

What Makes an Oil Essential?

By Nancy Harknett

Essential oils. We hear about them and see them in health food stores all over. Many of us have had a massage or aromatherapy treatment and can recall experiencing their pleasant smells, but we may not know what essential oils are, how they work, or why it is important that we use only therapeutic grade oils.

So what does it mean for an oil to be essential? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word essential means “in the absolute or highest sense; thorough, complete; of or pertaining to a thing’s essence.” In *Essential Oils Desk Reference*, 5th ed., modern day master oil blender Gary Young, N.D., defines it this way: “An essential oil is that aromatic, volatile liquid that is in many shrubs, flowers, trees, roots, bushes and seeds and that is usually extracted by steam distillation.” Because of this steam distillation process, these oils are very concentrated and thus more potent than dried herbs. He adds, “It requires a large amount of plant material to produce small amounts of a distilled essential oil.” I have heard this same researcher say that, in a very real sense, the plants give up their lives for us so we can have the medicine we need.

My olfactory senses were developing in such a way that I could tell when an oil was “missing” something. I also grew to depend on them for my own health.

It has long been understood that essential oils contain many healing properties (vibrational energies) that invigorate the mind, soul, and physical bodies. Most of us have read about these oils in various ancient writings, including the Judeo-Christian Bible. Words like “anointing” or “the anointed one” are often found, as well as actual names of oils used in daily life. Some of these are: cistus, cinnamon, cedar, clove, hyssop, spikenard, frankincense and myrrh.

These ancient oils are being distilled again today for their medicinal qualities. There were early pharmacists that dealt directly with essential oils and used them to treat illness. When these oils were steam distilled with great care, they became very potent — more powerful even than the excellent herbs that these same early scientists had used medicinally.

Today, alternative healing practitioners commonly use essential oils as complementary medical treatments that help the body to help itself and heal on a cellular level. Essential oil benefits are many. Depending on the essential oil, these may include properties that are anti-septic, anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial and anti-viral. They are also great detoxifiers, and can help in clearing emotions and restoring hormonal balance. These oil vibrations stimulate glandular function as well as generally oxygenating all cells and systems. Many of these oils have the unique advantage of being able to cross the blood brain barrier. This allows treatment to be given to areas not available using pharmaceuticals. Some essential oils, like frankincense, have anti-tumoral properties and have been known to eliminate aggressive tumors.

With so many potential benefits, thousands of people consult the *Essential Oils Desk Reference* and use the oils at home to treat themselves, their families and their pets. Still, not all essential oils are created equally. Recently, questions have arisen about the quality of “essential” oils and their actual therapeutic benefits. Some smell so good, no matter who makes them or how they are made, that one might ask, “Who cares? If it smells this good, it’s good enough for me!” Lavender is a common scent that frequently meets with this kind of questioning. For centuries, lavender has been known for its skin healing properties. Many of us keep it in the kitchen for first aid. I have experienced immediate relief from the pain of a burn and complete healing of it within 24 hours when using real, therapeutic grade lavender. Some well meaning people experience the disappointment of reaching for their lavender, using it, and discovering that not only does it not help, but it can turn a 1st degree burn into a 2nd degree burn! How is this possible? The oil that harms can hardly be called therapeutic. It has to be an essential, or therapeutic grade, lavender oil to heal the burn.

Why is it that not all oils on the market today can be considered “essential”? Going back to the process of steam distillation, it has been discovered that each plant/bark/seed

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needs a special temperature, pressure and time for optimal production of a truly essential (therapeutic grade) oil. If we are interested in perfume grade oil, this careful process need not be followed. When the same plant material is used two or three times for distillation, the resulting oils do not have all the properties of a therapeutic grade oil. In fact, often when a distilled oil is not up to the highest standards, it is sold to the perfume industry or to an “essential oil” distributor with lower standards. There is also a growing practice of using chemical solvents to engineer or “extend” the oils. The resulting product is an adulterated oil. These oils are not medicinal in quality and will not give healing results when used.



Photo by Beth Barbeau

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The chemistry of essential oils is complex. It takes years of study to understand all of the parts in the oils. There can be from 80-300 different constituents in one oil alone. We can use complete, therapeutic oils without extensive study; however, the more practitioners educate themselves, the better we serve others and the safer they are in our hands.

So, to understand the term “therapeutic grade” when applied to oils, I decided to study. I learned about the skills involved in carefully studied and practiced steam distillation. I found a source of oils from people who did just that. I learned some chemistry of essential oils. I learned techniques of applying the oils therapeutically and safely. After using these highest quality oils available, I began to experience that my olfactory senses were developing in such a way that I could tell when an oil was “missing” something. I also grew to depend on them for my own health.

Years ago a young pioneer in the field of essential oils coined the term “therapeutic grade.” This was the result of his studies of steam distillation with the European masters in Turkey and France, Egypt and Oman. He understood there was a difference in distillation practices and in the resulting oil quality. Others dismissed the term “therapeutic” as foreign and unnecessary.

Gradually, though, everyone began to use this term, hoping to make themselves credible in the field of essential oils. They did not change their process or practice, just adopted the term. This has caused much confusion. To avoid continued confusion, one company has trademarked a new label. Whenever we see the trademark Y.L.T.G. (Young Living Therapeutic Grade) on a bottle of oil, we know that the most careful, consistent and up-to-date distillation processes are being used. We also know that the plants, preparation, purity and potency of the oils are guaranteed.

All of this knowledge has led me to understand the true meaning of an essential, therapeutic grade oil. I have made a conscious choice to use only the Y.L.T.G. oils to give my clients the best treatments available. If I am paying more money for this privilege, then I am doing it willingly. I deserve it and so do my clients. As my father said, “You get what you pay for.” This has never been truer than now, with the opportunity to use Y.L.T.G. essential oils.

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