

HISTORY OF ESSENTIAL OILS

Nature's Source for Health, Healing, Vitality and Longevity!

Since ancient times, and as near as we can tell, from the beginning of recorded history the plant kingdom has provided rare and powerful extracts and essences that have long been prized for their ability enhancing, medicinal, spiritual, aromatic and therapeutic value. Aromatic plants, essences and oils have been used for ages in ceremony, religious observances, beauty care, food preparation and preservation, as incense, and for perfumes. Aromatic plants have also been the basis for herbal and botanical medicines and remedies for thousands of years. In fact, they're the root of today's pharmaceuticals.

The earliest essential oils usage evidence occurs in the period of 3000-2500 B.C. It's common for Egyptians to be given credit as the first culture to use aromatic extracts for beauty care, culinary uses, spiritual and physical wellbeing. But it is believed that essential oil-like extracts were also being used in China and India at nearly the same time. Depending on who is citing historical evidence, you can also find references to Ayurvedic uses of essential oils in India much earlier. Whichever way we look at it, history of the following cultures has enriched and enhanced valuable aspects of the essential oils and aromatherapy world.

A Brief History of Essential Oils Around the World

EGYPT

As early as 2000 BC, the ancient Egyptians were using essential oils for medicinal benefits, beauty care, spiritual enhancement, and in literally all aspects of their daily life.

The Egyptians were passionate about beauty; they took beauty care very seriously and were considered highly accomplished in specialized beauty care treatments. In fact, Cleopatra's legendary beauty is attributed to her extensive use of the customary Egyptian essential oils, fatty oils, clays and salts from the spa on the edge of the Dead Sea – gifted her by Marc Antony, and other naturally occurring treatments.



Expensive aromatics and perfumes were worn in Egypt by the ruling families and the priests. Egyptian temple priests – the doctors of the day – were renowned for their herbal preparations, tinctures, unguents, salves and ointments. They employed the vast variety of aromatic balsms, resins and powders in many ways for both religious and medicinal purposes. Formulas and recipes for the ancient remedies are still considered highly prized in our world today.

Many ancient pictorials on Egyptian temple walls depict essential oils extraction and care. Egyptian royalty using essential oils, as well as valued recipes and formulas. Clearly, essential oils were revered in the culture. In fact, when King Tutankhamen's tomb was discovered and opened in 1922, the excavation team found (among other things), over 500 ancient alabaster jars – specially carved containers for essential oils. Raiders of the tomb had taken the prized essential oils, but had left the gold!

INDIA

Essential oils have been a core element of the Indian Ayurvedic health care system; a natural healing system blending spiritual, philosophical and practical elements.

No one is sure exactly how old Ayurvedic medicine is, but it has been practiced for at least 5000 years and is widely practiced in India today. A principal tenant is aromatic massage. Ayurvedic literature from 2000 BC records Indian doctors administering oils of cinnamon, ginger, myrrh, coriander, spikenard and sandalwood to their patients.



The term Ayurveda, a traditional Indian text, is rooted in Sanskrit. Derived from the words "ayur," meaning "life," and "veda," meaning "knowledge". The Vedas, India's most sacred book, mentions over 700 different herbs and aromatics codifying the uses and aromatics for religious and therapeutic purpose. Basil is one of the sacred plants India believed to open the heart and mind, bestowing the energy of love and devotion. Sacred to Vishnu and Krishna Indian deities, it is said to strengthen faith, compassion and clarity.

While this is only one simple teaching of the Ayurvedic tradition, Ayurvedic wisdom and influence is becoming more and more prominent in today's western culture, with high profile proponents such as Deepak Chopra, as well as training institutions in the US and Canada.

CHINA

In China, herbs and plant medicine are an integral part of Traditional Chinese Medicine. They're also an important part of Chinese folk medicine. Specific use of essential oils has been traced to before the time of Christ. The oldest surviving medical text that we're aware of is Shennong's Herbal, dated around 2700 BC, containing information on usage of 365 plants. Shennong was a ruler, father of Chinese herbal medicine, and cultural hero of China who taught his people the practices of agriculture. He consumed hundreds of herbs to test their medical value, and is said to have discovered tea and to be the father of Traditional Chinese Medicine, including acupuncture.



Another significant influence on today's Eastern medicine stems from Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, who is said to have authored a book on internal medicine, including important uses of essential oils, which is still used as a reference for practitioners today.

In today's aromatherapy world, along with contributing the valuable historical plant medicine texts, China is one of the most prolific producers of essential oils.

EUROPE

During the Middle Ages, Hippocrates' wisdom and the use of aromatics was denounced by the Catholic Church as decadent; bathing for healing or 'the cure' was deemed 'inappropriate'. This temporarily reduced the use of essential oils therapeutically, although they were kept in use for their pleasant aromas.



History seems to point to the Monks of that era for secretly keeping plant medicine and wisdom alive and well, although the threat of persecution or being burned at the stake was ever-present. The use of herbs and essential oils was labeled as 'witchcraft'.

Many lost their lives or were outcast from their communities during that time period.

By the 1600's, writings about herbal medicine and essential oils became widespread. By the 1800's most of the pharmacopoeia of England, Germany and France were referencing and prescribing essential oils for a variety of illnesses.

At the same time, large flower-growing districts in the south of France were supplying raw materials for French perfumers. Tuberculosis was common, yet workers processing flowers and herbs generally remained disease-free. Believing that essential oils in the plants were protecting the workers, the first recorded lab test of the anti-bacterial properties of essential oils was performed in 1887.

Historically Proven

Essential oils have not only stood the test of time, they have proven their efficacy and effectiveness on every level. Tradition and historical records provide proven insights and understanding of how essential oils were used in the past, and how they can benefit our lives today. Happily, with the renewed interest in essential oils, and resurgence in their use, there are many, many new clinical studies and publications documenting the efficacy and benefits.

Aromatherapy is now becoming a powerful bridge between cultures, modalities and health care professionals.

GREECE

Much of the education that became part of Greek, Roman and Jewish culture was derived from the Egyptians.



Hippocrates, the Greek physician whose influence still informs the medical community, was considered the father of modern medicine. Among other things, he studied and documented the medicinal influence of over 300 plants, and is reported to have advised that "The way to health is to have an aromatic bath and scented massage every day."

He reportedly believed strongly in the medicinal benefit of fumigation with aromatics and used fumigation in the city of Athens to combat the plague. He also prescribed aromatic treatments for fallen soldiers on the battlefields.

A contemporary of Hippocrates, Theophrastus wrote:

"It is to be expected the perfumes should have medicinal properties in view of the virtues of their spices. The effect of plasters and of what some may call poultices prove these virtues, since they disperse tumors and abscesses and produce a distinct effect on the body and its interior parts."

Implicit in his observation is a fundamental principle of therapeutic aromatherapy – that essential oils applied externally affect the internal organs and tissues of the body.

ROME

The Roman culture was deeply influenced by the Greeks, with influences that were heavily interwoven through centuries of war. The Greek influence is most apparent in architecture and health care.



When it comes to aromatics and health, more than any of the other cultures, the Romans used aromatic materials and essential oils with sheer extreme and decadence. They bathed with them lavishly, several times a day, and had frequent massages with essential oils. Oils were also used to scent the hair, body and the bed. The most exotic oils available were blended by highly skilled perfumers, creating celebrated fragrances.

A prominent Greek physician, doctor for the Roman army, Pedanius Dioscorides, wrote an impressive 5-volume reference work on herbal medicine during the first century A.D. With well over 600 remedies in these publications, time and 1,500 years of medical practice has proven that many remedies he wrote about are very useful. For example, myrrh is helpful with gum infections; juniper berry is a well-known diuretic; marjoram has sedative properties; and eypress can be useful in relieving diarrhea.

THE BIBLE

Both the Old and New Testament have dozens of references to aromatic plants, with at least 12 essential oils mentioned over 9 times respectively.



Essential oils and herbs that are specifically mentioned in the bible include cedarwood, frankincense, myrrh, and the Christ child.

One of the most well-known references to aromatics is of the Magi bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child. Another significant reference is in the book of Exodus in which Moses received the specifics for a holy anointing oil. Included in that formula was cassia, cinnamon, clove, galbanum, myrrh, olive oil and spikenard.

Many of the specific uses for essential oils, as well as recipes for essential oil blends in today's world are a direct result of biblical references.

Jean Valnet, a Parisian medical doctor and army surgeon, who was also a colleague of Gattefossé, was bound to use essential oils – with great success – as antiseptics treating war wounds during the Indochina war from 1945-1959. As the story goes, he was in China treating war wounded when he ran out of his supply of antibiotics. Out of desperation he began to use essential oils on the injured. He was amazed to see how the essential oils fought infection, crediting many lives saved due to the use of essential oils.



After the war, he continued using essential oils in his practice, publishing in 1964 the comprehensive text The Practice of Aromatherapy, earning him global recognition and providing impetus for further interest, study and discovery.

In the 1980's French MD, Daniel Pénol along with French biochemist Pierre Franchomme, investigated and catalogued the medical properties of over 270 essential oils, recommending uses for a clinical environment. They then co-authored a reference book listing the medicinal properties of those oils. The book, published in French in 1990, L'aromathérapie Exactement, quickly became the primary reference book for secondary authors researching and writing of the medical benefits of essential oils.



In 1910 Rene-Maurice Gattefossé, a French cosmetic chemist, severely burned his hands and arms in an accidental lab explosion. He extinguished the flames, but as he described it, "both my hands were covered with rapidly developing gas gangrene." He submerged his burns in a large container of lavender oil, reporting that "just one rinse with lavender essence stopped the gasification of the tissue. This treatment was followed by profuse sweating and healing which began the next day."



Although he previously had no interest in natural healing methods, his astonishing burn experience led Gattefossé to investigate the medical uses of essential oils by treating soldiers in military hospitals during World War I. He coined the term "aromatherapeutic" in 1920's-1930's – the treatment of disease and injury using aromatic essential oils first recorded lab test of the anti-bacterial properties of essential oils was performed in 1887.

In Europe Today

Today, in France, Germany and England, it is common for doctors to offer advice when prescribing remedies for a specific health condition. Patients can choose either prescription medicines or natural essential oils. Both are distributed through pharmacies across Europe.



These pictures are of store windows at two different pharmacies in France. Note "aromatherapie" in both windows, indicating the availability of essential oils.