

# Alternative 101: AROMATHERAPY

BY HEATHER K. PEAKE

Aromatherapy is the use of fragrant plant oils to improve mood and promote physical and emotional well-being.

Fragrance has been used for a variety of purposes over the centuries, but the practice of

aromatherapy is new. It started, literally, by accident. In the 1930s, French chemist Rene-Maurice Gattefosse burned his hand in a lab accident and unthinkingly plunged it into a container of pure lavender oil.

To his amazement, the pain and redness instantly vanished, and the burn healed in a day or two.

Gattefosse and other European scientists began to experiment with the healing power of essential oils. By the 1970s, it had won enough converts to be taught in medical schools in both England and France.

Aromatherapy arrived in the United States in the 1980s, when it started to gain popularity as a non-invasive treatment for a wide spectrum of physical and emotional ailments. The growing demand for natural products and remedies brought it into the commercial mainstream in the 1990s.

Proponents of aromatherapy sing its praises in

curing everything from congestion to sexually transmitted diseases, but the scientific jury is still out. Certainly, some of the claims are true. Peppermint and ginger have long been known to soothe stomach upsets. Tea tree oil combats skin problems. Lavender has been shown to help insomnia. But the more exorbitant claims – that scent alone can stimulate the immune system, improve memory, kill bacteria or cure infertility or impotence – have never been proven.

Part of the problem is that we don't know exactly how the sense of smell works. Is our response to scent purely emotional, or can it actually set off a physiological change? Research is ongoing, but until the mechanism of scent is understood, the bigger promises of aromatherapy will remain anecdotal.

## The oils

The heart of aromatherapy is the use of essential oils, either alone or in blends called "synergies."

Essential oils are substances that live in between the cells of plants and act as a sort of regulatory system. Depending on the plant, they help it adjust to

its environment, fighting off parasites and disease, attracting insects to promote pollination, sending out toxins to discourage predators or weeds, and in some cases, even sending up a cloud of vapor to protect the plant from the sun.

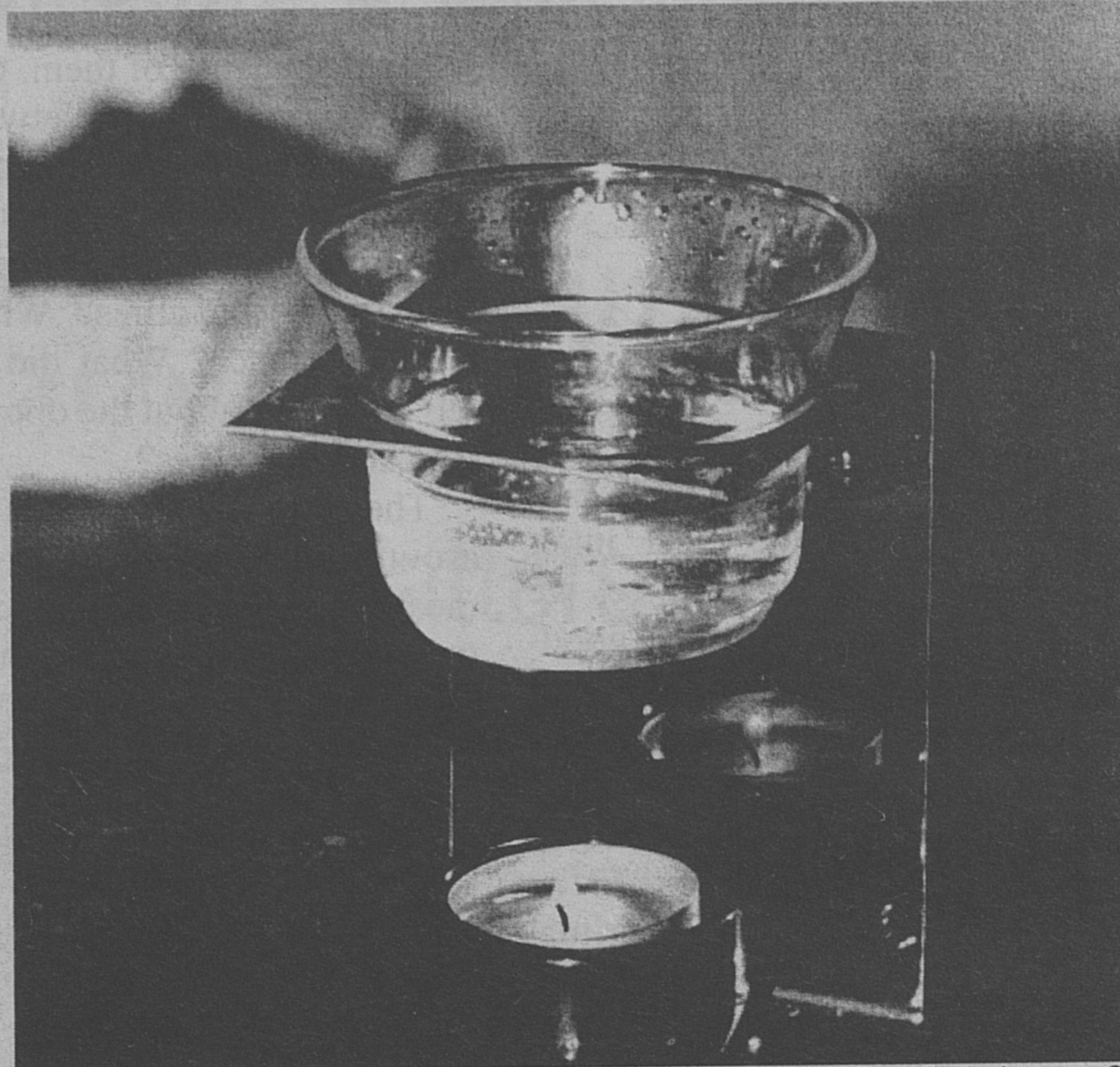
Steam distillation is the preferred method of extracting oil. Using a series of vats, water is boiled and the steam forced up through the plant matter, exuding the oil. The resulting vapor is collected and the oil separated out.

While it can be extracted from the flower, leaves, bark, stems and roots, it still takes an enormous amount of plant matter to produce a small amount of oil. It takes 150 kilograms – more than 300 pounds – of lavender to make one kilogram (just over two pounds) of oil. For roses, the requirement is 2000-3000 kg for the same yield. The purest oils are priced accordingly.

## The art

There's no state certification process for aromatherapists, but those who call themselves "certified" have often completed an on-site or distance learning course of study or a apprenticeship. An aromather-

photo Jordan Silverman



Here are some synergies from [www.aromaweb.com](http://www.aromaweb.com) to get you started. (The ingredients should be available at your local health food store or co-op.)

**Calming Bath Oil**  
1 tablespoon sweet almond carrier oil  
2 drops German Chamomile essential oil  
3 drops lavender essential oil  
2 drops patchouli essential oil  
Combine the essential oil first, and then, when drawing the bathwater, add to the carrier oil and pour into the tub. Swirl it around the water before jumping in.

**High Stress Massage Oil**  
15 drops Clary sage essential oil  
10 drops lemon essential oil  
5 drops lavender essential oil  
1 oz. Sweet carrier oil  
Combine all ingredients. Makes a good foot and leg massage, or with a little help, a good all-over massage.

**Insomnia Oil**  
sweet almond carrier oil  
12 drops bergamot essential oil  
3 drops lavender oil  
3 drops cypress oil  
Combine all. Put a couple of drops behind your ears just before bed, drawing any excess oil down your jawline.

apist can suggest what kind of oils might work best for you, as well as whipping up blends and synergies suited to your needs.

If you want to learn aromatherapy on your own, there are dozens of books, magazines, web sites that can walk you through the basics of the chemistry of essential oils, recipes, and safety guidelines.

Oils and synergies can be

## Aromatherapy resources

### - WEB -

The Aroma Web  
[www.aromaweb.com](http://www.aromaweb.com)

Amateur Aromatherapy  
[dialspace.dial.pipex.com/town/avenue/as07/menu.shtml](http://dialspace.dial.pipex.com/town/avenue/as07/menu.shtml)

Canadian National School of Aromatherapy  
[home.ica.net/~cnsa/](http://home.ica.net/~cnsa/)

### - ASSOCIATIONS -

National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy  
PO Box 17622, Boulder, CO 80308  
(800) 556-6735 [www.naha.org](http://www.naha.org)

American Alliance of Aromatherapy  
PO Box 309, Depoe Bay, OR 97341  
(800) 809-9850

### - BOOKS -

*The Complete Book of Aromatherapy and Essential Oils*  
Valerie Anne Wormwood

*Aromatherapy: An A-to-Z*  
Patricia Davis

*Aromatherapy Workbook*  
Marcel Lavabre

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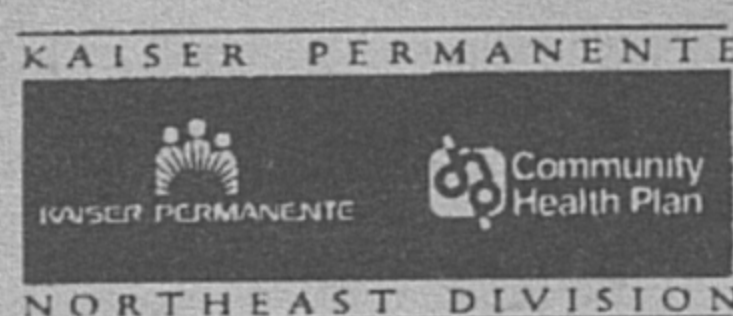


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