

Ancient History & Modern Rediscovery

Ancient History

Essential oils are the oldest and some of the most powerful therapeutic agents known to man. They have a millennium-long history of use in healing and in religious ceremony throughout the ancient world, besides their use as fragrance.

Some, particularly frankincense, are cited repeatedly in many Judeo-Christian and Muslim religious texts. They were used to cure every ailment "from gout to a broken head." Others, such as myrrh, lotus, and sandalwood oils were widely used in ancient Egyptian purification and embalming rituals. Still others, such as clove and lemon, were highly valued as antiseptics hundreds of years before the discovery of modern antiseptics.

Aromatics, as they were called, were some of the most prized treasures of the ancient world - they were traded for gold, silver, and even slaves.

To understand how valuable essential oils were in ancient Egypt, records show that when Tutankhamen's tomb was opened in 1922, 350 liters of oil were discovered in alabaster jars. Amazingly, the plant waxes had solidified around the openings of the jars, sealing and preserving the oils!

The National Geographic reported in October of 1985 that almost 1,000 years before Christ, dynasties of the ancient world were fighting over the lucrative incense market. Caravans of 3,000 camels transported costly frankincense along the Frankincense Trail, a 2,400-mile-long road that stretched from southern Arabia to the coast of Israel.

It appears that the ancient Egyptians were the first to recognize the therapeutic potential of essential oils. They created fragrances for personal use as well as for ritualistic and ceremonial use in the temples and pyramids. In 1817, the 870 foot long Ebers Papyrus, dating back to 1500 B.C., was discovered. It listed over 800 herbal prescriptions and remedies. Many mixtures were composed of myrrh oil and honey. Myrrh was most often used for embalming, due to its effectiveness in preventing bacterial growth.

The physicians of Greece came to Egypt to learn about the oils. Even Hippocrates attended the school of Cas.

The Romans used essential oils by diffusing them in their temples and political buildings. They were fond of soaking in oil-scented baths, then receiving a fragrant oil massage.

The ancient Arabian people began to study the chemical properties of essential oils. They developed and refined the distillation process.

Europeans began producing essential oils in the 12th century. During the Plague of the Middle Ages, a band of thieves robbed the dead without becoming infected. Finally, four thieves were captured in Marseilles, France, and charged with robbing the dead and dying victims of the plague. At the trial, the magistrate offered them leniency if they would reveal how they managed to avoid contracting the dreaded infection, in spite of their close contact with infected corpses. It was disclosed that these thieves were perfumers and spice traders who had rubbed themselves with a concoction of aromatic herbs (cinnamon, clove, and oregano), which was the source of their immunity.

When the great library was burned in Alexandria during the Dark Ages, much of the knowledge of essential oils and their uses was lost. It was only through the cosmetic and perfume industry that some of the valuable science of aromatherapy began to resurface.

Modern Rediscovery

The modern rediscovery of the value of essential oils is attributed to French cosmetic chemist, René-Maurice Gattefossé, Ph.D. In July of 1910, a lab explosion set him aflame. After extinguishing the flames, he discovered that his hands were quickly developing gas gangrene. But just one rinse with lavender essential oil stopped the horrible process. Healing began the next day.

His discovery was quite accidental -- he had plunged his arm into a vessel that he assumed was water. But it actually contained pure lavender oil (*Lavendula officinalis*). With regular application of lavender oil, the wound healed without a scar. When he investigated the chemistry of the oil, he discovered that some of its chemical components had tremendous healing properties.

This incident prompted Dr. Gattefossé to research the healing compounds of essential oils. His research spurred the clinical use of essential oils.

As a result, French physician, Dr. Jean Valnet, used therapeutic-grade essential oils on patients suffering battlefield injuries during World War II. He was able to save the lives of many soldiers who might otherwise have died, even with antibiotics. After the war, he documented his clinical results in his book, ***The Practice of Aromatherapy***. He also shared his knowledge with his student, Daniel Péroël, M.D., who later co-authored the first definitive medical textbook on the chemistry and clinical application of essential oils: ***L'aromathérapie exactement***.

Two more 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.