

COMPLEAT AROMATHERAPY:

shopping for *essential oils*

aromatherapy is a simple concept — who hasn't felt a burst of happiness and get-up-and-go from the citrusy blast as you peel a fresh orange? But harnessing the complex, natural scents and the therapeutic value of pure essential oils is where the real science of aromatherapy is seen. Ensuring you're purchasing the best essential oils is enough to stress you out, so grab your lavender, take a deep breath, and read on for some essential oil shopping tips.



Essential oils, the *force vital* of flowers, leaves, herbs, wood and other plant parts, offer humans the gifts of both scent-based therapy as well as, some scientists purport, natural healing benefits. Using essential oils to enhance wellness is the basis of modern aromatherapy. Sure, certain scents make us feel comforted (the heavenly smell of baking bread, for one) and others send stress signals (the pungent odor of rubbing alcohol, for example). But it is the natural chemicals inherent in essential oils that go beyond sheer scent to offer us natural healing benefits — to feel relaxed or stimulated, to affect healthier physical and emotional conditions, or to just plain feel good.

Nature's medicine cabinet offers a wealth of essential oil-based remedies (eucalyptus mentholated rub for the nasties, lavender for stove-top burns) that requires having the best supplies on hand. But whether you're seeking essential oils for your favorite sore-muscle soak recipe, or looking to fill up a home diffuser with seasonal scent blends, be sure you're getting true essential oils. To assist you in choosing the best, here's some guidelines for buying essential oils so you get the scent (and the results) you're sniffing for!

SEEK REPUTABLE SOURCES

You've seen them, those cute little essential oil bottles stacked on the shelf at a local boutique. With aromatherapy capturing mainstream retail in recent years, many shop keepers jumped to offer customers aromatherapy oils. Some offer good products. But many, despite the best of intentions, can't deliver. In some cases, those oils have been in inventory so long, they've aged, lost potency or aroma, even spoiled. Some have been exposed to light and air — both of which will affect freshness and quality of the essential oils. At the least, don't purchase off the shelf, where many hands have opened and many noses have sniffed. Ask for fresh, unopened stock that has been kept safe in a cool, dry, dark cabinet.

Any purchase should be from an essential oil supplier that not only is well-educated in aromatherapy, but well-connected to regional and global purveyors of 100% pure essential oils. Check your local health food store or day spa, many of which carry fine lines of essential oils. Research e-stores on the Internet, a great spot to start. Look for quality guarantees, oil information, and credentials. Skip the price check for now: Cost is not necessarily an indication of the quality of the vendor's oils, so do some research to ensure the source is reputable and offers pure essential oils.

BUY PURE ESSENTIAL OILS

Just what is "pure"? The terms "pure" and "100% natural/pure" are offered by many aromatherapy sources to indicate that there are no synthetic materials added. But go a step further and check the label: If you're shopping for Lavender, for example, the label should state 100% pure essential oil, use the botanical name of the essential oil (*Lavendula Officinalis*), and proffer the extraction method (steam distillation). Your best essential oils suppliers will also provide the quality specifications ("Org." for organic origin) and part of the plant used (flowers). They will also indicate country of origin (France) — important for determining the quality of the oil harvested from current soil conditions and climate. If the harvesting and distillation information is not readily accessible, ask: It's an excellent indicator of source quality and you'll learn more about the oils you're purchasing.

Quality is key: Oils that have been handled improperly (exposed to air and dust), are old, were distilled from poor crops to begin

with, or are adulterated oils (oils that have chemicals or other oils added to them) lack the therapeutic benefit you're seeking. And skip the synthetics — any ingredient that reads "natural identical oil," "fragrance oil" or perfume may be nice for some, but if you're seeking all-natural therapeutic essential oils, avoid these imposters. Aromatherapy is the art and science of wellness through pure essential oils — not "smell-alikes" that won't provide natural healing (and may even cause irritation or allergies).

BOTTLES AND PRICING

Ensure freshness by purchasing oils in dark-colored — amber, cobalt, or green — glass bottles. Essential oils can take on the chemical attributes of, even dissolve, plastic (yuck!), so don't purchase essential oils stored in plastic bottles. (Essential oils blended with carriers such as jojoba oil, hand creams, etc., are fine when delivered in plastic, but use them within six months before quality deteriorates.)

As noted above, price is not an indicator of quality — you're not getting a deal if the supplier offers all its essential oils for the same sale price. Expect prices to vary among individual oils. Lemon essential oil, for example, will be extremely inexpensive when compared to Jasmine or Angelica essential oils, which are far more rarer essences. Certified Organic essential oils can carry a premium.

Before placing a large and expensive order with a new source, purchase a few of the more common essential oils to test quality. Many sources offer pure, pre-mixed essential oils blends; consider one to widen your experience with aromatherapy.

Once you've found a reputable source that offers quality oils, get to know them: Ask for information about the oils to gauge customer service. If you're unsure about unusual oils you've read about, such as Ravensara or Yuzu, for example, ask for a sample: Many aromatherapists love to share their knowledge and even if there's a minimal fee for sampling, you will learn much while adding to your growing cache of essential oils.

