

Ahimsa Information Sheet

Organic Essential Oils

In response to repeated requests from many customers we have resumed our practice of offering 'Ahimsa Information Sheets'. Their function is to provide information and stimulate debate on matters of interest and importance to essential oil users.

We believe that by providing *information and education* we enable our customers to make wise decisions and avoid costly mistakes. The topic of this information sheet is 'organic oils': the new high profile area within the essential oil industry. We will discuss the facts and, some of the many and varied myths which abound in relation to the word '*organic*'.

Organic Oils: Facts v Fiction

At Ahimsa we are totally committed to the concept of organic agriculture and, on a personal basis, have consumed only organic foods for over 20 years; subject to the limitations of availability. However, the application of the organic model to essential oils is comparatively new, leading to much confusion and sometimes misrepresentation. We will clarify this situation by addressing some of the most frequently asked questions.

At Ahimsa we offer a wide range of organic essential oils; double certified by the world's most respected certification bodies. These are not included in our standard catalogue but, prices can be supplied on request.

Q. What is an organic essential oil?

Quite simply **the term organic defines a method of producing the plant material** from which the essential oil is to be extracted i.e. it must have been produced without the use of synthetic herbicides and pesticides.

Most importantly, that is all it tells us.

With respect to non-organically produced essential oils; it is true that *some* residues *may* be found in *some* essential oils. There is much research demonstrating that, it is uncommon for residues to be carried across into well-produced essential oils. This is particularly true for premium quality oils, where great attention is paid to both the growing and production régimes.

Pesticide residues are generally encountered in cheap oils, originating from sources where expertise is poor and regulations are not enforced.

As with all other quality issues involved in sourcing essentials oils, it is a matter of knowing the source, the producer and the regulatory bodies in question before any assessment can be made as to quality.

Q. Is an organic essential oil of a higher quality than a non-organic essential oil?

Not necessarily: *Quality is an entirely different question.*

This may seem a strange answer but, the term 'organic' defines a *production method not quality!*

Not all organic oils are of a high quality and some are extremely poor.

In order to produce a high quality oil many factors have to be present, of which the following are just a few:

- Climatic conditions must be ideal for the crop being produced.
- Best practice horticultural/agricultural methods must be employed.
- A high level of crop/production knowledge must be present.
- Expert distillation management and processing must be employed.
- Optimum storage procedures must be followed.

***The concept of producing a cheap, premium quality organic oil is an oxymoron and exists only in the realms of wishful thinking!**

***The major factor inhibiting the production of a quality oil is - Cost-cutting!**

***Where the focus is on producing an oil as cheaply as possible – the result is invariably a poor quality oil.**

Q. How can I be sure an essential oil is genuinely organic?

This is the really difficult question; one which has no single answer and there are several issues to be considered.

For example:

***Does organic certification guarantee authenticity?**

Unfortunately, **No.**

For example; certification tells you only that a *particular* oil was certified as organic however, there is nothing to link that particular oil to a *specific* certificate.

There is no analytical technique capable of identifying 'organic-ness' and so preventing substitution; once a genuine certificate has been obtained it can be used to misrepresent non-organic oils; a practice which is extremely common and is exceptionally difficult for reputable certification authorities to police & eradicate.

It might be possible for analysis to detect *some* pesticide residues but this is by no means certain, or even probable. Furthermore, meaningful analysis is very expensive and is therefore, in reality, not a viable option for consumers.

Hence, it is a simple matter for a reseller to buy a small quantity of a genuine certified organic essential oil and then, apply the certificate accompanying it to any cheap non-organic oil. What is more, *it is being done all the time.*

***Does organic certification prevent ‘adulteration’ ‘processing’ or ‘adjustment’ of an essential oil?**

Unfortunately **No**.

As long as the processing does not introduce non-organic material it is entirely permissible. Adulterants may subsequently be added as long as they too are organic e.g. organic palmarosa or organic geranium can be added to organic rose otto: *it would still technically be organic but, it wouldn't be rose oil!*

***Are organic oils more expensive?**

Almost invariably, **Yes**.

Organic essential oils are more expensive if we assess oils of comparable quality; and this is for many reasons.

- There are additional costs involved in organic certification.
- The economies of scale inherent in large-scale commercial production are not available to small-scale organic growers.
- Authentic organic oils require a totally separate distillation, handling and packaging plant to avoid contamination with non-organic material: this is a huge additional expense.

In general, one should expect an authentic organic essential oil to be in the region of 3-4 times the price of its non-organic counterpart. If the price seems too good to be true, it probably is!

Sometimes anomalies do occur but it must be remembered that these are the *exception rather than the rule*. For example, in recent years some excellent organic tea-tree oil has been available at uneconomically low prices. This has been the direct result of a massive over-supply of oil and demand not meeting expectations. This situation will ultimately be redressed.

A few low-volume, wild-harvested, Australian oils such as some specialist eucalypts are available at a comparatively economical price.

Because they are wild harvested production has always been ‘organic’.

Because they are produced by, exclusively, single-species producers there are no additional distillation costs hence the compliance costs involved with organic certification are not significant.

***Can continuity of supply be guaranteed for organic oils?**

Quite simply, **No**.

Because the total amount of organically produced oil is miniscule, when compared with the overall market, there will inevitably be times when certain oils are unavailable. This is particularly pertinent to the rarer, low-volume, specialist oils where the failure of a single producer's crop can lead to an oil being unavailable. For this reason alone most volume manufacturers of consumer products are reluctant to commit to genuine organic oils.

***Is there parity between all certification bodies?**

Unfortunately, **No**.

There is a wide degree of variance; we have seen many examples of certification which are wholly unacceptable and completely meaningless.

***Are all organic certificates authentic?**

Again, unfortunately, **No**. We have seen many certificates in the marketplace which are regarded as wholly unacceptable by any reputable certification body.

The word *organic* has become the foremost *marketing-tool* at the present time and all too often it is just that: a figment of the imagination with no basis in reality.

Q. Is it possible to have an organic ‘absolute’?

Absolutely not – here we encounter yet another oxymoron!

The extraction process for absolutes – *which involves the use of solvents* - by definition renders it impossible to produce an organic ‘absolute’.

The inclusion of ‘organic absolutes’ in any product range indicates either: technical incompetence or, an intention to deceive.

Consequently, beware of anyone offering you organic absolutes!

Q. How can I be sure I am buying genuine organic essential oils?

Do not allow yourself to be misled: There is no form of quantitative analysis that can guarantee an oil is truly organic. There is no unqualified proof that any specific certification belongs to the oil you are being offered.

However, there are things you can do to safeguard your investment;

- *First and foremost – ask searching questions and, assess whether the answers you receive really make sense. If a supplier cannot provide you with sustainable answers; how can they vouch for the authenticity of their products?*
- *Buy from a supplier whose reputation you can trust.*
- *Consider whether the oil is priced realistically, is it too cheap for an authentic organic oil? Remember one or two anomalies arising out of specific circumstances e.g. tea-tree are acceptable but, across a range, organic oils will inevitably be significantly more expensive than their non-organic counterparts.*
- *Consider the certifying body; there exists a wide variation in standards.*
- *Finally, use your own judgement and common sense: they are your best safeguards.*