# DERMASCOPE

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# A Passion for Lavender

by Michele Phelan

My interest and passion for aromatherapy goes as far as I can remember. I fondly recall one summer my family and I spent in Italy when I was a child. The beautiful countryside, delicious cuisine, and fabulous weather were only secondary compared to the fresh scent of lavender that lingered in the air long into the evening. The fields of lavender were not just extraordinarily beautiful, but seemed to have the uncanny ability to lift my spirits and stimulate my senses. It was not until some years later when I began to study the art and science behind aromatherapy that I realized the scent of pure lavender flowers were the essential oils contained within the petals and that these oils had tremendous healing powers.

Although often cultivated for perfumery, lavender is a member of the aromatherapy family which is a respected branch of complimentary medicine. Although there are some 30 species of lavender, the most common are: true lavender, spike lavender, lavandin, and maritime lavender. True lavender (or lavendula augustifolia, its botanical name) is the most well known of all lavender species and is a native of the Mediterranean region. The main producers are Bulgaria and France. Smaller producers include Australia, Argentina, England, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Algria, India, and Russia. Lavendula has an herbaceous frangrance with somewhat of a woody undertone. It is considered yang with slight yin tendencies both in its properties and scent. Yin and yang are considered to be the balance of all things and in eastern medicine forms the basis for many treatments. Yin is considered feminine, quiet, dark, and passive, while yang is considered masculine, light, hot, and active. Although there is a greater predominance of either one or the other, all things in the universe contain both yin and yang. The symbol for yin and yang are opposite colors of equal proportion on separate halves of a circle with a dot of the other color on the other half.

Lavendula is unique in its capabilities as it heals in multiple ways. If a patient has the propensity to be depressed or melancholy, the strong yang qualities of lavender can help inspire feelings of well being. If the patient has nervous energy, the yin properties can comfort and calm.

In recent years, the chemical constituents and healing properties of lavendula have been strictly evaluated by chemists using testing known as gas chromatography and the following components and its properties were discovered:

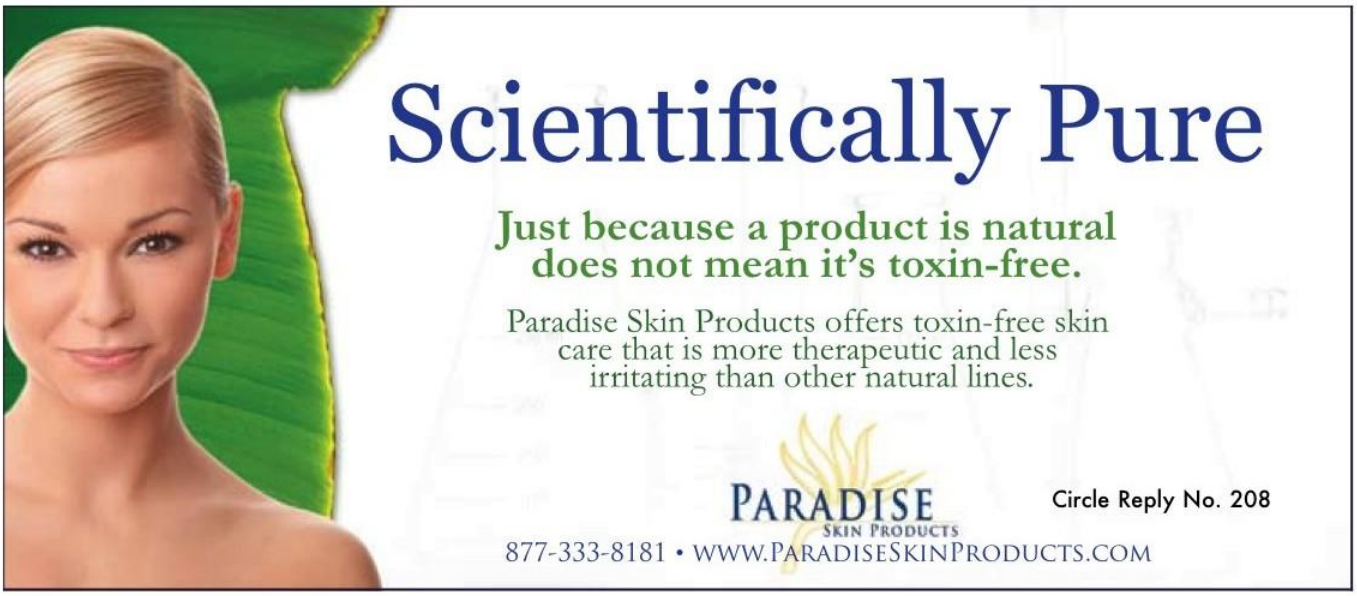
- Pinene (.02 to .67 percent), antiseptic properties
- Limonene (.02 to .68 percent), antimicrobial and toning properties
- Cineole (.01 to .21 percent), healing and decongestant properties
- Camphor (.54 to .89 percent), antibacterial properties
- Octanone (1.75 to 3.04 percent), healing and antiseptic properties
- Linalool (29.35 to 41.62 percent), healing and regenerative properties
- Linaly acetate (46.71 to 53.80 percent), healing and calming properties
- Terpinen (.03 to 4.16 percent), antiseptic properties
- Lavendulyl acetate (.27 to 4.24 percent), calming and soothing effects

The healing effects of lavendula oil extends much further than just its ability to heal on a physical level; it can heal on a mental level too. The limbic system is the part of the brain associated with smell and memory. To aromatherapists it is also known as the olfactory brain meaning smell brain, as well as the old brain or prehistoric brain because it has to do with animal instinct rather than rational behavior. Even though lavendula has always been considered the universal essential and considered safe to apply to the body or inhale, it is important to make sure your clients enjoy the scent prior to its use. Lavendula as well as other essential oils has an amazing effect on the brain's chemistry, according to many therapists who study aromatherapy.

The pathway by which this occurs is as follows:

- Inhalation of lavendula essential oil molecule takes place.
- The fragrance molecule is absorbed into the olfactory epithelium and registered by the olfactory nerve.
- This information is sent to the neocortical part of the brain that processes smell and to the hypothalamic region simultaneously, which regulates hormone control.
- Neurotransmitters are released by the brain which produces a calming and balancing effect to the many organs of the body.
- The components of the essential oil are excreted by the body via the kidneys or exhaled through the lungs.

Lavendula oil is extracted from freshly cut flower tops of the plant by steam distillation. In physics all matter is based on the principal that it can exist in three forms: solid, liquid, and vapor, when the temperature or pressure is conducive. Once placed in the still, the steam (vapor) lifts the volatile oil up and away from the plant material. This transforms from a liquid state to a vapor state then back into a liquid state. The oils will then travel down a tube and into water at the end of the still. Here the precious essential oils are quickly removed, placed in a receptacle, and subsequently bottled. Some of the essential oils, due to their heavier molecular weight, are left behind in the water of the still and are often used to make hydrosols. Hydrosols

are lavender water, a by-product of steam distillation.

As with any treatment, whether it is natural or synthetic, there are always individuals who may be allergic or contraindicated. Therefore, this information should be ascertained prior to starting any treatment with lavender oil. The oil should not be applied neat (undiluted) to the skin. Instead it should be added to a base such as unsaturated fatty oil or distilled water first, and it should not be applied too close to the eyes. Obviously, lavendula is not meant to take the place of any medication that is prescribed by a doctor and if a client had a negative or allergic reaction to it in the past, it should not be used again.

Lavendula, as with many other essential oils, has been used consistently throughout time but fell out of favor during the 20th century due to the discovery and use of penicillin. With more and more research being done in the pharmacology and pharmacokinetics of essential oils, it is being more readily accepted into mainstream therapies, and the understanding of their efficacy and the credibility of herbal medicine is growing rapidly. No matter how high tech our society has become, we are still not able to adequately reproduce this liquid gem that only Mother Nature's magic can create.

Today many individuals who wish to live a "cleaner, healthier lifestyle" tend to look for guidance from therapists who practice a more natural way of healing.

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*Michele Phelan has been a licensed, practicing aesthetician for over 20 years. She has taught State Board, CIDESCO, and post-graduate aesthetics. She has extensive knowledge of dermatological topics, cosmetic chemistry, electrical modalities, and physiology/anatomy. Phelan is an International CIDESCO diplomat, and a registered aromatherapist. Her articles have been featured in many industry publications. She has been interviewed by CBS for her extensive knowledge of eye lash extensions. She is the co-owner of Concepts Skin Care Clinic in San Francisco, Calif. and the founder and president of Concepts Institute of Advanced Esthetics located in South San Francisco, Calif. Concepts Institute is an approved NCEA training facility. For more information, please visit www.conceptsinstitute.com.*

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