

Essential oils, cosmetics, perfumes, soaps. Questions to ask and what to look out for.

There are still new people setting up flashy looking web sites claiming to supply the finest essential oils, cosmetics and related products. This is an update to information in other articles on this site for the benefit of new web users. Please also read [Internet sales](#) below.

Many web sites are established by people who know little about what they are selling and have no sound product training. Please bear in mind that such suppliers are frequently cottage industry based operations and a flashy web site is no indication of the size or quality of a business. There is nothing wrong with a cottage industry operation provided people have educated themselves properly. However, many just read a few popular aromatherapy, cosmetics and perfume books and then commence sales to the public. Sound technical books are available but they cost a lot. **These people do not buy those books as why bother when you can make cash out of a gullible public by not educating yourself properly..** Some of these site owners claim to be "qualified" from this or that course, but only those who have been in the trade for many years know which courses students do not get sound education from. Other web sites are operated by people who are little better than criminals selling scam products to the gullible.

In Britain it is illegal to make "medicinal claims" on the website of someone who also sells the oils. This has been the case since 1968 and later laws have tightened this up even more. Most of our older well established aromatherapy suppliers have been aware of and complied with this legislation for years. Therefore, if you come across a UK based web site making medicinal claims, it may be evidence of several things:

1. Someone who has not bothered to check the law over what they sell.
2. Someone who does not care that they are breaking the law.
3. Someone who has not undertaken a sound training course.
4. Someone who has been conned by one of the larger essential oil traders.
5. Someone new to the trade who knows little about its history.

Our Medicines control agency has been abysmally lax in enforcing the law on the rogue suppliers. There are a few such suppliers in the UK, so look at the claims they make using the above information. If you come across a UK web site making what you think might be medicinal claims, please let me know.

In the USA making certain medicinal claims is illegal, but the legislation is rarely enforced. **Therefore you have thousands of web sites making outrageous claims**, claims that frequently have no basis at all in reality. Quite a number of suppliers there sell oils with labels that do not meet your basic legal requirements, particularly Wintergreen oil.

In Canada there are laws over what can and cannot be claimed. However, the Government agencies seem more concerned at setting up fallacious regulations and trade consultation committees, rather than clamping down hard on the rogues ..

General advice.

Organically produced oils:

Don't be fooled by those who claim they get **all** their oils direct from growers, that is hogwash. The essential oils trade is International and conducted mostly via big traders who then resupply the aromatherapy trade. Some suppliers do get some oils direct from growers, but they cannot possibly get all of their oils from such sources.

The same comments apply to organically grown oils. Yes some are produced that way, but only a tiny proportion compared to what aromatherapy traders sell. In addition, many OG certificates are forged or the association issuing them does not undertake adequate on-the-ground inspections,

particularly in under developed countries.

Beware in the UK of traders who claim ALL their oils are "Soil Association certified". This OG certifying body do not check the sources of most essential oils that they grant certificates to. Instead they rely on what the oil traders tell them and on useless bits of paper. It must never be forgotten that they are a trade organisation.

Endangered species:

Most aromatherapy traders sell oils from trees that are on the endangered species list, they then invent all kinds of stories to cover their backs such as "we get our oils from legal sources only". In reality they simply accept what they are told by their suppliers most of which is hogwash. See other articles on this site.

Dangerous oils:

Many suppliers sell essential oils with known dangers, but without any warnings. Often these suppliers are ignorant of well acknowledged safety data, or they don't care about your health as long as they get a sale. *Check other articles on this site for guidance on dangerous oils.*

Certificates of analysis:

There are analysts turned suppliers who knowingly sell adulterated oils to aromatherapy outlets. There are others who claim to do analysis but have had no training in the fragrance trades or experience working for big oil distributors. Only a tiny number of aromatherapy suppliers can afford to have their oils analysed by real experts. There are those who pay for the cheapest analysis simply so they can claim their oils are genuine - cheap analysis will not detect good adulteration. In reality, this trade is awash with oils that are not all they are claimed to be. There are essential oil traders who will take a commercial GLC from a book and then give that to their customers as "evidence that the oil they supply has been analysed", yes it may have been 10 years ago, but not every batch.

"I trust my supplier":

That is the biggest load of nonsense I have heard. There are some who do their utmost to only sell quality products, but there are a hundred fold more who just do not care as long as the cash is flowing. There are only a tiny number of aromatherapy suppliers that I would trust and some of those are on my web site. There are others who have been trading for years and who have learnt their trade via long experience. Be cautious of new traders as most of those come under the categories above.

Hype on suppliers web sites:

Bear in mind there is no system in place for verifying the claims made on Internet sites. Anyone can say anything they like and will usually get away with it.

Beware particularly of web sites which contain numerous links. These indicate a site operator who has not checked the sites they are referring people to, but are just operating link exchange scams to increase their profile on the net.

Cosmetic type products.

Natural cosmetics:

Be cautious of those who claim their products are 100% natural. It is very difficult to produce safe, wholly natural products, because of the need (and sometimes legal requirement), that the products do not support microbial growth. There are a few natural preservatives that are being used, but there is a problem in that most of them have not been subjected to adequate testing for skin safety. That is different to synthetic preservative where extensive testing has been done over many years. Please ignore the hype over the dangers of paraben preservatives, this is all based on a single discredited piece of research. Web sites selling cosmetics and using this information on parabens, are either ignorant of the research being dismissed, or may be trying to scare people unnecessarily.

You need to be aware that **particularly in the USA** many small kitchen sink producers are using dangerous preservatives such as benzoin resin. This is often because they have looked up the subject in old out of date books and just assumed that because these materials were used in the past, that they are OK to use nowadays. So if you come across someone using benzoin, you need to ask some questions on why they are using it, and what grade they are using as some may be safe. A few people rely on spice oils such as cinnamon bark oil to help act as a preservative, however, such oils can be highly damaging to the skin unless they are part of an expertly formulated product.

The subject of cosmetic preservation is not a job for amateurs. This subject is a science in its own right within the 'Science of Cosmetics'. It is vitally important because badly formulated home produced cosmetics can do more harm than good.

Helping tribes or the environment:

Beware of suppliers who are selling cosmetics that they claim are used by "indigenous tribes" or are "traditionally used" in certain locations. Often these contain novel herbs and extracts that have never undergone any kind of safety evaluation. The fact a product has been used traditionally can rarely be taken as an assumption of safety. We have many herbs and oils that have been banned as too dangerous to use nowadays, which may have been used a lot in the past. If you cut yourself in the jungle, using a potentially sensitising resin is less of a risk than getting gangrene, but that does not mean it is safe in regular-use products. Often these producers also make outrageous claims as to the efficacy of their products and even get scientists to try and give them validity.

Never ever forget you can claim almost anything you like on product efficacy on a web site!

Also try and find out if any of the ingredients come from endangered species, particularly jungle trees.

Lack of appropriate education:

I have come across many small suppliers on the newsgroups who started by making a few cosmetics for their own use, but quickly started selling those products to other people. Many of these have not had any training, adequate training, or education, in manufacturing such products. Others have relied on what they can glean from others on newsgroups in order to develop more products. So beware, the subject is a minefield.

Natural perfumes.

Something that seems to be increasing in popularity and thus the scammers will be jumping on the bandwagon. Another minefield where most of the above on cosmetics also applies.

Particularly beware of those who claim their training was with experts in the perfume trade. With a few exceptions the real experts work in-house for large companies and are not allowed to do private work. There are only a tiny number of real experts in perfumery who work for themselves and fewer still who offer training courses. Most of the real perfumers who used plant extracts are retired or dead, most modern perfumers are qualified in chemistry not natural extracts.

So what does that leave us with?

1. People who have learnt what they know from old books of formulas and then experimented with the ingredients. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is highly misleading when they then call themselves "natural perfumers". This is not really fair to those who worked in a trade all of their lives and knew the subject inside out.

2. People who have done some kind of aromatherapy training and then dabbled with making perfumes. Such people are formulators **not** perfumers. There is lots of fun to be had from trying out different perfumes made from essential oils for yourself, but it is another ballgame selling such products to the public. I have come across several such web sites where the people are selling perfumes containing banned and dangerous oils and some with illegal animal extracts.

3. People who have done some training with herbalists or other traditional practitioners. None of these are experts at making perfumes, incense maybe, but not perfumes for retail.

The scams that I have witnessed include setting up a European based web site claiming to sell extracts from animal sources, which appear in old formulation books. The site I am thinking of is targeted at a USA based audience because they hope they can fool Americans into importing such products. Of course they don't tell their customers that they could be thrown into jail for importing banned animal extracts into the USA do they! So beware of any web sites selling items such as Civet; musk (animal); ambergris, etc.

Beware of anyone claiming to be an expert in natural perfumery, but who includes oils such as calamus and fig leaf which are banned by the REAL perfume trade.

Soaps, shampoos, etc.

Although in theory there should be less likelihood of causing harm as the product is washed off, I have come across examples of home producers who are using known dangerous sensitizing oils such as cinnamon bark and Verbena at very high levels of use. The use of for example Verbena oil is prohibited in commercial products by the large producers. There are also maximum recommended volumes of essential oils that should not be exceeded in shampoos and other detergents.

These levels of essential oils in soaps and shampoos are often far lower than home producers use, but there is a good reason for fixing such levels. The main reason is this question of sensitisation where long term exposure to the oils may initiate an allergic condition. It is not uncommon for someone to use the same skin lotion or soap for many years and often on a daily basis.

Therefore, if you come across a supplier using dangerous oils, then it is a good indication that they are ignorant of ALL safety data on essential oils, or they don't care.

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THE DANGERS OF SOME ESSENTIAL OILS SOLD ON THE INTERNET First published in the NAHA newsletter

During my searches for aromatherapy related subjects, I have come across thousands of sites selling essential oils. I was horrified by the number of businesses who are selling dangerous essential oils to therapists and the public without appropriate warnings.

"Appropriate warnings" is the most important issue. There is nothing wrong with selling many of our most hazardous oils for non-contact uses. However, I consider it unscrupulous not to warn people that these products should not be applied to the skin.

Here in Britain and in Europe, we have stringent laws that control what can or cannot be sold, as well as what medicinal claims can be made. It is an offence under our Trading Standards regulations, to place any product on the market, if appropriate warnings are not attached to the product. Despite that, many traders here do still ignore this important piece of consumer protection legislation. A few even break the law over no medicinal claims.

In the USA and Canada you do have legislation over label claims, and health claims, but it is widely ignored. I have heard it said on several occasions that you prefer to rely on "individual responsibility". Well how can a member of the public be expected to ascertain if an essential oil may be dangerous or not. This is particularly important when you consider that half the 'aromatherapists' around don't have adequate knowledge themselves of such matters. If individual responsibility is the main trading criteria, then perhaps you should allow the general public access

to plutonium so we can all CHOOSE if we want to make an H bomb or not!! Such ideas are usually a trade get-out, so they can continue making money selling anything they can get away with.

Potentially Hazardous oils.

When I talk about hazardous essential oils, I am not talking about all the unsubstantiated hype endemic in aromatherapy. I am talking about hard verifiable facts. It is interesting that some of these facts originate from highly respected USA based organisations such as the International Fragrance Research Association. Therefore, it is not as a well-known US aromatherapy teacher said "oh yes they are very over the top on safety issues in Europe". Such teachers and authors say this, because they cannot stand it being made public, that their knowledge on essential oils is severely lacking.

The fragrance trade organisations do sterling work gathering data from adverse reactions reports and from testing the material in clinics around the world. **The aromatherapy trade has no such system** to monitor adverse effects of raw materials. Anyone that ignores such data is at best a fool and at worst unscrupulous, because they are toying with peoples health by ignoring valuable safety information.

When the RIFM advise a fragrance ingredient should not be used in consumer products, they are often referring to far lower levels of use than common in aromatherapy. By 'consumer products' this can mean soaps, detergents, lotions, creams, etc.

Here is a short list of dangerous substances that I have seen promoted on the Internet. This list does not of course include those essential oils like amni visnaga, ravensara, etc. and the fast growing number of 'chemotype' oils that no one knows if they are safe or not.

Benzoin resinoid and oil – a well documented sensitiser. RIFM recommend that only grades processed to remove the allergens should be used in consumer products. These grades are not generally available via aromatherapy suppliers. In addition, there is no such thing as benzoin oil; it is always a resin dissolved in a solvent which is often synthetic.

Bergamot oil expressed – a potent **photosensitiser**—no not just sunlight, but ULTRA VIOLET light present even in dull overcast conditions. Two cases of severe skin reactions to this oil were reported to me in 2002. This is a disgrace when this oils dangers have been well documented since the early 1920s.

Cinnamon bark oil – an extremely powerful irritant and an even worse **sensitiser**. Still being used by home soapmakers in the USA and Canada.

Peru balsam – a powerful sensitiser. RIFM recommend "not to be used as a fragrance ingredient".

Rue oil – a **terrible photosensitiser and sensitiser**. Reported to be a "useful oil" by someone in the American witchcraft scene on her web site. Clearly someone who has no idea on safety.

Sassafras. This oil is restricted to only the minutest amounts allowed in cosmetic products throughout Europe. It is restricted to such low levels, that it effectively bans its use. The reason is because tests have shown it is a potential carcinogen. Of course, in the USA you are used to using sassafras bark in teas and flavourings, however that is not anything like as hazardous as using the pure essential oil.

Tagetes (sometimes misdescribed as calendula) – a **powerful photosensitiser**. RIFM say a no effect level is 0.05%. Therefore, to use it on skin exposed to the light would be foolish.

Tansy oil (T. officinalis) – extremely toxic, and of little if any use in aromatherapy. **Blue Tansy**, a different variety, is promoted a lot in the USA without any sound evidence of its usefulness and no safety data of any kind.

Verbena oil – an extremely powerful sensitiser – recommended by the RIFM "not for use as a fragrance ingredient". Massive percentages of adverse skin reactions are recorded from testing a whole range of verbena oils. The only reason most aromatherapists have not seen such reactions, is because only minute amounts of genuine verbena are around, most is semi synthetic. This oil has been promoted as being useful for years by certain aromatherapy teachers.

Wintergreen and Birch - two highly toxic products sold by many US sites in particular. Most without the required labelling warnings as per US law. Neither should these be considered a natural product.

Wormseed (Chenopodium) – extremely toxic. Banned from general sale in the UK because of the deaths reported from its consumption in the past.

In conclusion: If anyone comes across Internet sites or shops selling these dangerous materials without warnings please do tell them. Often they simply may not know, and may have relied for their knowledge entirely on the popular aromatherapy novels, or on some of the appallingly poor training courses around. That is the kind of marketing that can trigger over zealous legislation being placed on everyone.

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