

History of Essential Oils

Early History of Essential Oils

For many centuries essential oils and other aromatics were used for religious rituals, the treatment of illness, and other physical and spiritual needs.

Records dating back to 4500 BC describe the use of balsamic substances with aromatic properties for religious rituals and medical applications. Ancient writings tell of scented barks, resins, spices, and aromatic vinegars, wines, and beers that were used in rituals, temples, astrology, embalming, and medicine. The evidence suggests that the people of ancient times had a greater understanding of essential oils than we have today.

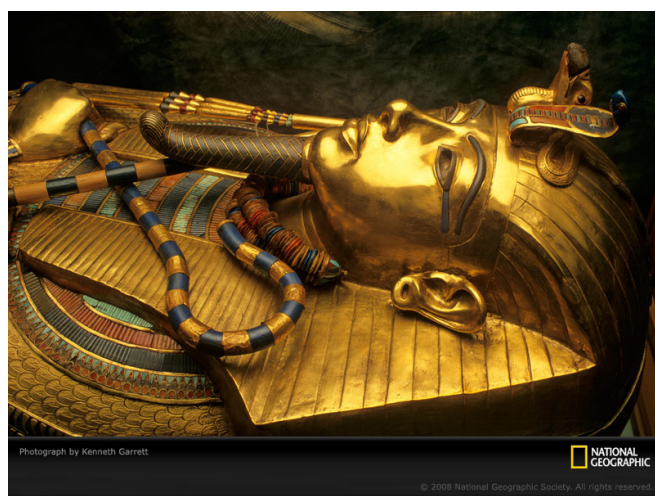
The Egyptians were masters in using essential oils and other aromatics in the embalming process. Historical records describe how one of the founders of “pharaonic” medicine was the architect Imhotep, who was the Grand Vizier of King Djoser (2780 - 2720 BC). Imhotep is often given credit for ushering in the use of oils, herbs, and aromatic plants for medicinal purposes.

Many hieroglyphics on the walls of Egyptian temples depict the blending of oils and describe hundreds of oil recipes.



An ancient papyrus found in the Temple of Edfu contained medicinal formulae and perfume recipes used by alchemists and high priests in blending aromatic substances for rituals.

The Egyptians may have been the first to discover the potential of fragrance. They created various aromatic blends for both personal use and for ceremonies performed in the temples and pyramids.



Well before the time of Christ, the ancient Egyptians collected essential oils and placed them in alabaster vessels. These vessels were specially carved and shaped for housing scented oils. In 1922, when King Tut's tomb was opened, some 50 alabaster jars designed to hold 350 liters of oils were discovered. Tomb robbers had stolen nearly all of the precious oils leaving the heavy jars behind. Some of them still contained oil traces. The robbers chose oils over a literal king's ransom in gold, showing how valuable the fragrant essential oils were to this ancient civilization,

In 1817 the Ebers Papyrus, a medical scroll over 870 feet long, was discovered. Dating back to 1500 BC, the scroll included over 800 different herbal prescriptions and remedies. Other scrolls described a high success rate in treating 81 different diseases. Many of

the remedies contained myrrh and honey. Myrrh is still recognized for its ability to help with infections of the skin and throat and to regenerate skin tissue. Because of its effectiveness in preventing bacterial growth, myrrh was used for embalming.

The physicians of Ionia, Attia, and Crete (ancient civilizations based in the Mediterranean Sea) came to the cities of the Nile to increase their knowledge. At this time, the school of Cos was founded and was attended by Hippocrates (460-377 BC), whom the Greeks, with perhaps some exaggeration, named the “Father of Medicine.”



The Romans purified their temples and political buildings by diffusing essential oils. They also used aromatics in their steam baths to both invigorate the flesh and ward off disease.

Biblical and Ancient References to Essential Oils

There are over 200 references to aromatics, incense, and ointments throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Aromatics such as frankincense, myrrh, galbanum, cinnamon, cassia, rosemary, hyssop, and spikenard were used for anointing and healing the sick. In Exodus, the Lord gave the following recipe to Moses for a holy anointing oil: Myrrh; five hundred shekels (about 1 gallon), Cinnamon;

two hundred and fifty shekels, Calamus; two hundred and fifty shekels, Cassia; five hundred shekels, Olive Oil; an hin” (about 1 113 gallons).

Modern History

Rene-Maurice Gattefosse, PhD, a French cosmetic chemist, is widely regarded as the father of aromatherapy. He and a group of scientists began studying essential oils in 1907.

In his 1937 book, *Aromatherapy*, Dr. Gattefosse told the real story of his now-famous use of lavender essential oil to heal a serious burn. The tale has assumed mythic proportions in essential oil literature. His own words about this accident are even more powerful than what has been told over the years.



Dr. Gattefosse was literally aflame - covered in burning substances - following a laboratory explosion in July, 1910. After he extinguished the flames by rolling on a grassy lawn, he wrote that “both my hands were covered with rapidly developing gas gangrene.” He further reported 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.”

Dr. Gattefosse shared his studies with his colleague and friend, Jean Valnet, a medical doctor practicing in Paris. Exhausting his supply of antibiotics as a physician in Tonkin, China, during World War II, Dr. Valnet began using therapeutic-grade essential oils

on patients suffering battlefield injuries. To his surprise, they exerted a powerful effect in combating and counteracting infection. He was able to save the lives of many soldiers who might otherwise have died.



Two of Dr. Valnet's students, Dr. Paul Belaiche and Dr. Jean Claude Lapraz, expanded his work. They clinically investigated the antiviral, antibacterial, antifungal, and antiseptic properties in essential oils.



In 1990, Dr Daniel Pénöel, a French medical doctor and Pierre Franchomme, a French



biochemist, collaborated together to author the first reference book that catalogued the various medical properties of over 270 essential oils and how to use them in a clinical environment.

Because of the work of these doctors and scientists, the healing power of essential oils is again gaining prominence.

Research conducted at Weber State University in cooperation with D. Gary Young as well as



other documented research, indicates that most viruses, fungi, and bacteria cannot live in the presence of many essential oils, especially those high in phenols, carvacrol, thymol, and terpenes.

This, perhaps, offers a modern explanation why the Old Testament prophet Moses used aromatic substances to protect the Israelites from the plagues that decimated ancient Egypt. It may also help us understand why a notorious group of thieves, reputed to be spice traders and perfumers, was protected from the Black Plague as they robbed the bodies of the dead during the 15th century.