

Natural Perfumery vs Synthetics the truth and the trade hype.

By Martin Watt

People on newsgroups and in emails have asked me about several issues surrounding the use of natural extracts and synthetic chemicals. There are many people (particularly those using social media sites) that believe everything suppliers, course providers and blog owners tell them. Therefore I thought this article might help clear up some important issues.

The following are my opinions based on a good knowledge of the natural extracts trades as well as the historical aspects of perfumery and a fair knowledge of synthetic fragrance production.

'Natural' perfumes and those who make and teach about them.

1. The term 'Natural' in perfumery does not just involve the use of plant extracts. It can involve the use of animal products. Unfortunately, there are suppliers who will sell and use animal products banned under International conservation treaties. So never assume that because a perfume is stated to be "natural" that it does not include ingredients that are illegal. I have seen a BBC TV programme where a reporter was told by an incense maker in an Arabic country that: "I sell this to UK customers". She was using musk and other ingredients which are illegal to import into countries who are members of CITES. Clearly the program makers did not consider editing out these comments or adding a note at the end of the program.

The maker of the incense blends in the above was a good example of how traditional products should never be assumed to be safe or legal. I have particularly noticed this gullibility among some natural perfumers, home soap makers and web sites in the USA and Canada.

2. **Natural does not mean safe:** Many of the people calling themselves "natural perfumers" have acquired much of what they know out of old books. These old formulas can be great, but they can in the light of modern knowledge be extremely dangerous. I have seen some of these perfumes on sale which contain ingredients considered too dangerous by the big perfume makers, for example cinnamon bark oil, costus absolute, verbena oil, expressed citrus peel oils, etc. If these people had obtained proper training or research information they would have possessed the knowledge to assess the safety or not of these old formulations. Clearly safety is not an important consideration among many of these people.

3. Some of the web sites run by supposed natural perfumers sell oils and extracts which are banned by the larger perfume and cosmetics trade. This is because they present significant risks of causing skin reactions and damage. Be on the lookout (particularly in the USA) for Costus and Verbena *Lippia citriodora*. If you see that being sold it is an indication of two things:

1. **Someone who does not know or care about safety issues.**
2. **That in reality the product may be a safer synthetic version and not the real thing as the web site will claim.**

4. The training to be a proper perfume formulator takes many years. Often they are University graduates in chemistry who then move on to working in the fragrance trade and develop their knowledge and nose until they are recognised by the trade as "noses". These people have an intimate knowledge of fragrance chemistry often including natural extracts, they also have the underpinning knowledge on safety issues via their trade organisations.

On the other hand, anyone can call themselves a "natural perfumer" without any training, or after having taken a course run by teachers who themselves have had no sound training in the main perfumery trade. Some even pick up snippets of information from newsgroups over the years and then give others the impression they are very knowledgeable. To do proper perfumery training costs a lot of money, so why bother when they can fool people into thinking they are so experienced by setting up websites, newsgroups, blogs and Guilds **which they own and control.**

There was a link here to a review of one of the teachers referred to above, however, after threats from this person, the author took her article down. Certain members of this organisation have had no adequate training in the subjects they teach and have written several of the trades "novels" on aromatherapy that I refer to in other articles on this site. At least one sells banned animal extracts and others have or do sell synthetic fragrance blends as "pure essential oils or absolutes". This organisation is typical of those who will take any unscrupulous businesses into their membership in order to bolster numbers and make themselves look representative to the world.

Beware of those who claim 30 years experience of natural perfumery without giving you any idea of how that experience was gained - could it be a lie to snare those who really believe everything on web sites and in publicity?

Beware of Natural perfumers who imply they are associated with popular authors in aromatherapy. Other articles on this site give you an idea of what I think of the level of knowledge of most such authors! Most aromatherapy authors have no training in the perfumery trade. That in itself is not a major problem, but it is when you are misled into thinking these people are very knowledgeable and experienced.

5. Like any trade, an individual should know what they are using and what they are advising others to do. From my observation of the burgeoning 'natural perfumes' trade this is far from the case. It is the blind leading the blind in many cases.

Natural versus synthetic:

There is an awful lot of misinformation on this, particularly on the Internet. Some web sites give the idea that any synthetic fragrance is going to give you all kinds of health problems, some do that just to sell their products - see the article 'fragrance scare story'.

First I want to cover synthetic fragrances. These can be made using a variety of starting materials including natural ones such as turpentine distilled from tree stumps felled for timber. Most individual fragrance chemicals have been tested for skin safety and toxicity and many are safer than their natural equivalents. One reason for this safety factor is that these individual molecules can be so potent that manufacturers only need to use tiny volumes in their products. Admittedly over the years a few such as synthetic musks have been found to be not as safe as first thought. However, that differs little from essential oils some of which were used liberally years ago, but which we now know are dangerous, i.e. expressed bergamot oil.

Some say "what about these chemicals when blended in exotic combinations"? The answer to that is all of the large companies test their products on panels of humans, on cell cultures and sometimes on animals. Therefore the toxicology and safety are known, in many cases better than with natural extract blends.

What about environmental issues of synthetics? This is the one area that as a rule turns me against them. All chemical processes use huge amounts of energy and often leave us with eco persistent wastes and high CO2 emissions. However, not all fragrance chemicals do and it is wrong to damn them all just because some may be environmentally unfriendly.

So what is the problem? The biggest problem is the way the public and most aromatherapists are hoodwinked into thinking anything synthetic is bad. In the case of synthetic fragrances they have their place and that is for scenting a vast range of products safely and effectively. There is very little evidence currently available that most of these fragrances present significant hazards to most of us if used appropriately. It is this question of **appropriate use** which is the big stumbling block. While it may be fine to use a tiny volume of synthetic Lily of the Valley in a candle, or soap made by a large commercial company, it may NOT be acceptable for untrained people making home made body care products. People often forget that these are powerful fragrances intended by the manufacturers to be used at a few parts per million. They were never developed for use in body care products at the kind of levels home produce makers sometimes use them. There could also be problems if regularly used in fragrance diffusers such as are often used for essential oils.

So what's wrong with just using essential oils?

One can make lovely natural perfumes just using essential oils and absolutes in alcohol, or in a light fixed oil. Just a good Turkish rose oil diluted in a solvent makes a delightful perfume. Simply adding some good Egyptian jasmin absolute to alcohol also makes a wonderful fragrance. You can blend essential oils, absolutes and resins to create perfumes of yesteryear. However, to do this safely you do need to know a little chemistry and certainly what extracts should never be used on the skin. It is that aspect which is a concern with home producers as they are often lacking in this knowledge.

In addition to the above, it is common knowledge among the essential oil wholesale trade that adulteration of oils is the norm. Some of the adulteration with synthetic chemicals is so well done that only expert analysis will detect it. As I have said in other articles on this site, adulteration is something aromatherapists do not like, but are in most cases completely unaware of. This has been going on since the beginning of aromatherapy as a popular therapy and puts massive question marks over many of the therapeutic claims made. **It is particularly common with absolutes which these people who call themselves 'natural perfumers' seem to love so much. Of course they love them, they smell delightful because they are MANUFACTURED for the REAL perfume trade and are mostly blends of synthetic chemicals with some naturals.**

What about environmental issues of natural extracts? This is where we also get an awful amount of hype from the oil supply trade. There are other articles on this site over these issues. Personally I would rather use a synthetic Sandalwood to make a perfume than use the real thing. The real thing is far more damaging to the environment and ecology than the synthetic in this instance. On the other hand I would not use that extract for any physical therapeutic purposes.

So after all that what is the answer?

It has to be use the correct fragrance material for the correct purpose. If you are using a known synthetic fragrance in a candle or soap, check with the suppliers as to what the recommended volume to use is. If they don't know **EXACTLY** then I suggest you do not buy from them as clearly they are just middlemen without adequate product knowledge. If you want to use that same fragrance in a body care product then you must be ultra careful in how much you use, and with your labelling.

If you want to recreate a natural fragrance blend from old books be very cautious. You must check the safety issues of every ingredient and if possible the combination of ingredients. It's one thing doing it for your own use, but another ballgame if selling it to the public as is common in the USA. In Europe, in theory, all such cosmetic products must be licensed and have a safety evaluation.

Try to purchase your oils from those who are prepared to supply data on their authenticity. Never deal with a supplier that also sells animal extracts, particularly if they are based in Europe or the Far East. **Most countries in the world are miserable at enforcing conservation treaties and trade always comes first, ethics last.**

In order to do all this you cannot just rely on the Internet and newsgroups as a source of information. Many are now doing that, including some teaching the subject.

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