History of Essential Oils

Many people are unaware that essential oils have been around for thousands of years. They are, in fact, known to be some of the **oldest and most powerful substances** on earth.

They have an extensive history of being used for anointing and healing. Essential oils are mentioned numerous times in the religious texts of the Jewish and Christian faiths. Essential oils were well known to be natural antiseptics and were used to treat ailments of all kinds. Essential oils were highly valued.

From ancient writings and traditions, it seems that 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 writing tells of scented barks, resins, spices and aromatic vinegars, astrology, medicine, and embalming the dead. The evidence certainly suggests that the people of ancient times had a greater understanding of essential oils than we have today.

Egyptians used many different essential oils and 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. In addition, the Egyptians may have been the first to discover the potential of fragrance. They created various aromatic blends for both personal use and for religious ceremonies.

Many hieroglyphics on the walls of Egyptian temples depict the blending of oils and describe numerous oil recipes. An example of this is the Temple of Edfu, located on the west bank of the Nile River.

![Temple of Edfu with reliefs on the walls and the inner chamber where perfumes and ointments were made.](image)

Over the centuries, this temple was buried beneath sand drifts, which preserved the temple nearly intact. The smaller of two hypostyle halls leads to the small room called a laboratory where the perfumes and ointments were compounded. On the walls are hieroglyphics listing recipes for these aromatic perfumes, including two recipes for kyphi, a blend of incense containing frankincense, myrrh, honey, raisins soaked in wine, sweet flag, pine resin and juniper.
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 Tutankhamen’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 that still contained traces of oil.

The Ebers Papyrus, also known as Papyrus Ebers, is an Egyptian medical papyrus dating to c. 1550 BCE. Among the oldest and most important medical papyri of ancient Egypt.

It was discovered by Edwin Smith in 1862 and acquired by Georg Ebers in 1873 and is currently being kept in the Library at the University of Leipsig, Germany. The scroll contains some 700 magical formulas and remedies. The papyrus was written in about 1500 BC, but it is believed to have been copied from earlier texts, perhaps dating as far back as 3400 BC. The Ebers Papyrus is a 110-page scroll, which is about 20 meters long. Along with the Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus (c. 1800 BC), the Edwin Smith papyrus (c. 1600 BC), the Hearst papyrus (c. 1600 BC), the Brugsch Papyrus (c. 1300 BC), the London Medical Papyrus (c. 1300 BC), the Ebers Papyrus is among the oldest preserved medical documents.
The Bible contains over 200 references to aromatics, incense and ointments. Aromatics such as frankincense, myrrh, galbanum, cinnamon, cassia, rosemary, hyssop and spikenard were used for anointing and healing the sick. In the Book of 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 1/3 gallons)

The Bible also lists an incident where an incense offering by Aaron stopped a plague. There are many other references to anointing oils in the Old Testament. The New Testament records that wise men presented the Christ child with frankincense and myrrh. There are other precious aromatics that are described in the anointing of Jesus.

All of the essential oil history research suggests that the people of ancient times understood essential oils better than we do now.

Herodotus, the Greek historian & physician, who lived from 484 BC to 425 BC recorded that during the yearly feasts of Bel, 1000 talents weight of Frankincense was offered on the great altar of Bel in Babylon.

**Herodotus:484 to 425 BC**  **Hippocrates:460 to 374 BC**  **Democratis: 460 to 370 BC**

Hippocrates (considered the Father of Medicine), learned his medical skills from his father, Heraclides (a student of Plato) and from Herodotus. He followed them from patient to patient. He eventually became well known throughout many countries. He wrote many works regarding medicine. His medical treatises made up the *Hippocratic Corpus* contain his views on medicine. Throughout the Corpus, plant ingredients used for remedies are described by taste and odor.

Hippocrates proposed a theory of healing based on the idea that the body has an inner healing power, which he called the *physis*, from which we get our word “physician.” The physician, from this point of view, was the guardian of this healing power, charged with keeping it vital and strong.

Hippocrates had a contemporary named Democratis, who opposed his ideas. Democratis preached the idea that we are nothing more than tiny particles (which he called “atoms”) that combine and recombine and eventually form us. Since Democratis could imagine no healing power in a particle – and they are all that we are – he argued that no natural healing power could possibly exist. *(More on this later)*
There is much history to be studied. The Romans, Napoleon, European Crusaders, the Arabians (developers of distillation), and many, many others all have essential oils, herbs, aromatics, spices, etc. mentioned in their histories. Drawing from the experience of the Greeks, Romans, China and India, the Arabian empire, embraced the use of aromatic oils, with Persian physician Avicenna (980 – 1,037 AD) perfecting the distillation process of essential oils.

In the 12th century, herbalist Hildegard of Bingen used herbs and oils extensively in healing.

Hildegard wrote *Physica*, a text on the natural sciences, as well as *Causae et Curae*. She was well known for her healing powers involving practical application of tinctures, herbs, and plants. In both texts, Hildegard describes the natural world around her, including the cosmos, animals, plants, stones, and minerals. She was particularly interested in the healing properties of plants. Hildegard wrote her two treatises on medicine and natural history, known in English as *Book of Simple Medicine* and *Book of Composed Medicine*, (Latin Name is Physica ) between 1151 and 1161. The longest and most comprehensive section contains information concerning the medicinal uses and harvesting of more than 200 herbs and other plants. She wrote, “Plants, which are sown by human labor, and spring up and grow gradually, are like domestic animals that are nourished with care in the home. Their *juices* border on the quality of that of a human, and become good and beneficial for food and drink. Some of these, used in medicine, suppress harmful or feeble *humors* in the body.”

**Humors**: One of the basic principles of medieval medicine was that of the four humors of which a human body was composed. The balance between these four (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) was essential for the well-being of a person.

In short, essential oils have been used for many centuries in many lands and nations for different reasons, including:

- religious rituals
- medicinal applications
- spiritual enhancement
Essential oils were used throughout Europe by monks during the Dark Ages to tend to the sick with many of the oils having anti-bacterial properties. Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the use of essential oils continued in use by both physicians and perfumers. During terrible plagues that swept through Europe, it is reported that certain occupations seemed to escape these plagues, including perfumers and tanners who scented their leather gloves before selling them. Doctors were also spared due to their knowledge of the powerful protective qualities of certain oils.

Somehow, through wars, the dark ages, alternate philosophies, this knowledge became lost... forgotten...

Return now to the philosophical debate between Hippocrates and Democratis. The two philosophies came to be known as “vitalism” - the belief that the body has an inner healing power that should be nurtured – and “atomism” – the belief that we are just a bunch of atoms that need to be controlled. This debate has raged on ever since. Why was the knowledge of essential oils lost – read on.

Before the United States became a country, men of vision saw the need for a system of medicine to be developed. There were few doctors and no hospitals. One of those great men of vision was Dr. Benjamin Franklin. In 1751, Franklin and Dr. Thomas Bond obtained a charter from the Pennsylvania legislature to establish a hospital. Pennsylvania Hospital was the first hospital in what was to become the United States of America. Franklin became good friends with Dr. Benjamin Rush, who served as the Surgeon General in the Continental Army and later became involved in politics and represented Pennsylvania. Both Franklin and Rush signed the Declaration of Independence. After the Revolutionary War was over, both men voiced their differences in how a new country should develop a national medical system. Franklin believed as Hippocrates and Rush believed in the theories of Democatis.

In 1783, Rush became a member of the medical staff at the Pennsylvania Hospital that Franklin Founded. The debate continued until 1790, when Franklin died at the age of 84. With Franklin gone, the ideas of Rush took hold. Medical doctors declared themselves atomists. Dr. Benjamin Rush presented medicine’s position like this:

“Although physicians are in speculation the servants, yet in practice they are the masters of nature …Instead of waiting for the slow operations of nature to eliminate a supposed morbid matter from the body, art should take the business of healing out of her hands”
From then until now, that has been medicine’s goal. Medicine’s therapies act in place of, or act as a substitute for, the body’s own natural healing powers. The physician assumes with his conscious mind the responsibility naturally held by our genes. And what is more disturbing is that the more physicians have come to know, the more aggressively they become in assuming that responsibility.

Western scientists typically discount alternative healing principles. The Pharmacopoeia of 1820 consisted mainly of herbal medicines, with few inorganic compounds, such as calomel (mercury), a favorite among regulars. Though herbs have been dropped from today’s Pharmacopoeia, approximately 40% of those drugs listed today are related to herbs in some way, whether synthetics or derivatives. Now drugs dominate the medical world. Though centuries ahead of his time in thinking, the great playwright Moliere stated:

*Nearly all men die of their medicines, not of their diseases.*

Moliere: 1622-1673

It wasn't until the early 20th century that people began to **rediscover** essential oils. In France, during WWI, Dr. Moncière used essential oils in ointments because they were antibacterial and aided in wound healing. In 1907 a French chemist, Dr. René-Maurice Gattefossé, PhD (the Father of Aromatherapy), began his study of essential oils. He wrote a book, *Aromatherapy*, in 1937 in which he tells his famous account of healing a serious burn using lavender oil. Following a laboratory explosion in July 1910, he extinguished the flames by rolling on a grassy lawn. He wrote that “both my hands were covered with rapidly developing gas gangrene.” He then stated that “just onerinse with lavender essence stopped the gasification of the tissue. This treatment was followed by profuse sweating and healing which began the next day.

Dr. René-Maurice Gattefossé,

Dr. Jean Valnet, a doctor from Paris and author of *The Practice of Aromatherapy*, used essential oils on patients during WWII. As a physician in Tonkin, China during the war, he exhausted his supply of antibiotics. He began using essential oils on patients suffering from battlefield injuries. To his surprise, the essential oils showed a powerful effect in fighting infection. He was able to have the lives of many soldiers who might otherwise have died. Two of Dr. Valnet’s students, Dr. Jean-Claude Lapraz and Dr. Paul Belaiche, continued his work. They clinically investigated the antibacterial, antiviral, antiseptic, and antifungal properties in essential oils and determined they have **healing capabilities**.
In 1990, Dr. Daniel Penoel, a French medical doctor and Pierre Franchomme, a French biochemist, collaborated together to co-author the first reference book that cataloged the various medical properties of over 270 essential oils and how to use them in a clinical environment. Their work was based on the clinical experience of administering the oils to patients by Dr. Penoel. The book, published in French, is titled *l’aromathérapie exactement* and became the primary resource for dozens of authors worldwide in writing about the medical benefits of essential oils.

Essential Oils are no longer the missing link in modern medicine. Millions of people are applauding their power and millions more are being introduced and educated to their potential each year. As more and more health practitioners, doctors, scientists and users of all ages venture into the world of this ancient knowledge, the methods of medicine will take on new dimensions and exciting discoveries will be made that will benefit mankind today and tomorrow.

If you want to keep pace with the latest developments in natural health-care, using the power of essential oils, then you will love AIRASE. You’ll be educated, inspired and enlightened, and better able to choose alternative treatment options. Knowledge is power and with that power you will be better able to plan and carry out your personal program of vibrant, life-long health. **Help keep this freedom alive.**

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