

## A Beginners Guide to Understanding Essential Oils

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Plants are more powerful than we know. Unlike animals, plants don't have the power to run away when threatened, which has caused them to slowly evolve with arsenals of powerful defenses against would-be eaters. These chemicals are antioxidants and have as many benefits for us as they do for plants. For this reason, people have been stripping these beneficial materials from plants for thousands of years. Used medicinally, recreationally, and even religiously, essential oils have long played a key role in cultures around the globe.

With a little time and research, you too can harvest the powers of essential oils in your life and learn to live with the benefits of natural plant compounds. Whether you want to use essential oils for medicinal purposes, to cultivate a mood through aromatherapy or even to keep annoying pests away, this beginning guide to essential oils is the starting point you need.



## What Are Essential Oils?

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To put it simply, essential oils are the parts of plants that smell so distinctively. These chemicals are volatile oils, meanings that they contain hundreds of different carbon and hydrogen based compounds called terpenes. Unlike “true oils” like olive oil or coconut oil that are classified as fixed oils, essential oils are much lighter and tend to vaporize into the air.

In many ways, essential oils can be considered the blood of plants. Plants carry their essential oils in many different parts, including the bark, leaves, stems, flowers and even roots. Like blood, they seal cuts, help protect wounds against dangerous microorganisms and even trigger emotional responses in plants. Without essential oils, plants would die.

Essential oils are a key component of cooking and what gives your food the zest you look for. All your favorite spices like cinnamon, nutmeg, thyme, basil and many others get their flavor from their essential oils. However, the uses of essential oils isn't limited to cooking, as they are often used in syrups, toothpastes, mouthwashes, cleaning products, lip balms, soaps and more.

## History of Essential Oils

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Long before modern times, essential oils were used as medicine to treat everything from skin problems to cancer. In many cultures, essential oils were used in religious ceremonies to cultivate a certain mood. Some of the first documented examples of essential oils come from the ancient Egyptians, who relied on them for their make up and perfumes. The ancient Greeks and Romans relied on myrrh to heal wounds and reduce inflammation, while a potent combination of sandalwood, ginger and cinnamon was used as an antibiotic during the pandemic of the Bubonic Plague in the 12th century.

Though essential oils have declined in medical prominence in the past decades, interest in their health benefits has revived in recent years because of aromatherapy. Today, these historical oils are used for their therapeutic, antiseptic, anti-inflammatory and other characteristics.

## How Are They Extracted?

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Pulling essential oils out of plants is a tricky process because of how concentrated they are. For example, getting an ounce of peppermint essential oil takes over 16 pounds of fresh leaves.

There are several different methods for pulling essential oils out of plants.

The most popular method is steam distillation, which involves suspending fresh mixed plants over boiling water to allow the steam to pull out the oils from the plant. As the steam rises, it gets captured in a vessel and is pushed through a tube, where it quickly cools down and condenses back into the steam cooled back into water. However, it stays separate from the water because oil and water don't mix. When done correctly, steam distillation can leave you with essential oils that retain 100% purity.

An alternative to steam distillation is expression, which is how citrus oils are usually extracted. Similar to the process of cold pressing true oils like olive oil, citrus peels are mechanically squeezed to draw out as much essential oil as possible.



## Different Types Of Essential Oils

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Because there are hundreds of different plant substances that can be used for essential oils, each type of oil is categorized as either a top, middle or base note. Mixtures of essential oils are usually best when they incorporate all three notes in order to create a balanced mixture.

**Top Notes** tend to be the most volatile and delicate, as they are made from the young leaves, flowers and fresh herbs from plants. Because their aromas evaporate quickly, top note oils are used for quickly stimulating the senses to wake you up or snap you out of a depressive mood. Their sharp scents activate the senses and make you feel more alert. Examples include basil, sweet orange, peppermint and cinnamon.

**Middle note** oils are well balanced and usually good for the entire body. Made by distilling the entire plant, middle note oils tend to be robust and heavy, and they naturally create a strong connection between the mind and body and are often used to treat physical problems like stiffness and arthritis. Examples include lavender, nutmeg, palmarosa and juniper.

**Base notes** are the richest form of oil and usually are extracted from the resins of trees, giving them a hearty, earthy quality. Their heavy nature makes them useful for calming anxiety, nervousness and even anger. Examples include myrrh, patchouli, and vanilla.

## Buying Essential Oils

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Because essential oils are natural products, their quality can change considerably depending on the plant's growing conditions, age and even method of extraction used. Because of this, there is an enormous range in the price point for essential oils. Though it might be tempting to buy the cheapest form of oil you can find, you will truly get what you pay for- an inferior, low grade product.

Experienced essential oil users can tell the quality of their supplies simply through smelling them, but beginners should take the time to research different essential oil companies to find the ones that sell higher grades. Price point isn't a good indicator of quality, as low quality oils are often sold for more than they're worth. Instead, look on websites to see where the oil is sourced from and read reviews from previous buyers. It's a red flag if every oil from a company costs the same amount, as real essential oils should vary in price depending on the variety.

To determine the quality of the oil you are looking to buy, it's important to pay attention to the purity, grade and integrity of the oil. When given the choice, always choose pure essential oils over synthetic ones, and never buy oils that have been diluted with true oils like vegetable oil. A good test is to put a dab on a tissue. If it doesn't evaporate after a few minutes, you know the essential oil has been cut with a cheaper true oil.

Once you have your oils, store them in glass containers (some oils can actually dissolve plastic) and keep them out of heat and direct sunlight, lest they start to break down and lose some of their potency.

## What Are They Used For?

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You can use essential oils in a variety of different ways, but the three most common uses tend to be for use as natural pesticides, for the mood-altering effects of aromatherapy, and medicinally.

**Pesticides:** There are plenty of uses for essential oils to help you take care of an obnoxious pest problem. Peppermint, eucalyptus and spearmint oil all repel spiders, ants, fleas, aphids, beetles, moths and plenty of other flying bugs. Cedarwood works well to keep lice, slugs and snails away, while lemongrass and lavender repel fleas, ticks and mosquitoes.

To get the benefits of essential oils for your bug problem, mix six to twelve drops into a spray bottle of water and spray around the site of the problem.

**Aromatherapy:** Because smell is the most sensitive of the five senses, potent scents can have a strong impact on our moods, memory, and even emotional response. Aromatherapy is the process of harnessing the power of these scents to influence your physical and emotional health. Whether you create an invigorating blend of eucalyptus and peppermint oil or sooth your soul with some soft lavender, the power of scent to change your mindset can't be underestimated.

**Medicinal:** The power of essential oils to have a big impact on your body's health shouldn't be underestimated. Essential oils are the lifeblood of plants, and their molecules stimulate a response in the brain when their scents are absorbed by the olfactory nerves. Some oils stimulate immune responses that help you fight infection and reduce inflammation, while others help your body dry up the mucous from a cold and open up your sinuses to allow you to breath freely despite suffering from a cold.

Essential oils also have the ability to absorb and break down the free-floating free radicals in your blood stream, which cleanses your blood of toxins and keeps you healthy. Because essential oils are more potent than tea, you only need a small amount to start noticing the benefits.

## In Summary

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The world of essential oils is full of potential for your olfactory nerves. Whether you choose to use them to rid your world of pesky bugs, change your mood and mental state, or to keep your body healthy, essential oils are a great way to solve your problems the natural way.

**Read more about Essential Oils and more on [Naturalcave.com](https://www.naturalcave.com) (click here)**

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