

Carrier Oils, Vegetable Oils, Fixed Oils, Base Oils, Essential Oils, Fragrance Oilswhich is which and what is what?

We are often asked what the difference is between fragrance oils and essential oils and many of our students initially get confused over essential oils differing from carrier oils and are disappointed when they smell the strawberry seed oil expecting it to smell of strawberries.

Here is a quick guide to how the carrier oils, essential oils and fragrance oils differ.

Carrier Oils

These are often referred to as vegetable oils, fixed oils or base oils. They are obtained from seeds, nuts, fruits, vegetables and leaves and are used as a base to which other ingredients are added. Having said that, base oils can be used on their own without the addition of other ingredients.

Let us take olive oil as an example. Olive oil is extracted by cold pressing olives. The result is a beautiful greeny/golden oil and whilst it may have a hint of olive about it, it is known for its emollient qualities rather than its aroma.



Strawberry seed oil is similar in that it is obtained by cold pressing the seeds. This yields a beautiful golden oil that is similar in texture to olive oil. Strawberry seed oil will not smell of strawberries.

All base oils are oils that are used to massage and moisturise. Most are in liquid form, but occasionally they are solid - coconut oil is an example of a solid oil.

Solid oils have a high volume of stearic fatty acid. It is possible to remove the stearic acid to render the oils more liquid. This will explain why you have coconut oil in its solid form and coconut oil in its liquid form (which should be referred to by its correct name of fractionated coconut oil).

In brief, a carrier oil is an oil that has no distinct smell. It can be applied directly to the skin as a massage oil or to moisturise. It can be mixed with all other types of oils.

Essential Oils

Essential oils are also obtained from parts of a plant. There are different methods of extracting the oils including steam distillation, cold pressing, and solvent extraction.



Essential oils are too strong to be applied directly onto the skin and need to be diluted in a carrier oil (depending on the product you are making) before use.

Essential oils do not contain any fatty acids and therefore do not feel 'greasy'. Essential oils are volatile which means they are able to evaporate. Since they are able to evaporate, they have an aroma - unlike base oils which cannot evaporate and therefore do not have a distinct smell.

Many plants and parts of those plants can yield essential oils. The flowers, leaves, wood, seeds and bark from the plant often have different aromas.

For example

Flowers - Rose, Jasmine, Geranium, Lavender, Ylang Ylang

Leaves/Grasses - Basil, Bay, Thyme, Rosemary, Lemongrass

Fruit - Orange, Lemon, Grapefruit, Lime, Mandarin

Seeds - Almond, Celery, Coriander, Black Pepper, Carrot Seed

Berry - Juniper, Pimento Berry

Wood - Cedar, Sandalwood, Rosewood, Ho Wood

Bark - Cinnamon, Ravensara

Roots - Orris, Ginger

Resin - Frankincense, Myrrh

Moss - Oakmoss



Occasionally one plant will yield different essential oils from different parts of the plant. For example, the orange tree produces three different smelling oils with different therapeutic properties - neroli (which comes from the petals of the orange blossom), orange (from the rind of the fruit) and petitgrain (from the leaves and little twigs).

Essential oils are used for their aroma in cosmetic products such as soap, bath fizz, perfumes etc. They are also used for their therapeutic qualities when applied in massage oils, creams, lotions and similar.

If you are interested in developing your knowledge and require more information about the therapeutic qualities and healing properties of essential oils, a good starting point is our [decoders](#) which suggest ideas for use.

In brief, an essential oil is an oil that has a very distinct smell. It must not be applied directly to the skin but diluted in another oil (or similar) first. It can be mixed with all other types of oils and different essential oils can be blended together. Essential oils are reported to have therapeutic qualities.

Fragrance Oils

Fragrance oils are synthetic oils made to smell identical to a natural product.



An example of a typical fragrance oil is strawberry fragrance oil since it is difficult to capture and hold on to the strawberry aroma from the fresh fruit.

Other popular fragrance oils include coconut, pineapple, apple, cucumber, raspberry, peach and other fruits (or flowers, herbs and more) where capturing and holding the original fragrance is lengthy, expensive or downright impossible.

Like essential oils, fragrance oils are too strong to be applied directly to the skin and need to be diluted before use.

Fragrance oils are also useful as a substitute for an essential oil when working to a budget. It takes 30 rose heads to create one drop of rose essential oil which makes a bottle for rose essential oil very expensive. Aroma of lily of the valley, violet, carnation, rose and jasmine are popular ingredients in perfumes, but the cost of gathering the essential oil can make the cost of the final perfume rather prohibitive. The majority of perfumes nowadays contain fragrance oils instead of essential oils as these are less costly and straightforward to emulate.



Fragrance oils are a useful addition to many cosmetic products, but they cannot be considered natural.

In brief, a fragrance oil is an oil that has a very distinct smell. It must not be applied directly to the skin but diluted in another oil (or similar) first. It can be mixed with all other types of oils and different fragrance oils can be blended together.

Fragrance oils are man-made synthetic oils and have no therapeutic qualities other than the uplifting feeling you can get from smelling something appealing.