

Essential Oils: Are They Snake Oil or the Real Deal?

Like a potent puff of patchouli, essential oils have permeated popular culture. Once relegated to the “hippie” aisle at the grocery store, these aromatic plant distillations have become mainstream — and big business. Most estimates put the 2025 global market somewhere between \$11 billion and \$28 billion, depending on the research firm, and every major forecast has it still growing. If you’ve noticed an uptick in your Facebook friends selling essential oils, you’re not alone.

But the backlash was inevitable. For every “essential oils calmed my frightened dog” testimonial, there’s an “essential oils kill cats” admonishment — and an “it’s all a multi-level marketing scam” warning lurking around the internet’s corner. So where does the truth lie? Are essential oils true healers or just today’s snake oils?

A brief essential history

Essential oils are anything but new. Frankincense and myrrh were among the gifts of the three wise men (Matthew 2:11), and author Sandra Kynes traces European distilling of lavender, rosemary, and sage to the mid-sixteenth century. Many credit Frenchman René-Maurice Gattefossé, who studied their healing properties in the early twentieth century, with coining the term “aromatherapy.”

Essential power of aroma

Some of us have simmered cinnamon sticks and orange peel on the stove as buyers toured our home, and never thought of it as aromatherapy. We just knew the aroma made us feel good. But how does it make our pets feel? Pet care professionals know that not everything we enjoy is safe for animals. Peanut butter can be a special pup treat; peanut butter and chocolate could be a trip to the vet. For pets, are essential oils a spoonful of peanut butter or a peanut butter and chocolate candy bar?

Essential education

In September, we asked IBPSA members how they use essential oils — nearly a decade after our first survey. As in 2017, about two-thirds of respondents use them. The primary reason given was to calm pets; with odor control and antibacterial properties cited as secondary reasons.

Those who named a source cited Plant Therapy, AnimalEO, and a local health food store — there was no mention of doTERRA or Young Living, which turned up in 2017. Education was mostly self-directed: only one respondent has completed a formal certification (two more plan to), and independent research was the most common source of training. Among those who don’t use essential oils, reasons included lack of training, safety concerns, cost, client preference, and doubts about the benefit.

Essential knowledge

In 2015, Dr. Nancy Brandt, DVM, founded the Veterinary Medical Aromatherapy Association (VMAA) to set protocols and standards for aromatherapy in animals and to educate the public and veterinarians. She remains its leading voice and an active holistic veterinarian in Las Vegas, now with more than 30 years of experience. For Dr. Brandt, essential oils offer psycho-emotional benefits (like calming) but also antimicrobial and antiviral ones.

Smelling is speed reading for dogs. As Dr. Brandt explains, “animals create meaning in the world with smell.” With senses of smell many thousands of times greater than ours, “smelling is speed reading for dogs.” (Think of fall: pumpkin spice? A premium-priced latte? Happy smells.) An amount that’s right for us can be far too much for

animals: a cat rubbing against a rose plant gets one whiff, and that's enough, while a drop of concentrated rose oil is dramatically more intense.

It's not just the oil, it's the technique. Dr. Brandt says the studies repeatedly cited for negative results tend to overgeneralize and miss how oils should actually be used. Just as some drugs can't be used with cats because their waste-management systems differ, not every oil in some standard amount should be used. Her rules: less is more, and "when in doubt, dilute." The key is education.

If the brand you're interested in offers training, take them up on it. The VMAA also offers training courses and certification (use that in your marketing), RACE-approved for CE credit for veterinarians and vet techs. Details at vmaa.vet.

Not all oils are created equal

Dr. Brandt has a preferred brand but keeps VMAA's education non-denominational, so she doesn't name it. Her guidance instead: there are no certification bodies for essential oils in the U.S., so make sure your supplier was involved every step of the way, from seed to harvest to distilling to bottling, and consider whether the plants were organically raised. A caution since 2017: "therapeutic grade" is an unregulated term — no government body grades or certifies essential oils that way — so it can't stand in for knowing your supplier.

Sonya Wilson of Southpaws Playschool in Austin, Texas, agrees. "Choose a brand wisely," she says; her go-to brand was picked by an employee with a chemistry degree. Her other rule: "Avoid MLMs."

Also, the fragrance you smell from an essential oil is not the "fragrance" listed on the back of shampoos, detergents, dryer sheets, and cleaning supplies. That single word can represent thousands of synthetic, often petrochemical-based chemicals, and the FDA's "fragrance loophole" exempts companies from listing them. A 2022 federal law (MoCRA) told the FDA to require disclosure of fragrance allergens on labels, but at last check the agency had not yet published even a proposed rule, well past its 2024 deadline. As demand for essential oils grows, expect cheaper synthetic substitutes, too. Read the label. And if you're starting out, Dr. Brandt recommends cleaning your facility thoroughly and going chemical-free first, since essential oils can combine with petrochemicals to cause adverse reactions.

The smell of money

Finally, are there any real business benefits to using essential oils in a pet care business? Our survey says: it depends. A majority of respondents using them saw no noticeable business impact, and only one reported negative client feedback. But for Sonya Wilson, who has used essential oils at Southpaws for five-plus years, the payoff is concrete: calmer pets mean fewer injuries from upset pets and "fewer dismissals from daycare due to behavior issues." Her top tip: "Always make sure that the pets have a way to remove themselves from the vicinity of the scent."

Dr. Brandt's own practice uses essential oils to create a positive experience the moment pet and owner walk in the door, and she says it's one of the most complimented aspects of her practice because it "doesn't smell like other vets." Being educated about essential oils is also a marketing angle that sets your business apart.

She also suggests a boarding-facility "welcome package": include a small sample of the oil you use with new-client paperwork and have the client use it at home with their pet during snuggle time. Then, when those speed-reading pets walk into your facility, they "read" happy, snuggly times.

Are essential oils essential to running your business? Maybe not. Respondents were split on whether they move the needle, but for those who find the right fit, like Sonya, they're a real differentiator. Just take a sniff of that pumpkin spice latte you paid a pretty penny for and think about it.