

Aromatherapy is a natural adjunct to the practice of massage, and one that greatly enhances the therapeutic experience. The demand for aromatherapy is booming. It has become a must-have modality at spas and salons, and essential oil companies are springing up everywhere.

Though relatively new to the U.S., the art and practice of aromatherapy are as old as our relationship with plants. Infused oils, pomades and plant resins were used from ancient times for healing, cosmetic and ceremonial purposes. References to the properties and uses for essential oils are found in manuscripts from China, India and Egypt dating as far back as 2800 BC. However, since most of these substances were rare and costly, they were employed mainly in the royal courts and temples, administered with ritual and invocation. Trade routes and methods of extraction were often closely guarded secrets.

A plant's "essential oil" is a liquid produced in small, gland-like pockets. The word "essential" refers to the fact that this liquid contains the imprint of the plant's specific qualities and acts as a protection for the plant itself. The volatile molecules of the essential oil communicate with the plant's environment, and with mankind, through aroma and vibratory rate.

Ironically, 19th century chemists, anxious to identify the active biochemical ingredients and their effects, laid the groundwork for synthetic derivatives, leading to the decline of essential oils and herbal medicine.

Modern scientific literature on essential oils began in the 1920s with the French chemist Gattefosse. He accidentally burned himself while working in his laboratory and instinctively plunged his hand into an open vat of lavender (a popular ingredient in the colognes and sachets of his day.) To his amazement, the burn healed without pain, blistering or scarring. Subsequent investigation into the sedative and regenerative properties of lavender led to scientific exploration and testing of other essences. A great deal of medical research on the effects of essential oils now exists, leaving no doubt that when the right oil is chosen, at the right time, wonderful things can occur.

However, there are also contraindications for essences, as well as possible sensitivities and dosage guidelines. Therapists who choose to use aromatherapy in conjunction with work on mind/body - whether in spas or private practice, as room diffusion or in massage -- need to be well-educated with regard to properties and effects and to treat essential oils with the respect they deserve as a powerful healing modality. Simply adding lavender to massage oil, or using the same commercially prepared blend for every client, isn't the way to go if you want to use these substances professionally and responsibly.

Many books and classes on aromatherapy are available, some for continuing education credit. As in other areas of our practice, opinions about therapeutic applications can vary, so try to read and listen to as many leaders in the field as possible so that you can form your own opinion. Also, because an individual's response to essences can differ from time to time, a good "sense" of which essence to choose can be as valuable as all the literature on properties. To develop this, familiarize yourself with different essences and the information conveyed through their individual aromas. Pay attention to "likes and dislikes," because it is thought that these responses communicate desirability of effects.

It is also important to realize that the most powerful aromatherapy treatment is simple inhalation. Molecules enter the brain and blood stream immediately via nerves, nasal membranes and the alveoli in the lungs. Essential oils are also said to pass the blood-brain barrier and studies indicate that some is absorbed directly into the lymph through skin contact. Realize, then, that you and your client receive the treatment at the same time. The greater your repertoire of essences, the more you can

moderate your own exposure to certain oils. And it is advisable to use only therapeutic quality essential oils, which indicates a substance manufactured and grown with integrity and without adulteration or harmful additives. Therapeutic quality may cost more than fragrance grade, but it is definitely worth it, even for room diffusion.

True essential oils range in price from extremely expensive (like melissa, rose, jasmine,); to expensive (like frankincense, chamomile, sandalwood,); to moderate (like ginger, peppermint, basil); to inexpensive (like lavender, rosemary, orange.) "Bargains" are not always what they seem to be in this field. You should question whether therapeutic quality is present when a wide variety of essences are displayed in the same amount (usually 10 milliliters) for the same price. Think twice when an essence you know to be very expensive is offered in large quantity at a low price.

Many factors influence quality, including the method and expertise of extraction, and the region of growth. Also, a particular species of the same plant and/or extraction from certain parts of the plant may be considered better quality, and therefore more costly. (Quality standards may reflect both fragrance and levels of desired biochemical components.) For example, wild rose geranium from China may be almost twice the price of the farmed variety from Morocco. Orange blossom extracted from the flower and leaf can cost almost a third the price of that from the flower alone. And you'll pay more for silver fir (*Abies alba*) than for Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*.) As with crops, a shortage can push the price up. Occasionally, a price will come down, but usually not enough to take the essence out of its general price category.

In these and other ways, the essential oil business shares many characteristics with the wine industry: Many of the manufacturers of fine essential oils have been in business for centuries. Since plants are living organisms, they are affected by their environment and climate. Therefore, the same manufacturer can produce an essence that varies in aroma from year to year, so you can expect the same variance with true essential oils that you would from different vintages of wine.

Most distributors shop the manufacturers and repackage the essences, either singly or in blends, under their own label. Be wary if a distributor claims exclusivity on quality, but know that when distributors shop well, the results are good products that deliver fine fragrance and top therapeutic effect. Try distributors that are recommended by lecturers or referenced by authors of books on aromatherapy. Compare prices and samples. Experience will help you zero-in on the products you want to use in your practice.