

Make your own perfumes

Are you searching for an elusive, exclusive scent that's yours alone? Make it yourself by blending various floral or herbal tinctures you make yourself.

Tincturing is one of the easiest ways to extract the scented essence of herbs and flowers. And it's simple enough to do in your home, and requires no special equipment. A few plastic soda bottles, some coffee filters and some dried herbs, plus a big jug of cheap vodka, and you can set up your own perfumery.

You can buy herbs in bulk at your local healthfood or metaphysical store. Healthfood stores typically only stock herbs used in cooking or healing, so if you want to find those that are used in perfumes but not also used in cooking or healing, the New Age store is your best bet. There you can find patchouli, rose, lavender, and chamomile, as well as the less obvious orris root, lemongrass and vetiver. Don't overlook the spices - a hint of cinnamon or clove can give a perfume a dark, rich scent.

Making a tincture is simple:

Put a quantity of herbs or dried flowers (to be determined by experimentation) into a clean, dry soda bottle. Use the 20 ounce size or smaller while you're still learning your craft, and move up to the one liter bottle once you feel you have the proportions down. You may have to grind the herb in your food processor to get it in small enough pieces to tincture readily. Most herbs sold commercially are already chopped or ground; if you are buying from a 'wild-crafter' (one who collects herbs 'in the wild'), you may receive the plants in more of a natural state, which requires more work.

NOTE: if there are small children in your house, make SURE that your tinctures-in-progress are well out of their reach. Because you are using soda bottles, it would be very easy for them to think these were something good to drink, and small amounts of alcohol can prove FATAL to very small children!

Cover the herbs with vodka. Buy the cheapest brand on the shelf; taste isn't the issue here - alcohol content is. Don't fill the bottle to the top - some herbs or resins such as benzoin will foam when tinctured. Leave enough air at the top for you to be able to shake the bottle.

Label your tincture-in-progress! There's nothing worse than looking at a shelf of processing tinctures and not be able to tell your patchouli from your chamomile! Put the date on them as well as the herb being tinctured. Store the bottles in a cabinet; this is in lieu of purchasing expensive, dark-colored bottles to make your tinctures in. Once a day, take them out and shake them to thoroughly mix the herbal matter with the alcohol. Do this for about two weeks.

Some botanical matter takes longer to tincture than others. Herbs and dried flowers should be done in two weeks. Some very fragile dried flowers or plants will eventually completely dissolve in the alcohol and you will wonder where they went! Roots and woods will take longer. Leave wood such as cedar or licorice to tincture for at least a month.

At the end of two weeks (or a month), 'decant' your tinctures. I use a coffee filter to filter out the soggy plant material, filtering the tincture into a pan. (If you are a natural gardener, make sure the leftover plant mass has dried thoroughly - all the alcohol evaporated - before adding to your compost heap. Alcohol is flammable and a compost fire can be quite dangerous.) Once filtered, you can rebottle; for long-term storage, purchase dark brown or blue bottles. For shorter periods, glass or clear plastic in a dark cabinet is fine. Dab a little of the tincture on your skin, and wait for the alcohol to evaporate before taking a sniff. Is the scent strong enough? If not, you may wish to put more herbs into the tincture and let the brew extract more plant essence before calling it 'done'.

All plants will produce a tincture, but only some of them will have a scent suitable for perfumery. Good choices include lavender (produces a dark rich violet-colored tincture), patchouli, rose (a beautiful deep red liquid), lemon balm, chamomile, vetiver, lemongrass, rosemary (a lovely 'grassy' scent), cinnamon and clove. When buying rose petals, make sure it is the type with a scent! Some newer rose strains have had the scent bred out of them and are for 'looks' only.

Each tincture by itself can serve as a single ingredient perfume. If you love the scent of rose, wear rose tincture on your pulse points, or make a rose cologne spritzer by diluting your tincture with water and storing in a spray bottle.

Of course, the real joy is in creating a blend that is exclusively yours. Mix florals with more woody or grassy scents. The sharp tang of citrus can be mellowed with the sweetness of a spice. Make your kitchen your laboratory and wear the results.

Here are two blends to get you started:

RICH GIRL - A rich spicy scent that evokes glamour and wealth:

Four parts patchouli tincture

Two parts rose tincture

One part (or less, to suit) each of Clove and Cinnamon tinctures

SERENITY - A floral fragrance that calms and soothes the senses

Two parts lavender tincture

Two parts chamomile tincture

Two parts lemongrass or lemon tincture (Without this last ingredient, you may find the blend soothes you too much; the lemony scent will counteract the soporific effects of the chamomile.)