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BY LISA FABIAN

## scents *alive*

REFRESH AND INVIGORATE  
WITH ESSENTIAL OILS



Approximately 200 dubious chemicals are lathered and applied to our bodies every day, according to government experts—a shocking but not so surprising statistic when you consider all the artificial fragrances, colors, and preservatives that are added to conventional beauty products. It makes sense, then, to look for natural ingredients such as essential oils.

Offering healing benefits for both the body and the mind, essential oils will “help you feel better, more energized, and rested and peaceful, especially about yourself,” says Mary Lee Patton, author of *Mary Lee’s Natural Health & Beauty*. Aside from feeling good, essential oils can help you look good. “[Their] regular use—in either creams, lotions, or blends—is the most natural and effective way you can keep your skin looking its best,” adds Patricia Betty, author of *Essential Beauty*.

### WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL OILS?

Derived from roots, seeds, leaves, bark, flowers, and resins, essential oils give plants, fruits, spices, and herbs their distinctive scents. These oils are comprised mainly of compound chemicals known as terpenes, which contain medicinal compounds that enter the skin through a process known as transdermal absorption.

Essential oils have curative properties as well as preventive actions. They can help regulate mood and emotion and boost energy levels—a definite plus when summer weather has you wilting. “Summertime places extra demands on your skin and on your energy. After a long day at work in air conditioning or at play in the hot summer sun, the soothing qualities of beauty products with ingredients found in nature—including essential oils—enable you to relax, refocus, and refresh,” says Peter Lamas, founder of Lamas Beauty.

### HOW THEY WORK

Essential oils have both topical and aromatherapeutic effects, according to Angella Green,



brand manager at JASON Natural Products. For example, citrus oil calms the nerves and works as an antiseptic. Bergamot soothes anxiety and is also anti-inflammatory.

“Aside from external benefits to the body, essential oils also offer aromatherapy benefits to help energize or calm the mind,” notes Green. These oils help signal the brain and body to relax. Some scientists believe essential oils can remain in the body for three to four hours, although healing responses can possibly last for days or even weeks.

Another benefit of essential oils is that almost all of them are antimicrobial to some degree. Because their molecules are small enough to penetrate the skin, they can reach deep enough to help combat puffiness, inflammation, and sun damage.

In one double-blind trial, a few drops each of rosemary, cedarwood, thyme, and lavender mixed with carrier oil was found to help regrow hair. The study found that the autoimmune activity causing hair loss was blocked by the essential oils.

The skin can benefit from diluted essential oils as well. Lavender and ylang ylang oils help purify and normalize skin oil. Neem oil works well, too. It’s antimicrobial and antifungal. Also look for neroli oil. It normalizes oil production and purifies. Laura Setzfand, vice president of marketing at Nature’s Gate, recommends almond oil for moisturizing, chamomile for soothing,

and geranium for balancing the skin’s oil production. As if all this isn’t reason enough to use essential oil products on your skin, how about the fact that they smell great?

#### WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Many natural products incorporate essential oils into their formulas. From soaps and shampoos to lotions and sprays, you’ll find a product (and scent!) for everyone. If you’re shopping for natural deodorants, look for ingredients including tea tree and coriander oils.

Aloe vera oil helps with dry skin, sunburns, and wounds. A perfect after-sun soother, aloe oil or gel is ideal for the beach. When skin is sunburned, look for products with essential oils like lavender, eucalyptus, or chamomile.

If the heat and humidity have you feeling sluggish, consider a blend of marjoram, cypress, and peppermint, which can help improve circulation and eliminate joint and tissue toxins. Citrus oils such as orange, lemon, or lime help energize, according to Lamas. Peppermint, eucalyptus, and lavender also help with heat exposure. To relieve summertime tension and fatigue, look no further than the herb garden, where essential oils of rosemary, oregano, and basil get their start. Combine peppermint and rosemary oils with some water and pour into a bottle for a cooling body spritz. ▶

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### TOPICAL USE

Keep in mind that most essential oils can be safely applied to the skin through a carrier oil such as jojoba, almond, or grape seed. Four to six drops of essential oil to two tablespoons of carrier oil is an approximate proportion, according to Mary Lee Patton, author of *Mary Lee's Natural Health & Beauty*.

Among the most appealing of scents for both men and women, lavender is a welcome addition to many a product. "It not only helps to calm the mind but also works as an anti-inflammatory and burn soother," says Green. Bergamot is also known to help lift one's spirits.

### COOL OFF

Essential oils can be infused into a room, inhaled, diluted and massaged into the skin, applied through hot and cold compresses, added to water (in a bath), and, of course, applied to the body in natural beauty products. When using essential oil products, you receive the oil's benefits not only by inhalation but also through skin absorption.

When it's hot outside, spritz with essential oil-infused sprays for a pick-me-up. Basil, ginger, jasmine, lemon, orange, and cinnamon oils work well when added to a spray bottle along with some water.

The scent of peppermint is refreshing, and it makes a cooling skin tonic. Put a few drops in a spray bottle with some distilled water, and spritz it on your face and body for an instant chilling effect; store in the fridge. **Tim Blakley, training manager for Aura Cacia, likes to put**

**a few drops of peppermint oil on his socks before putting on his shoes each morning for a cooling and stimulating effect that lasts all day. For sandal wearers, he suggests diluting one drop of peppermint oil in ten drops of carrier oil before applying to the feet.**

In the summer, a lukewarm bath with essential oils of peppermint and juniper will help revive and refresh. Add eight to ten drops of oil while the tub water is running. Soak for at least 15 minutes and up to half an hour for the most therapeutic effect.

The scent of tea tree oil can awaken the senses when you're feeling peaked. Consider adding this oil in small amounts to natural foot, skin, and scalp products. This herbal antiseptic helps heal cuts and burns, protects against infection, and soothes bug bites. Speaking of pesky insects, citronella oil used in a vaporizer or put into topical applied oils, lotions, or creams will naturally keep bugs away, according to Setzfand and Green.

Don't forget about summer road trips. Being in a hot, stuffy car stuck in traffic is no fun. Spritz essential oil of peppermint to help you stay alert and reduce feelings of road rage and frustration. ■■■

SELECTED SOURCES *Essential Beauty* by Patricia Betty and David Andrusia (\$16.95, Keats, 2000) ■ *Mary Lee's Natural Health & Beauty* by Mary Lee Patton with Bob Condor (\$23.95, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2001) ■ **Personal communication:** **Tim Blakley, training manager, Aura Cacia, Angella Green, brand manager, JASON Natural Products; Peter Lamas, founder of Lamas Beauty; Laura Setzfand, vice president of marketing, Nature's Gate, 3/08** ■ *The Truth about Beauty* by Kat James (\$17.95, Beyond Words, 2003)