

Natural Perfumery - A Fragrant Evolution For Aromatherapy by Anya McCoy

printable version

Update: The author of this article, Anya McCoy, has begun teaching an online course in natural perfumery that is found [here](#).

Introduction

The term “Natural Perfume” was relatively obscure more than five years ago. Many people, myself included, say we have been natural perfumers for years. But really, we were mostly amateurs, happily mixing simple blends, often cribbed from aromatherapy books, with our own preferences dropped in. Then there was a change in consciousness, and many decided that they really wanted to learn how to blend, and they wanted to define themselves as separate from mainstream perfumery, the stuff of department store choking clouds and allergic reactions. So, the term Natural Perfumery, like a synchronistic “click” in many scent-lovers heads, became the way in which we define what we do. I launched a natural perfume line in South Florida in 1991, the first in the USA.

In the 1800’s, before the discovery of synthetics that would change perfumery forever, natural perfumery did exist; it just wasn’t called that. The perfumers were just perfumers. The 20th Century saw the growth of Mainstream Perfumery and the increasing use of synthetic chemicals replacing the natural aromatics. Now, in the 21st Century, Natural Perfumery is the logical next step along the fragrant path for many aromatherapists. It is the road back through history that we are now finding, and it is wonderful.

Aromatherapists are already used to blending several essential oils to evoke a mood, or bring about a desired physical change, and so this new trend, the natural progression of blending perfumes came into being. Aromatherapists, and others, suffering from chemical overloads, allergies and sensitivity to these synthetics, and perhaps just a gut reaction to the harsh and fake smells of these synthetics, moved towards a return to the perfumery of old, Natural Perfumery.

Natural Perfumery existed for centuries before Gattefosse conceived aromatherapy in the early part of the 20th Century, and now many modern aromatherapists discovering that they want to refine their art and create “real” perfumes, sometimes, but not always, with a healing goal in mind.

They are delving into the world of sensual pleasure and grand experimentation. One roadblock: very few of them have training as a perfumer, a requisite for understanding the complexities of blending the raw materials. One way past that roadblock? Classes, peer groups, and home study.

Some aromatherapy books contain some basic, rather primitive, perfume blending tips. Usually using no more than five or six essential oils, these simple perfumes smelled nice, and performed their aromachology job, but didn't approach mainstream perfumery techniques. Chrissie Wildwood's seminal *Create Your Own Aromatherapy Perfumes: Enchanting Blends for Body and Home* (Piatkus Press, 1995) is now a collector's item, selling for ten times its original price on Internet sites. This is due perhaps because of the recognition that she was the first aromatherapist to publish a comprehensive, industry-based book on blending from an aromatherapists' palette. Still, she limited the choices to essential oils, only. Visit Chrissie's website: <http://chrissie-wildwood.com/>

Aromatherapy eschews the use of aromatic concretes, absolutes, resins and waxes. Aromatherapy is all about essential oils, and only essential oils. That is changing, as the recognition of the fact that if perfume is only to be dabbed on a small area of the skin, not rubbed in a large area, as in a massage, then there is a place for a well-conceived, well-designed perfume that contains absolutes, concretes and other "non-AT" raw materials. Another big boost to Natural Perfumery has been the Internet. There, a novice perfumer in Wisconsin, or Japan, or England can sit at a computer and obtain rare and wonderful essences from every corner of the globe. It seems the time is right, the opportunities are right, and social and spiritual consciousness are aligned to reinvent an old art in a new light. They can sign up for online study courses, and interact with other natural perfumers online.

For this article, the focus will be on the production of liquid or solid perfumes, those fragrant delights that can be sprayed, dabbed, or massaged into the skin. The liquid may be undenatured alcohol, or carrier oil, such as almond, jojoba, and others. The solid perfumes, carried in a small "compact", are typically solidified with beeswax. It's a whole new world opening up for aromatherapists, with a new language, new raw materials, and new skills to be learned.

History of Natural Perfumery

For centuries, long before the beginning of recorded civilization as we know it, people gathered fragrant plants and extracted the scent to add delight, sensuality and sometimes-sacred elements to their life. This was plainly illustrated recently when archaeologists unearthed evidence of one of the oldest perfumeries known to the world. In Cypress, an archaeological dig found the "world's earliest perfumery". The truth of that statement is in question by those who study ancient cultures, but it is true that the discovery is monumental, in that it is one of the largest extant "factories" for extracting fragrant materials and producing scented products. For more details, go to: <http://news.scotsman.com/international.cfm?id=212432005>

Ancient Greece, Egypt, China, India, and the countries on the trade routes – they all had well-developed Natural Perfumery industries. Alchemists, herbalists, ordinary folk and experienced scientists created fragrant oils and unguents for themselves or for sale and trade.

In France, and a few other areas of the world, notably India and the Middle East, there are still perfumers who make fragrances “in the old way”, rejecting the synthetic chemicals so prevalent in mainstream perfumery.

In history, as now, the natural perfumer would extract the fragrant molecules by infusion, tincturing, enfleurage, or distillation. To make an infusion start by placing the fragrant material in oil and either heating the oil or placing the container in the sun, until the oil takes on the fragrance of the source. Tincturing required an alcohol base. The alcohol could be wine, or something stronger, like brandy or vodka. Again, the materials were placed in the alcohol until the liquid became fragrant.

Enfleurage is a method of scent extraction perfected by the French. Trays of animal fat were the receiving media for delicate flowers like jasmine, gardenia and tuberose. Usually, the flowers had to be replaced numerous times before the fat became saturated with the scent. Then, the fat was “washed” with an alcohol to separate the scent from the fat. Distillation, the art of placing the plant material over steam, and separating the “oil” of the plant from the water constituents, was typically done on a large, industrial scale, and, on a smaller scale, some home distillation took place.

Throughout most of Western history, perfumes tended to be “one note”, i.e., the wearer had to choose between rose, jasmine, sandalwood, patchouli, etc. In India, the user could choose from glorious attars, which are hydro distilled aromatics co-distilled with sandalwood or cedar wood (typically). Some attars were just one aromatic combined with the sandalwood (e.g. rose, jasmine), others were a carefully constructed formula of flowers, roots, woods and resins. When the hydro distillation of fragrant materials was done into a dry receptacle, it was called a ruh. For more information on ruhs and attars, see:

http://www.habibintl.com/indian_attars.htm

Another source for information on the fragrant offerings of India is the collection of newsletters of Christopher McMahan on his Website:

<http://whitelotusaromatics.com>

The Psychology and Spirit of Natural Perfumery

Mainstream perfumery – we all know what that is about: attraction, seduction, empowerment and adornment.

Natural Perfumery takes a different approach. Sometimes. Yes, it can be about “aspiration” – to feel better, sexier, prettier, younger, and more elevated psychologically. But the really beautiful element at the core, the heart, of Natural Perfumery is that the perfumer, if they are very sensitive and spiritual, will work with the client to create a scent that addresses the spirit, body and mind.

This is only possible, of course, when the perfumer works on a one-to-one basis. Most perfumers start out with themselves as a client in the training and evolutionary process necessary to get to know the ingredients. The Natural Perfumer can still aspire to heal the end consumer that is unknown, that is, not a personal client, by composing a perfume that contains a theme, a focus, and a real goal.

You can always tell a Natural Perfumer who comes from aromatherapy from one who doesn't – there is a real effort by the aromatherapist to put healing elements into the perfume. They have studied, and understand, the aromachology and spiritual nature of the essential oils. They celebrate more of a palette to play with, and they just take the healing effects to another level with the narcotic effects of tuberose, the grounding effect of ambrette seed, or the sacred solemnity of nagarmotha (a gorgeous incense-y scent often used in Ayurvedic healing.)

Not to say the Natural Perfumer who does not come from an aromatherapy background cannot heal and delight the client. The very act of identifying oneself as a Natural Perfumer indicates the person has turned away from mainstream perfumery, the synthetic chemicals and harshness, and to the true essences. They are on a path of enlightenment of spirit, psyche and body and soul.

They come from varied backgrounds: soaper, esthetician, nature-lover, and lifelong perfume addict. They have a finely attuned nose that can discriminate between true and synthetic essences. They want to create a fragrance of beauty, one that inspires, seduces, delights and yes, sometimes, on a basic level, heals the client.

Thus, many different people, from many different backgrounds gather under the soft, wafting breezes that carry the ribbons of scent, designed the Natural Perfumery way, to a new, eager clientele. Thus the new discipline and art of aromatherapy marries with the ancient discipline and art of perfumery to fashion an evolved perfumer, one who is hopeful to bring a fresh, beautiful, non-toxic scent to life.

The Modern Natural Perfumer - Training to be a Natural Perfumer

The modern mainstream perfumer is a component of an international fragrance industry. There are approximately 400 perfumers employed. Most are male. They have a college degree in science, and have completed a rigorous course in perfumery, training for years as “noses” under industry guidelines. Their education is long, arduous, and very demanding. Some work in the perfume industry, others in the “fragrancing” industry, creating scents for dish soap, laundry detergent and similar products.

The Natural Perfumer, if the Yahoo group Natural Perfumery with 500+ members is any indication, is mostly female, without formal training. Instead, the Natural Perfumer looks to some aromatherapy books, and the sharing of knowledge on the yahoo group as the basics of learning how to blend. They work at creating perfumes; with some branching

out to body care products such as body butters and lotions, candles and associated fragrant creations.

Natural Perfumery can be found at:

<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/NaturalPerfumery/info>

The group has been in existence since June 14, 2002, the “early days” of Natural Perfumery, as defined for this article.

Interest in the subject has grown, and “drydown”, top, middle and base notes, tincturing and blending descriptions piqued interest in the art. The history of the perfumes, the romance of the bottles, their liquid contents a source of pleasure and intrigue, helped fuel the Modern Natural Perfumer in going forward to refine their craft.

Some teachers began to advertise their courses in Natural Perfumery, and more and more, the study of the art and the craft of formulating blends grew. It is an exacting, demanding world. Exact measurements of weights and volumes must be kept. Notes must be meticulous. Disappointment is high, due to inharmonious blends that may be left to sit for months, to see if they improve, or discarded. Costs are high, much higher than in aromatherapy; some absolutes and attars make rose otto’s price seem paltry in comparison. There is the rigorous demand that perfumers must spend part of every day just sniffing and studying the raw ingredients, constantly testing themselves.

In some parts of the world, undenatured alcohol is very hard, if not impossible to obtain, due to government rules. A perfumer restricted in that way may have to consider only making oil-based perfumes, which results in a much different product. Not a bad product, just different, as alcohol allows many ingredients to take on a much more ethereal, diffusive nature.

In the Yahoo group, members share tips and offer guidelines on all aspects of Natural Perfumery. Some members are generous with their hard-earned knowledge and offer formulae on how to blend a lilac accord, an amber accord, or how to properly work with a difficult substance, like guaiacwood. Much of the information shared there cannot be easily found, if at all, in books.

There is a lot of trial and error for the self-trained Natural Perfumer, and this community is probably the only one of its sort in the world for them. Here no question is insignificant. The archives of the group hold Files bursting with knowledge on hydrosols, INCI names, FDA regulations, IFRA guidelines, online sources of classic perfumery books, and, of course, blending tips.

A separate section contains links to suppliers, sources of everything from bottles and pipettes to rare and beautiful attars and absolutes. Safety is as big an issue in Natural Perfumery as it is in aromatherapy, and the latest government guidelines, or author’s findings on the subject can be found in the Files or Links section.

The list of schools teaching the subject is slowly growing, and it is too early to evaluate the quality of breadth and depth of that learning resource. Some Natural Perfumers travel to France, Grasse, in particular, to learn from the mainstream perfumers, and just leave out the synthetics, taking in the information and hands-on experience with the natural ingredients back to their workshops. This hybrid learning experience is rare, and of the 500 members on the group, perhaps less than a dozen have been able to study in Grasse. The rest are self-taught.

Discussion of subjects that impact the Natural Perfumer can be far ranging. Many have stopped using sandalwood, rosewood, spikenard and several other endangered raw materials. The recognition that perfume formulae have to be in compliance with EU and IFRA standards to be sold in Europe is changing the way they conceive and formulate a blend. Many did not realize that use of certain oils, from rose to the citruses, can push a blend into “unsafe” territory regarding either chemical load on the body, or government regulations that oversee such things.

The group exchange can save the perfumer lots of time, money and effort via this information sharing. Creating in a vacuum, such safety and regulatory constraints might not be known; in the group, late-breaking information is immediately shared, and the knowledge base grows.

For government regulations and industry guidelines, <http://ifraorg.org> and <http://www.noharm.org/details.cfm?ID=743&type=document>

The Aromatics – The Reason We Are Natural Perfumers

Lush, Redolent, Sultry, Fresh, Frivolous – we find all of this and more in the Flowers, Woods, Resins, Leaves, Roots, Bulbs and Rhizomes, Seeds, Fruits, Barks, Beeswax, Seaweed, Seashells, Soil and other luscious lovely aromatics.

Now aromatherapists can expand their repertoire to include the concrete and absolute of rose, the absolute of petitgrain and patchouli, the concrete of ylang ylang, the yummy absolute of chocolate. Additionally, the gorgeous base note of beeswax absolute is now available to help “fix” the scent, to make it last longer on the skin. High, middle and base notes are just limited to music anymore, they are the framework that the Natural Perfumer uses to build a fragrance, and part of the new vocabulary and discipline. Typically, a perfumer will begin a blend after defining the theme, or classification, such as Oriental, and choose aromatics that will accomplish that goal. The major “types” of perfume are: Floral, Woody, Green, Foody, Oriental, Chypre, Fougere, Marine, Citrus, Amber and others.

The perfumer’s palette can include upwards of 500 natural raw ingredients. Many modern Natural Perfumers are taking it upon themselves to create their own extracts of raw materials. They do this by infusing (in oil) or tincturing (in high-proof alcohol) beehive scrapings, fruits and other materials not typically processed for perfumery. The

Natural Perfumers love the results of these experiments and are creating very personalized perfumes with them.

What aromatherapist ever thought of using seaweed or burnt-smelling seashells for a scent? Yet seaweed absolute and the essential oil known as choya nakh fulfill this scent palette. Often the strong scents have to be diluted before use, as much as 90%, leaving only 10% of the original essence in the alcohol or oil. Some rare ones like kewda absolute, reveals itself at 1% dilution. It's all a learning curve, and that curve is deliciously fragrant.

Animal-based fixatives such as ambergris, civet, and musk are now outlawed or banned by international agreements, and are no longer readily available for perfumery. Some still use these products, despite ethical and humane reasons to the contrary. The best approach for Natural Perfumers may be full disclosure on their websites and products regarding whether or not their items are "cruelty free". That way the customer may make an informed decision about their purchase." In the world of synthetic perfumery, they have chemicals that "fix" the scent, that is, allow it to last longer on the skin. Many synthetic perfumes do have some natural essences in them, and some, in fact, do contain the animal products. That is why "full disclosure" is very important for the Natural perfumer.

So, by not using the animal product or synthetic fixatives, the Natural Perfumer has to get creative to formulate perfumes that will last, since the nature of the essence is usually to vaporize quickly. That's why they're called volatile oils; they diffuse and evaporate quickly in the presence of heat and oxygen.

Aromatherapists have a head start in blending perfumes that are safe for the consumer. Already aware of many issues such as photosensitization, irritation, sensitizers and potential allergic reactions when using aromatics, they have a handle on many aromatics and their properties. Used to blending using very low percentages of oils to carrier, to avoid causing any of the above-mentioned possibilities, they soon learn that Natural Perfumery allows a much higher percentage of aromatics, depending upon the ultimate goal:

Approximate Percentages of Aromatics to Diluents in Blends

Type	% of aromatics	Balance	Ration of alcohol/water
Perfume	30-50	70	95/5
Eau de Parfum	20-30	85	90/10
Eau de toilette	5-10	90	80/20
Eau de cologne	2-3	95	75/25

How exciting – to break out of the confines of low-diluent blends, one-note blends, into the world of multi-layered, complex formulas. How exciting to have a whole new world of fragrant possibilities open to aromatherapists. And how wonderful that we are using

natural ingredients, trying to reintroduce and reinvent Natural Perfumery for our world, so that we might escape from the harsh synthetic fragrances that counteract aromatherapy.

Where is Natural Perfumery Going From Here?

It is a wondrous and unruly discipline. It is being defined and redefined constantly. Some insist on only organic ingredients. Others have taken a strong stance against using endangered species. All reject denatured alcohols and synthetics. There is a striving to find a marketing niche, and in the meantime, most sales are done locally, and on the Internet, with few being sold in department stores and other outlets for perfumes, like boutiques.

There is no formal or informal organization or guild for Natural Perfumers. Given that it is in its infancy, that is to be expected. Many interact, sometimes on a daily basis with others in the field, via the Internet, telephone, or, if they're lucky in person. It truly is a brand-new world out there for Natural Perfumers.

Seeing the passion and love that the Natural Perfumer brings to the field, it can only be assumed that this field will grow and mature. Natural Perfumery will become what it becomes, as simplistic as that statement is. Check back in five, 10 or 50 years to see how the ingredients blended now, at the beginning of this century, evolve and mature, like a fine perfume, to reveal its hidden beauty and strengths, in the future.

Copyright © 2004 Anya McCoy. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.