

The Reality of Fragrance Oils

The Whole Ingredient List Exposed

I am terribly allergic to fragrance oils so my opinion is admittedly biased against them. But no matter what my opinion is regarding their allergen potential and safety, one simple fact remains undisputed: manufacturers are not required to disclose the ingredients of fragrances oils. Trade secret laws allow the ingredients to be hidden behind closed doors. An average of 30 to 50 ingredients are used to create one fragrance and this number can climb to as high as 200 per fragrance. Many of the undisclosed ingredients would be completely avoided if only consumers knew they were present in a given product. I seriously doubt that a consumer who reads ingredient lists would knowingly buy, make or sell a product with an ingredient list that read: 4-(4-Hydroxyphenyl)-2-butanone, 3-Hydroxy-2-methyl-4-pyrone, 4-Hydroxy-3-methoxybenzaldehyde, 3-Ethoxy-4-hydroxybenzaldehyde, α -Ionone, Methyl sulfide, 2,5-Dimethyl-N-(2-pyrazinyl) pyrrole. (Source: A Consumer's Dictionary of Cosmetic Ingredients, by Ruth Winters) An ingredient list such as this would be a major red flag to an educated consumer who reads and cross checks them for safety. But if you are using raspberry fragrance oil in your product then these ingredients are likely in your product. The ingredients could vary from manufacturer to manufacturer.

The Fragrance Exception

According to the rules set in place by the FDA all ingredients must be listed in order of predominance on a cosmetic ingredient list EXCEPT ingredients added to give a product an odor. Because of this loop hole the word “fragrance” may represent many of hundreds of ingredients in one product. The term “fragrance” is defined by the FDA as “any natural or synthetic substance or substances used solely to impart an odor to a cosmetic product.” If a “fragrance” is added to mask or cover up the odor of other ingredients it is not required to be added to the label. Therefore, a product that contains fragrance chemicals can be labeled “unscented” or “fragrance free”. This means that if an ingredient in a product gives it an undesired scent then the manufacturer can add fragrance oils to mask the smell and never disclose them at all. I had always wondered why I still had allergic reactions, ranging from eczema to asthma, to products bearing the label “unscented” or “fragrance free.”

More to “Fragrance” than Meets the Eye

Even preservatives can be hidden behind the “fragrance” title. A preservative with the trade name Naticide has been given the coveted INCI (The International Nomenclature of Cosmetic Ingredients) name of “fragrance”, hence allowing unscrupulous manufacturers to call their product “preservative free”. How do I know this? Because a sales representative called me to sell us what he termed “the greatest new preservative that wouldn’t have to be claimed or disclosed on an ingredient list”. I asked for a full ingredient list and was denied because with the “fragrance” INCI name it is granted the trade secret protection. I asked the sales person to have someone from the lab call me so I could ask technical questions and clarify the safety of the preservative. Believe it or not, no one called me back. Any host of undesirable preservatives could be hidden within this preservative system. They could be good, bad or ugly but with the INCI name

of “fragrance” we will never know. One company calls Naticide “manuka oil” in their ingredient list, but I have a bottle of Naticide sitting right here on my desk and it is undoubtedly not manuka oil as it does not remotely smell or feel the same as manuka oil. According to the Naticide manufacturer: the trade name is “Naticide”, the type of ingredient is a “preservative”, the functionality is “preservative, broad spectrum (gram+/-, yeast, fungi), ideal for preservative free formulations”, and its INCI name is parfum a.k.a. fragrance. How can an ingredient be called a preservative, used as a preservative, with the functionality of a preservative and yet be marketed as ideal for preservative free formulations?

Is it a Fragrance Oil Masquerading as an Essential Oil?

Another commonly misrepresented ingredient in the aroma category of the cosmetic industry occurs in the blurred line between essential oils and fragrance oils. All too often manufacturers and consumers of cosmetics are being tricked into believing that they are using pure essential oils, when in fact they are being sold adulterated goods.

Contaminated essential oils are widespread in the market place as a result of a blurred line between what is technically allowed and what is actually true. It is a common held belief that if the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) and CTFA (Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Fragrance Association) allow the ingredients of any fragrance component to all fall under the heading “parfum” or “fragrance” then there is no reason to inform the consumer. By law, even when a label says “essential oils” or a product is sold as an “essential oil” it is not a guarantee that the product does not contain fragrance oils. The practice is perfectly legal and runs rampant in our industry. In fact you can claim that you use “essential oils” even if you use fragrance oils, reconstitutes, adulterated oils, perfume compounds, aromas, synthetic fragrance ingredients or diluted essential oils. It is legal to claim that a product only uses essential oils, when in fact there are added synthetics in the product. The practice of using fragrance oils and labeling them essential oils is even more common in blends that are being sold as essential oil blends.

An Educated Nose

Truly the only safe guards are an educated nose, asking a lot of questions and knowing exactly what plants do produce essential oils and from what part of the plant. For instance, you can get an essential oil out of the leaves of a strawberry plant, but it won't smell like strawberry at all. It would smell herbaceous and green and not sweet and fruity. If you are being sold “strawberry essential oil” ask questions, ask for the botanical name of each ingredient and the country of origin. The only fruits that produce an essential oil that smells like the fruit itself are citrus fruits. Some plants produce a variety of essential oils from different parts of the plant. For instance the citrus family produces: neroli (*Citrus aurantium*) from orange blossoms, sweet orange (*Citrus sinensis*) from the zest, and petitgrain (*Citrus aurantium*) from the leaves. Although all of these essential oils come from the same plant family, only one of them smells like an orange. The best way to know the difference, so that even a poorly labeled product will not sneak past you, is to educate your nose by smelling essential oils next to fragrance oils. Once you smell the difference it is unlikely that you will ever be misled again. Nothing man made smells as pure and natural as the essential oil or distillate water that comes from true plant material.

Synthetic fragrances are cheaper and always smell consistent because they are lab created. Nature does not always produce the same exact scent each and every harvest of plant material. Essential oils can vary due to environmental differences from year to year and due to varying countries of origin for plant material. Lab created fragrances or “essential oils” misbranded as pure unadulterated plant essences are often: made from petroleum by-products, contain known carcinogens, phthalates (see Phthalates Explained at Essential U) and are the most common cause of cosmetic related allergic reactions according to many reputable allergy specialist. Fragrance oils are known to contain many of the same toxins and carcinogens that are in cigarette smoke. There are said to be anywhere from 2000 to 5000 raw fragrance components used to formulate fragrance oils. I didn’t count the list but feel free to go to the site yourself to see a full list of fragrance raw ingredients, and decide for yourself what is acceptable to you. You will find a combination of natural and purely synthetic ingredients.

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/sccp/documents/out131_en.pdf

No Such Thing as Phantom Ingredients

When I challenge manufacturers to disclose ingredients I receive comments like this one: “disclosure of each trivial amount of processing aid will confuse consumers as to the actual meaningful ingredients present in the product.” Other suppliers, manufacturers and companies believe that we should not disclose “phantom ingredients” because they would only confuse the consumer. I guess they believe they should protect us from knowledge that might make us ask questions.

Do We Have a Right to Know?

No matter which side of this debate is right or wrong, the issue doesn’t relate to the safety of the ingredients that are used to compose fragrance oils. The issue is that consumers are unable to make informed decisions for themselves about the use of undisclosed ingredients for their product line or personal use. A consumer who desires to not be exposed to secret ingredients has only one choice: to avoid fragrance oils altogether. This, of course, presents the problem that scents are airborne, which means we are exposed all day everyday to them whether we personally use them or not. But that is another issue altogether. Of course, fragrance companies will never disclose their ingredients because by law they are allowed to claim intellectual knowledge which means that their blends will remain trade secrets.

Ask Questions

I am not setting out to change the world, but to inform consumers of what they don’t know and cause people to ask questions. If a company selling a product that they claim is an essential oil cannot product a MSDS (Material Safety Data Sheet), C of A (Certificate of Analysis) and tell you the botanical name and country of origin, you should look elsewhere. You cannot rely solely on labels, websites or a claim that something is pure and unadulterated. Train your nose, ask questions and demand answers.

The Right to Know

Absolutely every opinion can be backed up by real facts and “facts”. The simple truth is that there is research out there to back up any stance you want to take on any given subject. It is important as consumers that we research the information that makes the most sense to us. I can find an argument online or in a chat room to back up or discredit any opinion I hold. There is no substance on earth that is non-sensitizing, in all circumstances, to all people. People who are allergic to peanuts cannot honestly petition for peanuts to be banned worldwide. But they do have the right to have it disclosed to them if a product they consume, or use, contains, or has been processed, near peanuts. I am not proposing in any way that we ban all fragrance oils, I simply believe that we have a right to know when we are being sold fragrance oils and what is in them.