



Morris Arboretum

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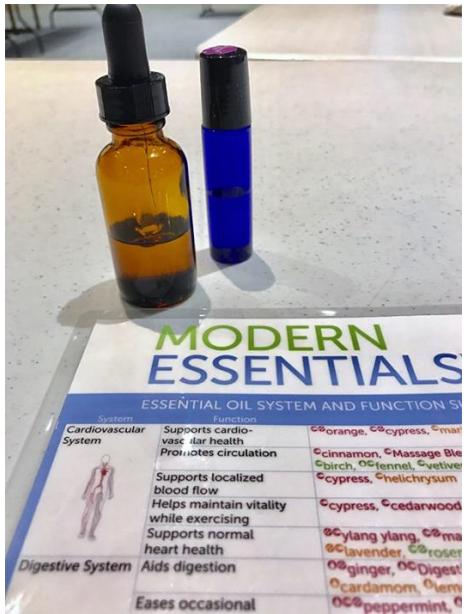
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Plant Aromatics—Oils That Are Essential for a Reason

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A Fundamental Start with Essentials

Since my undergraduate class, “Pharmacognosy,” I have had an affinity for essential oils. Pharmacognosy is the area of pharmacy that explores plants, specifically their therapeutic and medical uses. That knowledge led to my life-long fascination with

essential oils. On April 22, I learned even more about this favorite subject at a Morris Arboretum class taught by Megan Koppel, a natural health educator.

Roots of Essential Oils

Essential oils get their names from the idea that they contain the “essence” of a plant. Lavender oil is a good example. While traveling in Provence, France, I had the good fortune to watch the production of lavender oil. The resulting essential oil is said to have all the intrinsic benefits of lavender, including medical (antiseptic, anti-inflammatory), culinary (coloring, flavoring), cosmetic (soothing, fragrance), and aromatherapy (calming, relaxing). Lavender essential oil delivers all this, and that’s a lot of good stuff for a flower that is also a delight to see in gardens or open fields.

Flowers to Oils

Those involved in essential oil production collect the raw ingredients (typically flowers and plant parts) by a painstakingly slow process. Truckloads of flowers—as in the case of lavender—move through phases of distillation or extraction to ultimately yield a relatively small quantity of the oily essence. Roses present a similar challenge. Because of the world’s love of rose scent, the market for rose oil is strong, and the price of real (vs. synthetic) rose oil is expensive.

Experiencing the Essentials Firsthand

At the Morris Arboretum, Koppel guided us to participate in an eye-opening and energizing essential oil routine. We took a drop or two of peppermint oil in our cupped hands, and then we added a drop or two of wild orange oil. We mixed the two by rubbing our palms. Then we cupped our hands and inhaled the mixture. The aroma not only opened the senses, but also produced an energized feeling of contentment. We followed that by rubbing some of the oily mixture on the muscles at the back of our necks, which produced a cool and relaxing feeling. Finally, we rubbed a thumb in the remaining mixture and swiped it against the roofs of our mouths. The result—clean breath!

It’s not surprising that the use of essential oils is growing. Oils are readily available, as are accessories, including tiny rollerball bottles for on-the-go application. Diffusers are simple electric gadgets that spray a fine mist of the oil. Some essential oils of note are basil, bergamot, camphor, clary sage, clove, eucalyptus, geranium, ginger, marjoram, nutmeg, orange, patchouli, tea tree oil, and ylang-ylang. These oils are sourced from flowers, leaves, peels, roots, seeds, and wood. Regardless of the source, most essential oils have the same fundamental properties. They are oil-based substances that do not readily dissolve in water (they’re hydrophobic) and are volatile (they diffuse into the air if their container is opened).

The Internal Route

Koppel also covered the internal uses of essential oils. Some people think that when used on the skin, these oils are systemically absorbed, and this process positively influences internal organs and systems—an ancient form of medicine that is still used by some today. Then there's the all-so-careful use of essential oils used as substances to ingest. Oils like oregano, one which Koppel calls the “essential oil hammer in your toolbox,” can help boost vitality. Naturally, you should clear anything you plan to take internally with your physician and that, like medications, essential oils should be given in “reduced doses” to children and the elderly.

Home-Grown Uses of Essential Oils

Aromatherapy blends and all-natural perfumes are not the only items where you'll find essential oils. Cleaning and other household products, especially simple and safe ones made at home, are perfectly complemented by essential oils. In fact, Madison Avenue has been touting pine- and lemon-scented cleaners for decades; but they often contain synthetic ingredients. Today, as concern about synthetics and allergy frequencies are more prevalent, natural cleaning solutions are coveted. Koppel explained that we can readily prepare these with ingredients like vinegar, baking soda, and simple soaps. Ideal essential oils to add are pine, lemon, lime, orange, evergreen, cucumber, lavender, and rosemary. In some instances, the medicinal benefits (such as disinfecting for rosemary) do double duty, adding more than just a fresh scent.

Caveat Emptor

Koppel covered what to look for when buying essential oils, such as purity, potency, and source. Oils approved for oral use (in addition to the typical external use) should have an expiration date although when essential oils are stored in a cool, dark place, they may stay fresh for longer.

The Value Proposition

Adding a dash or more of essential oils to your life is a natural and delightful approach to feeling better and having a safer home. Still, enjoying essential oils, like many pleasures, is not the cheapest proposition. Quality oils, especially ones like frankincense, coriander, and cardamom can be expensive, but like good cheese, champagne, and truffles, a little essential oil goes a long way. Continue to watch the Morris Arboretum listing of education programs for classes on a range of subjects to feed your senses and broaden your horizons. Now, that's essential!