%. A 1% yield indicates that it takes 100 kilos of plant material to produce 1 litre of essential oil. Prices will thus also vary and are not necessarily an indicator of quality. If all oils on sale are the same price, then it is generally a sign that the oils could be synthetic, adulterated or blended products, often with dilutions of less than 10% of essential oil. Diluted products should be clearly labelled. When purchasing individual pure essential oils check that they are clearly labelled with the words "Pure Essential Oil" and not just "Essential Oil" or "Aromatherapy Oil" which does not specify exactly what is in the bottle and can be very misleading. The label should always show the botanical name of the plant from which the oil is obtained.



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