**What are essential oils?**

An essential oil is a natural oil that is extracted from a single species of plant, whether a flower, a tree or otherwise, and the [National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (NAHA)](https://naha.org/) defines aromatherapy as "*the therapeutic application or the medicinal use of aromatic substances (essential oils) for holistic healing."*

The essential oil of a plant is found in its root, stem, leaves, flowers, or fruits. Although they are called oils, most essential oils don’t actually have an oily feel to them at all. They are described as oils because they contain oil-soluble chemicals – some of them contain up to 200. The complex chemistry of these essential oils is what makes them so valuable – and so helpful for healing and therapeutic use. It also explains why some oils have similar, overlapping properties – they are not just one ingredient, but many.

Essential oils aren’t just used by humans, they are an essential part of the plant’s make-up. Plants make use of them in many ways, including, including defending against infection, hormonal effects, healing damage and attracting or repelling insects, birds and animals.

**How are essential oils used?**

Essential oils have been used for medicinal purposes for many centuries. Aromatherapy as we know it was developed through the use of trusted essential oils in traditional folk medicine and the knowledge has been passed down through the ages. Modern scientific studies have [given essential oils validation](https://www.evidence.nhs.uk/search?q=aromatherapy) as they have proved that the compounds they contain do have positive effects, while the trend towards holistic health has led to something of a revival in the use of essential oils for health and well-being.

The most common way for essential oils to be used is in aromatherapy, where the healing effects of the oils are used to promote wellbeing and healing, often through massage, but also in products that can be used for anything from insect repellent to sleeping aids. Some essential oils have an uplifting effect on the mind, while others have practical properties like an antiseptic effect so they can be applied to the skin to reduce infection. Some, like lavender essential oil, are known to affect both the mind and the body so are especially useful.

**How are essential oils extracted?**

The essential oils are extracted from plants using a process called distillation, using steam or water. This process results in a highly concentrated essential oil. Once the oil has been extracted, it contains the therapeutic properties of the plant from which it was extracted, along with the fragrance, or aroma of the plant. Although we think of aromatherapy as a pleasant therapy, many essential oils don’t have a pleasant scent at all – German chamomile for example is particularly pungent!

**Difference between essential oils and aromatic oils**

Essential oils shouldn’t be mistaken for fragrance oils, often called aromatic oils, as they are artificially created, while essential oils are not. Fragrance/aromatic oils are created to reproduce other smells, such as fruits, or ‘spring rain’ but although they smell lovely, they don’t contain the natural compounds you find in essential oils. Only pure essential oils should be used for aromatherapy purposes.