

Introduction to Essential Oils

Where do Essential Oils Come From?

Essential oils are derived from plants and different oils are taken from different parts of the plant. Some oils are extracted from the flowers or fruit of a plant while others come from the leaves, roots, even the bark of the plant. While these oils have to be extracted from the plant in order for humans to use them, they play some important roles while they are still inside the plant. Some essential oils serve to protect the plant against predators or competing vegetation while others serve to attract pollinating insects.

Once they are extracted from the plant, most essential oils are clear, though some have a slightly yellow or orange tint. There are several different methods that can be used to extract essential oils and certain methods are most commonly used for certain oils. Citrus essential oils, for example, are most commonly extracted through expression while solvent extraction is the method most commonly applied to extract essential oils from delicate plant materials like flowers. Overall, however, the most common method of extraction for essential oils is steam distillation. [You will find an overview of each extraction method below:](#)

- **Steam Distillation** – This method of extraction can be used for seeds, flowers, roots, leaves, bark, wood and fruit peels. In order to use the process of steam distillation, the raw material is first placed in an alembic. The alembic is positioned over water and heat is applied to produce steam. The steam passes through the raw materials and, in doing so, vaporizes the volatile compounds (essential oils) in the material. The vaporized compounds then travel along a coil, condensing as they move along, until they are collected in a vessel. The final product collected in the vessel is the essential oil.
- **Expression** – This method of extraction is most commonly used for fruit peels like orange, lime, lemon, and grapefruit. In order to use the process of expression, the raw material is pressed using great force. This is the simplest method of extraction which is why citrus oils are usually the least expensive essential oils.
- **Solvent Extraction** – This method of extraction is a little more complicated than the others and it is most commonly applied to delicate raw materials like flowers. To use the process of steam extraction the raw materials is blended with some kind of solvent. That solvent reacts with the raw material, pulling out the plant tissue and creating a thick extract known as a concrete. That concrete is then blended with alcohol to draw out the aromatic compounds from the plant tissue to form the final product, called an absolute.

Using these three extraction methods, essential oils can be taken from a variety of plant materials. Below you will find a list of examples for essential oils taken by the different types of plant materials:

- **Flowers** – chamomile, clove, clary sage, geranium, hyssop, lavender, jasmine, marjoram, rose, orange, ylang ylang
- **Seeds** – celery, anise, cumin, nutmeg
- **Berries/Fruit** – allspice, juniper berry
- **Bark** – cinnamon, cassia, sassafras
- **Peel** – grapefruit, bergamot, lemon, orange, tangerine, lime
- **Resin** – frankincense, myrrh, benzoin, copaiba
- **Leaves** – basil, sage, lemongrass, oregano, peppermint, patchouli, rosemary, pine, spearmint, thyme, tea tree, wintergreen
- **Root** – valerian, ginger
- **Wood** – cedar, sandalwood, agarwood, camphor, rosewood

Now that you know where essential oils come from you can learn about their different applications. In the next section you will learn about the different ways essential oils can be used as well as the benefits of each method.

How Can Essential Oils be Used?

There are several different ways that essential oils can be used. These oils can be applied topically to the skin, inhaled through the air, ingested into the body, or used externally in the form of cleaning supplies and other products. Below you will find an overview of each application method for essential oils:

Topical Application

There are several different ways to apply essential oils topically including massage, compress, bath, or gargle. For most topical applications it is recommended that you dilute the essential oil with a carrier oil – you will learn more about carrier oils later in this book. Because essential oils are highly concentrated they have the potential to cause skin irritation or reactions if applied neat (without dilution). For massage, essential oils can be blended at a rate of one drop per teaspoon of carrier oil and applied directly to the skin.

For compresses, the essential oil is diluted in water or with a carrier oil and then soaked in a dressing and applied to the affected area. When using essential oils in a bath it is not necessary to dilute with a carrier oil because the bath water will dilute the oil – in some cases, however,

added a dispersant like milk can help to blend the oil more completely with the water. To create a gargle solution with essential oils you dilute it with water and gargle the solution before spitting it out.

Inhalation/Aromatherapy

As is true for topical application, there are several different methods for inhalation of essential oils – the method you choose will be determined by the desired effect. The four main forms of inhalation for essential oils are diffusion, dry evaporation, vaporization, and spray. A diffuser is a device that dispenses the essential oil in the air – you usually have to dilute the oil in water or carrier oil for diffusion to work. For the dry evaporation method you can apply a few drops of essential oil to a cotton ball or cloth and allow it to evaporate on its own.

The vaporization method for essential oil inhalation involves adding a few drops of essential oil to very hot water. The steam coming from the water will vaporize the oil, allowing you to inhale it. For the best results you should lean over the bowl, placing a towel over your head to contain the steam, and inhale deeply. For this method of inhalation you should use no more than 1 or 2 drops of essential oil because it is very potent. To use essential oils in a spray, you simply mix them with a water-based solution and spray it into the air.

Ingestion/Internal Use

The ingestion of essential oils is complicated because there is a great deal of debate regarding the safety of this method. There are just as many people promoting the ingestion of essential oils as there are people who are adamant about safety concerns. If you do choose to ingest essential oils you should only do so under the supervision of a licensed healthcare provider. You also need to make sure that the essential oils you are ingesting are therapeutic-grade. Essential oils for ingestion should ALWAYS be diluted and you should never consume more than 1 to 2 drops of the oil at a time.

External Use

Essential oils can be used externally in the form of many different products including homemade cleaning supplies and beauty products. Many essential oils have natural antiseptic and antibiotic properties which makes them a great addition to natural cleaning products while others have anti-inflammatory benefits which is good for beauty products. Before using any essential oil in a homemade recipe you need to make sure that it is safe for the intended application method.