



SNOW LOTUS

Aromatherapy, Education, Inspiration

The Conifer Oils

The Gift of Ancient Times

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The Conifer Family

A large percentage of the earth's ancient forests are made up of coniferous trees, i.e., evergreen trees in the temperate zone. Conifers bear cones and needles all year round, instead of flat leaves that come and go with the seasons. The coniferous forests are as important to the planet's overall living ecology as the tropical rainforests, only they've received far less attention. In addition, not that many essential oils are extracted from tree parts, when you consider the number of flower and herb oils distilled worldwide-perhaps less than 20%. Of that percentage, more than 60% of the tree-derived oils are extracted from deciduous green leaves and flowers. These include the Melaleucas, such as *M. alternifolia* (Tea tree), *M. quinquenervia* (Niaouli), *M. cajepatii* (Cajeput) and the related *Leptospermums*, Manuka and Kanuka, the Eucalyptuses, such as *E. radiata*, *E. globulus*, *E. polybractea*, etc., and the *Cinnamomums*, such as the *C. cassia* (cassia leaf oil), *C. glaucescens* (Sughanda), *C. camphora* (Ravensara) and *C. verum* (cinnamon leaf oil). Only the remaining 40% of all tree oils comprise the conifer oils.

Being in the temperate zone, coniferous trees and shrubs have a special significance for those of us living in the countries of the North. Perhaps just because they're so much part of our environment, we've neglected them. And yet we derive our most basic sustenance-on every level-from everything that's local to us. When winter is in process in the temperate climes, the tall, straight conifer trees once again reveal themselves across the land. Stalwart, proud, enduring. In cold, wind and snow, they're real survivors. Let's reconsider the coniferous sources of our oils.

The Conifer Oils

Currently the most popular essential oils among the conifers are perhaps Siberian fir, Juniper berry and Atlas cedarwood. These three oils are just the tip of an iceberg of conifer oils, all of which deserve exploration. However, even these three basic oils sadly suffer from misunderstanding and misrepresentation throughout the various industries that produce, sell and process them-mainly the perfumery and flavoring companies. For instance, Siberian fir oil derived from *Abies sibirica* in these industries is often known as "Siberian pine oil." Sound familiar? Someone at some point must have decided that "fir" just doesn't have the same appeal as "pine". "Siberian pine" comes from commercial sources that emphatically do not share the same values as aromatherapy, with emphasis on therapy-the values of only using unaltered and genuine oils. Juniper oil is divided into the berry oil and the twig oil, and the two are quite different in both aroma and therapeutic effect. Many companies do not distinguish between them, or unknowingly offer the berry oil that has been stretched right at the production source with the twig oil.

Conifer Oil Taxonomy

The common names of trees are also either mystifying or confusing. Atlas cedarwood refers to its origin in the Atlas mountains in Morocco, while Virginia cedarwood oil actually comes from a type of juniper tree (see the sidebar glossary), not a true cedar of the genus *Cedrus*. Likewise, the oil sometimes confusingly offered as Cedar leaf oil is normally (and should always be) known as Thuja oil because it comes from *Thuja occidentalis*, not from a species of cedar or *Cedrus*. Footnote: It is also one of the most toxic oils currently available and should not be used in any way by anyone under 12, pregnant or nursing. It certainly pays to find out as much as possible not only about the quality of your oils, but also about their actual botanical and geographical sources-regardless of their name as listed in catalogues.

The main types of conifer oils produced today, arranged for simplicity's sake according to their botanical classification, is shown in the sidebar below.

The Producers

The main locales producing conifer oils are Canada, France, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Siberia and the Russian Far East. As with most other essential oils, the bulk of these are processed for use in the food and product flavoring industries, while only a small percentage of the original oils are actually used by "aromatherapy wholesalers." Often (but not always), those oils offered for use in aromatherapy come from smaller producers, sometimes coops, for example. These producers usually take pride in creating a high quality product through their craftsmanship in traditional steam distillation. Often the tree needles are also sustainably wild-gathered or the trees replanted instead of simply being stripped or razed. In general, the smaller the producer, the more likely ecological correctness will be an important factor in the oils' production. This is another important reason for supporting the small producers-whatever the short-term cost may be-over the larger scale, more industrial types of operations.

Fragrance Categories

From the therapeutic standpoint, all the conifer oils have therapeutic value when used in an appropriate delivery form. However, on the olfactory level, there are certain ones that we find more acceptable; and this in itself is an important precondition for successful aromatherapy. For instance, it is my experience that the fir oils are ahead of the others in terms of client acceptance. Most people, on the whole, don't perceive the pines or junipers to be as "nice" as the firs because of their more resinous base note-despite the initially alluring name "pine." The firs, on the other hand, typify that "fresh-conifer" scent we associate with evergreen forests, Christmas trees, and so on. It's this fragrance note that's been commercially represented and sold as "pine" since who knows how long.

Can we somehow correlate the various fragrances of these conifers with their botanical grouping? This is very difficult. Just as the common names we use for oils disregard current botanical classifications, so natural plant fragrances do the same. The scents of conifers run right across botanical divisions, creating totally new categories.

The firs, spruces and pines essentially possess fresh-herbaceous-coniferous fragrance notes, while all other conifers possess a variety of different notes. These fresh-herbaceous notes uplift, stimulate and invigorate. Working through the

nervous and endocrine system (including the brain) by helping release stimulating hormones and neurotransmitters (e.g. noradrenalin, dopa-mine and vasopressin), they can revive one's energies, promoting strength, motivation, warmth and stamina. At the same time they tend to refresh, clarify and open up space (in every sense of the word). This is why these conifers are so valuable in wintertime, which makes extra demands on our reserves of energy, endurance and warmth. In the often emotionally draining or confusing holiday times of the winter season, for instance, the conifer oils can also help pull us through. Like the lifelong ties of blood and soul family, they are always there when we need them: solid, steadfast, dependable.

Used in baths, misters and diffusers throughout the cold, damp and sometimes SAD months, these fresh-herbaceous conifers hardly ever miss the mark (SAD = seasonal affective disorder; main symptom depression). On long drives they can be as much a blessing as Lime or May chang might be in a traffic jam or gridlock. Forget your Lemon-Basil-Rosemary mister for those long road trips or work projects, regardless of the season. Grand fir, Black spruce or Scotch pine (or preferably all three!) will keep you going, and going, and going ... in an unforgettable conifer rush of endurance. These are the kinds of oils that give new meaning to the term "rush hour." Their staunch energy gives us the courage and stamina to complete the most daunting of projects.

Then again, there's great aromatic variety in those conifer oils-as much as among the citrus oils, for example. Hemlock spruce, Black spruce and Douglas fir are more pungent-cool than the others, and provide more mental energy, clarity and focus.

Black spruce, Scotch pine and Larch have a deeper, woody-balsamic basenote, with more grounding and centering results. They can help you focus on what's going on from a grounded perspective, and on getting jobs done in the real world.

Grand fir, Silver fir, Douglas fir, Hemlock spruce and Sitka spruce have that mouth-tingling fresh-lemony note that can literally whet your appetite, as well as create more space and clarity in case of mental confusion, emotional bogginess or wooziness, and miscellaneous other wintertime reality zones.

A few other evergreens, like Siberian fir and White spruce have a delicious salty undertow that drifts you away to the open sea, to the tang of seaweed and the fluid freedom of your fantasies ... Who needs Jasmine or Ylang ylang? A more temperate combination of Silver fir and Black spruce with a few drops of Lavender to round of the sharp edges will initiate some truly hiemal magick-at any time of the year.

That leaves the deeper, somewhat darker and more mysterious world of the cedarwoods left to explore. From the fragrance point of view, the cedars lie at the opposite end of the spectrum: woody, somewhat muffled earthy notes predominate here, along with a fluid, smooth sweetness.

The two main true cedarwoods seen today are the Atlas and the Himalaya cedarwood oils. Their effect is mainly centering, grounding and strengthening, with a strange relaxing effect. They are classic sweet-wood scents that belong to the same realm as Myrrh, Patchouli and Virginia cedarwood. Rather than elevate and stimulate one's energies like the fresh-herbaceous conifers, the cedarwoods instead descend and calm them. They are there when our world seems to amount to just one big overwhelming experience, or when our mind is exploding with a million ideas, with little chance of our being able to grab on to any one and make it real. Their centering and balancing effect also extends to the emotions, where they can help dissolve acute emotions, as well as reinforce emotional boundaries. Clearly, it's no accident that the sweet-wood oils, in the form of incense, have been used for meditation and devotional practices for thousands of years. When carefully blended (e.g. with resin oils like Frankincense and Myrrh), their essential oils can still be used as such today.

Major Conifer Essential Oils Produced Today

- the genus *Abies*, the firs:
 - Abies alba, Silver fir oil
 - Abies balsamea, Balsam fir oil
 - Abies grandis, Grand fir oil
 - Abies sibirica, Siberian fir oil
- the genus *Picea*, the spruces:
 - Picea mariana, Black spruce oil

- Picea sitka, Sitka spruce oil
- Picea glauca, White spruce oil
- the genus Pseudotsuga:
 - Pseudotsuga douglasii, Douglas fir oil
- the genus Tsuga, the hemlocks:
 - Tsuga canadensis, Hemlock spruce oil
- the genus Pinus, the pines:
 - Pinus sylvestris, Scots pine oil
 - Pinus pinaster, Sea pine oil
 - Pinus cembra, Stone pine oil
 - Pinus mugo, Dwarf pine oil
 - Pinus nigra, Black pine oil
 - Pinus resinosa, Red (Norway) pine oil
- the genus Juniperus, the junipers:
 - Juniperus communis, Juniper berry and twig oils
 - Juniperus virginiana, Virginia cedarwood oil
 - Juniperus mexicana, Texas cedarwood oil
 - Juniperus sabina, Sabine oil
- the genus Cedrus, the cedarwoods:
 - Cedrus atlantica, Atlas cedarwood oil
 - Cedrus deodora, Himalaya cedarwood oil
- the genus Cupressus:
 - Cupressus sempervirens, Cypress oil
- the genus Larix:
 - Larix decidua, Larch oil
- the genus Thuja:
 - Thuja occidentalis, Thuja oil or Northern white cedar oil