



SNOW LOTUS

Aromatherapy, Education, Inspiration

## **Vetiver**

### *The Power of Mother Earth*

Peter Holmes, L.Ac., M.H.

### **The Root Oil**

Vetiver is a unique essential oil. First, it is one of the few that is derived from roots rather than flowers, seeds or herbs. Second, its mother plant belongs to the worldwide grass family that provides most cultures' cereal grains such as rice, corn, oats and wheat. Third, vetiver is a typical natural product from the tropics, not the temperate zone. These three key facts go a long way in helping us understand this little-known oil. Like remote jungle terrain in the tropics, vetiver possesses therapeutic potential that is largely unexplored yet very rich in possibilities.

In many cultures, and especially in the East, the root of a plant is an emblem of its vitality. This in contrast to the preference that we show in the West for all things, green, fresh and fragrant. We have no problem admiring the fresh, bracing tang of pine, fir or lemon oil, the leafy green fragrance of violet or galbanum, the heady floral topnotes of jasmine and ylang-ylang. Not so when it comes to the odours from the earth. Rooty, earthy, musty kinds of smells we can only take in small, occasional or diluted quantities.

Yet the root is where plants concentrate their vitality. This vitality may not be showy, as in the flowers of irises and orchids. But beneath its unassumingness lies a cumulative vitality that endures through time over many generations. It is for this reason that in Oriental medicine, for example, there are more remedies derived from roots than from any other plant part. In the heavy and obscure aroma given off by the essential oil of vetiver root we can sense the depth and power of roots and the earth in which they thrive. After all, vetiver belongs to the

grass family whose ultimate power resides in its root system. In Java vetiver root is called *akar wangi*, or 'fragrant root.' Like the highly potent oils of other roots such as Indian spikenard, valerian and costus—all from India, incidentally—vetiver oil is redolent with the pristine earthiness of the tropical jungle.

## **The Earth Fragrance**

Alone the scent of vetiver oil tells the whole tale. It has reminded pharmacists and perfumers of damp earth, sliced raw potato and even damp, mildewy old furniture such as one finds in true antique sales. This thick, viscous oil exudes a mysteriously complex mix of rooty, woody, mossy and fatty fragrance tones that tenaciously endure. Like the oils of patchouli and sandalwood, vetiver oil is a base note that serves as a valuable fixative for fougere, Oriental and chypre type perfumes, to which it "lends a suave softness and rich body" (S. Arctander 1968). It combines especially well with the essential oils mentioned below. Because of its density and potency, it is best to use no more than one drop of oil per ounce (oz) of carrier oil. Like numerous other natural perfumery materials, vetiver becomes more acceptable and blendable when used in dilution with fatty oil or alcohol. In aromatherapy, however, vetiver's earthy quality has wider, more therapeutic implications.

The effects of fragrances belonging to the element earth are grounding, cooling, strengthening and desensitizing. This is why vetiver oil can help an individual be fully present in his body, fully incarnated ("made flesh") in the physical world. In extreme cases this would apply to the treatment of schizoid states of disconnectedness, fantasy and idealization, for example. Vetiver generally helps one come down from the head and into the body. The oil's strongly bitter taste helps ground and lower our energies into the physical center just below the navel, the hara or lower dan tian. It thereby increases our connection with the earth, the physical world, enhancing all that is sensual, concrete, realistic and practical in life. Vetiver's aphrodisiac reputation and traditional link to the goddess Aphrodite should now make more sense. Because so many sexual disorders arise from an anxious mind panicking under stress—premature ejaculation and frigidity, to name but two common problems—Vetiver can be beneficial as it helps one focus on the physical, sensuous aspects of lovemaking.

Performance anxiety and other mental blocks can thereby be broken through. No other essential oil does these things as effectively and swiftly as vetiver.

On a mental level, with the use of vetiver abstract intellectual aerobics and scattered idea chains are radically mulched into the ground of simpler, more practical, earth-centered concepts. Neurotic and other unreal behavior that thrives on stress and tension is mellowed out and slowed down in the here and now of the world as it actually is. In this connection, Vetiver can help in both drug and work addictions—alongside oils of Lavender and Clary sage, for example. The oil's pull of gravity towards realism and practicalism can also chill out the most extreme conceptual idealism and religious mania. On the feeling level, vetiver cools down emotional flightiness and dizzy passions, and like Sandalwood and Patchouli oil grounds them in the reality of true body-centered feelings. States of irritability, anger and hysteria are also thawed through its nervous sedative action—more quickly than with rose or camomile oil, for example.

### **Physiological Actions**

Vetiver oil is also grounding and cooling physiologically. In India and Malaysia the dried thin, wiry vetiver roots are woven into fans, screens (kushiks) and mats (khus tattis) for what we now call environmental fragrancing. As the hot, dry breeze enters through verandahs, for instance, wetted vetiver screens are installed that effectively, refresh, cool and fragrance the interior. Vetiver fans are women's favorites from India through to Java. In past centuries these fans traveled with migrants from Java to Haiti, and from there to Louisiana in the American South. Vetiver oil itself can clear the empty heat arising from Yin deficiency disorders (energetically speaking), as seen in afternoon hot spells, menopausal hot flushes and intermittent fevers. Vetiver also helps relieve neurological symptoms in the head, such as ringing ears, dizziness and visual disturbances—a syndrome appropriately known in Chinese medicine as Liver Yang Rising. The oil's anti-inflammatory activity has been used in arthritis and dermatitis, for example.

## **The Grounding Oil**

As an earth essence, vetiver speaks of the true materialism and sensuality that arises when we appreciate the physical world for what it actually is. It shows us the awesome presence, beauty and mystery of the natural world in itself, and pulls us away from valuing things as symbols for something else, such as status, prestige or power. In an ontological sense, vetiver represents nothing less than spiritual immanence, i.e., the total presence of the spirit in the material world. Spiritual immanence is a significant worldwide and historical characteristic of many native, shamanistic and esoteric religions.

Rugged strength is another quality imparted by oil of vetiver. As it grounds and centers our energies, it also generates strength and stability—physically, mentally and psychologically. The oil is a classic for physical and emotional burnout resulting in total exhaustion with resultant vulnerability. In particular, vetiver desensitises states of excessive vulnerability that leave us open to the preying energies of others, and is protective in that sense. Like jasmine oil, it can bolster feelings of insecurity, lack of confidence and guilt. For instance, vetiver would be the oil of choice for children of busy single-parents who experienced an unstable, transient childhood moving from one house (or hotel) to the next. On the other hand, like the oils of Neroli and Bergamot, Vetiver can be used to treat fear and anxiety, including the depression that may arise from them. Physiologically Vetiver strengthens the body's connective tissue, thereby treating constitutional weakness in this area that presents, for example, frequent infections, toxicosis (excessive toxin accumulation) and chronic joint hypermobility. It is in regard to this connective tissue action that we can understand the oil's benefits for weak, loose or simply fatigued skin. Wrinkles and stretch marks after childbirth can also be prevented or reduced through its use.

## **Medical Actions**

Because of Vetiver's desensitizing effect on the emotional and mental level, one may speculate about a parallel action on the physiological level. This would imply at least the possibility that this oil may be useful in the large category of hypersensitivity disorders currently so prevalent. These disorders all entail an

allergic response and range from more superficial hypersensitivity conditions such as food, pollen, drug and other allergies (e.g., hayfever, asthma, eczema, angioedema) to more systemic, deeper hypersensitivities such as autoimmune diseases. We know that Vetiver has been successfully used in France for allergic eczema (atopic dermatitis), but more experimentation and research is clearly needed. It is by extrapolation of this kind that new uses can be explored for essential oils, and perhaps new discoveries made.

The fact that Vetiver belongs to the grass family is highly significant. This group of plants furnishes more edible plants, i.e., cereal grains, than all other plant families put together. Grains are the gifts of the Mother Earth goddess in most of the world's traditional cultures. In Greece she was called Demeter, and stood for all that is nurturing, regenerating and growing in life. The grass family therefore essentially has to do with nourishment, regeneration and growth—and Vetiver oil is no exception.

We have touched on vetiver's nurturing quality in states of insecurity, lack of self-esteem, hyper-vulnerability, and so on in connection with its general restorative action. Specifically, this oil can be very helpful for two major types of PMS. First, in PMS caused by estrogen deficiency that often displays weepiness and depression. Second, in progesterone deficiency PMS that typically presents feelings of un-worthiness ("beating up on oneself"), loss of purpose and withdrawal which manifest as excessively introverted behavior. Moreover, Vetiver is useful for PMS because of endocrine as well as emotional reasons. In the experience of several practitioners the oil seems to exert a bivalent regulating action on the hormonal secretions estrogen and progesterone—somewhat like the herbal remedies Chasteberry and Dong quai root. This in turn makes Vetiver an appropriate choice during the menopause when both these hormones need supplementing. Vetiver's general grounding and heat-clearing actions here work in concert with the hormonal effect, especially as the symptom of hot flushes goes.

Nurturing and regeneration also sums up vetiver's effect on physiological processes. The oil is considered moistening as well as cooling by nature, and in this sense belongs to the element water. Vetiver is lipophyllic, i.e., it holds on to water in the skin, for example. Together with its secondary oily quality it can

deeply nourish the skin's subcutis, thereby relieving parched, sensitive or irritated skin depleted of both moisture and oil content (D. Guembel 1986). Sandalwood and geranium oils would be complementary here for enhancing the skin's feminine qualities.

From the metabolic aspect, Vetiver essential oil is definitely anabolic, promoting tissue repair and gain, and intestinal nutrient assimilation. Weight loss, chronic underweight, anorexia and malabsorption syndromes are helped in this connection through its anastative action.

Ultimately, Vetiver essential oil is about the gifts of mother earth to humankind. Like a mother's deep embrace of her child, Vetiver represents the nurturing, regeneration and self-empowerment given freely to us by our Earth Mother, our planet Gaia. As she shows us her deepest mysteries, we can increasingly become open to her beauty, realize how inextricably involved we are in her well-being, and begin to ensure her safety at any cost. Her destiny and ours are one.