

REFLEXATION THERAPY

Reflexology - Soft Tissue Therapy - Massage

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History and Origins of Aromatherapy

Aromatic plants have been used to confer health benefits throughout human history, with direct evidence existing in tomb engravings and preserved writings from around 3500BC onwards in Egypt, Mesopotamia (Assyria and Babylonia), India and China. It is likely that cultures the Americas were using aromatic plants too, but their records are less documented. Early in history, as far back as 10,000BC, it is likely that humans burned scented woods to ward off the evil spirits that were associated with illness of any kind. From around 3500BC ancient cultures in China, Egypt and India used aromatic plant material as part of holistic philosophy, assuming the interconnectedness of human beings and nature. Aromatic substances were used for health and healing as well as for religious rituals and spiritual purification, the aromas being carried in the air and both air and breath being seen as manifestations of divinity.

The **Ancient Egyptians** appear to have been the first to study essential oils and use them for beauty, health and religious rites. The Egyptian god Nefertem is the god of lotus blossom, perfume and aromatherapy. The sun temple of the Ancient Egyptian pharaoh Niuserre (6th Dynasty, Old Kingdom) features depictions of the king enjoying a foot massage while oils are being prepared. While it is likely that ancient peoples extracted aromatic substances using fat, water and clays, the Ancient Egyptians developed distillation to extract essences such as cedarwood, clove, cinnamon, frankincense and myrrh for use in embalming the dead. The process of mummification was used extensively from the 3rd Dynasty (2650-2575 BC) onwards. Between the 18th and the 25th Dynasty (1539-657 BC), the Egyptians continued to refine their use of aromatics in incense, medicine, cosmetics, and finally perfumes. When Caesar returned to Rome with Cleopatra after conquering Egypt he threw perfume bottles of these master perfumers to the crowds.



Ancient Egyptian knowledge of aromatic medicine was absorbed by nearby cultures, including the Assyrians, Babylonians and Hebrews. The Hebrew Bible speaks of anointing with oil and holy perfumes; famously the New Testament (in Greek) mentions precious gifts of frankincense and myrrh for the Christ child as well as his anointing and perfuming.

China appears to have used aromatic plants for medical purposes around the same time as the Egyptians. A Chinese medical book called the Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine is dated at 2697 BC documents the medical properties and uses of over 300 plants. In **India**, **Ayurvedic** holistic medicine is evidenced from around 3000 BC with aspects of aromatherapy in practices that aim to promote harmony and balance to the spirit, mind and body. The Chinese concept of balance in flow of *chi (qi)* is similar to the Ayurvedic idea of balance in *dosas* (vata, pitta, kapha).

As the Egyptian empire declined Europe became the heart of scientific medical study, especially Greece and Rome. The Greek physician **Asclepius** practiced around 1200 BC and was so famed that he was deified as the god of healing and healing temples called Asclepeion were built. **Hippocrates** (circa 460-377 BC) founded the idea of holistic health, insisting that illness was not related to supernatural forces (like the Egyptians believed) but due to disorders or imbalances of the whole body that could be affected using mild physiotherapies and herbal medicines. Hippocrates studied more than 200 plant extracts and used them with the wisdom of *vis medicatrix naturae*: the healing power of nature. He rid Athens of the plague with this aromatic fumigations and paved the way for future scientific medical traditions.

In the 3rd century BC **Theophrastus** of Athens (philosopher and student of Aristotle) investigated plants and how their scents affected the emotions. He is generally referred to as the Founder of Botany, writing several volumes including '*The History of Plants*', which became one of the most important botanical science references for centuries after. In the first century BC the Greek physician **Discoroides** (40-90 AD) served in Nero's army and marched in Greece, Germany, Italy and Spain, recording his discoveries about the plants that he found including accounts of healing properties. He wrote '*De Materia Medica*' (also known as '*Herbarius*', a vast tome that deserved him the title of Father of Pharmacology.

Most influential of all Greek physicians was Claudius **Galen** (129-199 AD). He studied medicine from the age of 17 and from the age of 28 served the Romans treating wounds of gladiators with medicinal herbs. He became personal physician to the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius and as a result of his researches in Rome he wrote >400 treatises. Notably, '*De Simplicibus*' described the plant, its geographical location and medicinal uses. Galen formulated plant remedies for a wide range of ailments and is credited with the invention of the first cosmetic cold cream (beeswax, olive oil, rose petal hydrolats). Within 100 years of Galen's death Europe plunged into the Dark Ages (1st to 4th century AD), a time of barbaric wars and destruction during which medical progress halted for hundreds of years.

During the Middle Ages or Medieval period (from 5th to 15th centuries), in the Islamic-Arab Empire the 11th century physician **Ibn Sena** (Avisenna) practiced **Unani Tibb**, a medical system that built on work of Hippocrates and Galen. Unani Tibb preserved the works of Hippocrates and Galen so they survived the fall of the Greco-Roman empire at the end of the Dark Ages around 400 AD. Ibn Sena invented steam distillation (condensation) extraction and the purification of our essences or 'essential oils'.

Between the 14th and 16th centuries Europe experienced a **Renaissance** and Age of Discovery, recovering lost works from Greece and Rome and writing new syntheses about herbalism and aromatherapy (e.g. Gerard's *Herbal* and Culpeper's *The English Physician*). Essential oils were used to protect against infection, to cleanse and for perfume. Between 16th and 20th century advances in **science and technology** lead to a loss of the sense of holism when it comes to health, but from the 1900s onwards a renewed sense of the empirical value of holistic healing has reappeared.

A french chemist René-Maurice **Gattefossé** discovered the healing properties of lavender oil by chance when he burned himself and subsequently he examined the healing effects of pure essential oils, finding adulterations and synthetic versions to be much less effective. In a 1928 book, Gattefossé coined the term 'aromathérapie'. A number of Italians published work in the 1920's on the psychological effects of essential oils. Giovanni Gatti and Ranto Cayola published in 1923 *The Action of Essences on the Nervous System* and psycho-aromatherapist Paolo Rovesti is known for his work with psychiatric patients.

The french physician Jean **Valnet** published his book *Aromathérapie* in 1964. He used essences to help heal wounds and prevent infections among soldiers wounded in World War II. At this time in Australia the benefits of key native trees such as tea tree and eucalyptus were being documented.



Marguerite Maury (1895 - 1968) was a French biochemist who researched with scientific vigor the value of aromatic herbs for health, beauty and life energy. She was influenced by the author Chabenes' 1838 publication, *Les Grandes Possibilités par les Matières Odoriférantes* (The Great Potential of Aromatic Materials). Chabenes taught Gattefossé and his work became pivotal to Maury's understanding and holistic approach to health. In the 1930's Maury devised a unique system of client-centred aromatherapy massage, based on her holistic understanding of health and scientific

understanding of absorption of active molecules through the skin. In 1964 she published *The Secret of Life and Youth* in Britain, and this became an influential book, allowing her work to be developed in Europe and further afield in the 1970's and 1980's.

Modern aromatherapy is practiced differently in different countries, for example in France practitioners are trained similarly to doctors to administer oils internally and the profession is termed medical aromatherapy. At present in Britain, US and Australia, aromatherapists are trained to high clinical standards and must limit their practice to external application of essential oils chosen after consultation with individual clients. Aromatherapy is regulated in its ethics, conduct and practices by standardising agencies such as the CNHC (Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council) and the FHT (Federation of Holistic Therapists). The benefits of aromatherapy to modern users are many, as summarised by the FHT in its literature:

“Essential oils, which are highly aromatic, are readily absorbed into the body via the skin and lungs, and are believed to affect the body on all levels - physically, mentally and even emotionally/spiritually. When combined with massage, which helps to soothe away muscular tension and improve circulation, an aromatherapy treatment can be either deeply relaxing or uplifting, depending on the oils and massage techniques used by the therapist. Aromatherapy is used by people for a variety of reasons. Some use it to help them manage or cope with specific physical, mental or emotional problems, while others use it as a means of relaxation, or to help maintain good health and a sense of general well-being. Aromatherapy massage and essential oils are commonly used in hospitals, hospices and other healthcare settings, to help support patients and their carers.”

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