

ten for today

BY REBECCA JONES

BUYING MASSAGE OIL



Purchasing the right massage oil can be a slippery undertaking for massage therapists. Some choices boil down merely to personal preference: do you like the gentle scent of lavender or a more chocolaty aroma? But other factors can also come into play, including the age and skin sensitivity of the client, the time of year, the type of massage you do, and your own comfort level with experimentation.

In short, there is no one best product. Rather, there is a host of excellent products on the market, some more appropriate for particular situations than others, and a number of strategies you can employ for getting an excellent massage oil at a good price.

1. BE CAUTIOUS WITH NUT-BASED OILS

Sweet almond oil, for instance, is one of the most popular oils used by massage therapists. But surveys have found that more than 1 percent of the American population has some kind of nut-related allergy. “You don’t want someone to be on your table with a nut allergy if you’re using a nut-based product,” says Angie Patrick, director of massage business development for Massage Warehouse, a supplier of massage-related products, based in Norcross, Georgia.

The massage industry certainly isn’t ready to abandon all nut-based oils. But health experts underscore the necessity of taking good client intake histories, including any known allergies, before beginning the massage.

2. TAKE SCENT SERIOUSLY

Scented oils are great because they’re already formulated, they’re easy to use, and the formula is standardized. You can pretty much count on the next batch you order smelling just like the last batch. But unscented oils have other benefits. “If you use a nice base oil that’s unscented, you can add different essential oils that you like,” says Tom Wellman, president of SabaiSpa Products, based in Tamarac, Florida. SabaiSpa markets a range of herbal-based products from Thailand. “You can say to your client, ‘Would you like this type of scent or that type of scent?’ It lets you carry less of a given stock, but offer a wider range of possibilities.”

Even so, be careful about scents, even those that you add yourself later. “Every massage therapist understands that the warmth of the hands and the warmth of the client’s skin releases the fragrance,” says Ann Thariani, president of Gildden Tree, an Omaha, Nebraska, company that markets a line of healing natural products. “You may get used to a scent, and it may not smell too strong to you, but it could be overwhelming to your client.”

3. UNDERSTAND CONSISTENCY

Massage therapists often speak of *glide* when referring to massage oil. A very light oil or a cream or lotion, easily absorbed by the skin, is the usual choice for Swedish massage and its long, gentle strokes. Many therapists also prefer creams when working with older clients with thinner skin. For deep-tissue work, therapists generally want something heavier that will provide less glide and more friction. “If I’m working on a hamstring or doing deep tissue, I want to work more slowly to really get into that muscle,” says Linda Solien-

Wolfe, president of Solwolfe Resource Group of Merritt Island, Florida, and a licensed massage therapist who serves as a consultant for Performance Health/Prossage/Biofreeze, Inc.

4. KNOW NATURALS

There’s lots of controversy these days surrounding parabens—chemicals widely used as preservatives in cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. There’s no incontrovertible evidence that they cause harm, but the massage industry, as a whole, is moving away from products that use preservatives.

Wellman notes that any time water is used in a formulation, some type of preservative is necessary. Thus, lotions and creams, which contain water, require a preservative if they’re going to have any type of shelf life; oils don’t. “Oils can be preserved with vitamin E rather than chemicals, so you can get a natural type of oil that uses vitamins to keep it from turning rancid,” he says.

One all-natural alternative to oil is jojoba, which isn’t an oil but a liquid wax ester, very similar to the substance produced by human sebaceous glands. “It won’t turn rancid, as oils will,” says Robert Butler, owner of The Jojoba Company of Waldoboro, Maine. Other pluses: it’s nonallergenic and won’t stain the sheets. It won’t clog pores, and since it’s an emollient, it softens and conditions the skin. “And it’s great for therapists’ hands,” Butler says.



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Angie Patrick, director of business development, Massage Warehouse

5. WATCH SHELF LIFE

Be careful if you order oils in summer, especially if you live in a warm climate. “Talk to the manufacturer and say ‘Here’s where I’m at...’” advises Gilden Tree’s Thariani. “Many places won’t ship to a customer after Wednesday because the delivery trucks aren’t air conditioned. If you have a product sitting in a truck over the weekend, exposed to extreme heat, it will have a much shorter shelf life. It’s not too much of a worry in winter, but when the weather starts to get hot, ask how long it will take to arrive and how to avoid having it sit in that hot truck all weekend.”

6. TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

“A lot of manufacturers are willing to give you samples,” says Patrick of Massage Warehouse. “Just call your supplier and ask.” Even online suppliers will sometimes have samples they’re willing to let you try. And if no samples are available, buy the smallest size possible when you make your initial purchase. “I can’t tell you how many times people have bought gallon sizes of a massage oil, then tried to return it,” Patrick says. “Once it’s opened, it’s yours.”

7. TRY ASKING SANTA FOR SOME OIL

While massage oil is not a seasonal product, the fourth quarter is always a good time to buy it because manufacturers are trying to get rid of their inventory before year’s end, and sales are abundant, Patrick says. But if the holidays are a long way off and you need to buy some oil, just watch for deals to unfold. “It seems like every month, somebody’s got something on sale,” Patrick says. “There are deals to be had if you watch.”

8. THINK GREEN

Consider buying from manufacturers whose packaging is easily recyclable and whose supplies are produced sustainably. “Almost every massage therapist I’ve worked with is very concerned about this,” Thariani says. “We’re part of a big web here. And for massage therapists, that concern they have for well-being doesn’t stop at their door. It keeps going on.”


9. EXPERIMENT

There are lots of new products coming on the market every day and being open to trying new things can result in some pleasing discoveries. “It’s important to stay on top of the market,” Patrick says. “See what’s coming out. There’s been so much change in skin product technology, and a lot of new things are coming out every day with new ingredients. If you’ve been using something for years, there may be something new that’s even better.”

10. STICK TO PROFESSIONAL-GRADE PRODUCTS

You are, after all, a professional, and you owe it to your customers to give them the best experience possible. “Don’t shortchange clients with a product they can’t wait to shower off,” advises Gigi Targa, president of Evo Solutions, a Lakewood, Colorado, based company specializing in synthetic-free massage lotions. “Buying cheap lotions not designed for massage will not endear yourself to your client. They have put their trust in you as a professional. Buying a good quality massage lotion—in the long run—will save you money because you use less and it was formulated to do the job.”

While you’re at it, make sure you read the label. “This is something your own hands will be immersed in,” Thariani says. “Are you allergic to any of the ingredients? Know what you’re buying.” **m&b**

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