



SNOW LOTUS

Aromatherapy, Education, Inspiration

## Neroli

### *The Lightness of Being*

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### The Scene

The year is 1715. The long imperial reign of Louis XIV is finally over. The coronation of Louis XV marks the end of an old and the begin of a new era. The end of the imperial high baroque marked by grandeur, gravity, ritual and pomp. The demise of all things formalized, austere and mannered, as seen in the architectural elegance of Corelli's and Lully's royal court music, the dark velvet drapes of interiors, the classical poses and heavy colors of De La Tour's paintings.

Enter the Rococo era with its lightness, grace and sea-shell curves, with its taste for all things delicate, charming and intimate-the pastel tones of the new fashion's gossamer silks, the relaxed grace of interior ornamentation, the playful tenderness of salon music such as Rameau's, Dieupart's and Leclair's, the frothy brimming sensuality of Boucher's and Fragonard's canvases.

Aromatherapy too was an integral part of Rococo culture, and at the heart of Rococo consciousness was an essential oil. The oil of Neroli.

The court of Versailles gained the reputation for being *la cour parfumée* dominated by *le gout*. Society in general meanwhile displayed a renewed penchant for hygiene, grooming and well-being. There was an awakening of individual sensibility, and personal relationships became more important than social standing. One enjoyed the more intimate pleasures of taking tea Chinese-style in the fragrant mandarin garden, exchanging favorite fragrances among a small

group of close acquaintances, or making interesting new friends among tall bay windows.

A key figure in the Rococo fragrance revival was the king's leading lady, Madame de Pompadour. With her 'exquisite and unerring taste' she took a special delight in promoting the revival of many small artisan arts and crafts, and these included perfumery and the manufacture of scented gloves. The twenty-one *gantiers-parfumeurs* in Grasse, the manufacturers of fine leather gloves scented with essential oils and absolutes, at the time provided the most popular and enduring form of aromatherapy found in a social and interpersonal context. They certainly had a plentiful supply of Neroli oil available from the most fragrant Bouquetier cultivars, as it had been in production on the French Riviera since as far back as the early sixteenth century. Madame de Pompadour's patronage single-handedly turned these Southern France cottage industries into a business of near-industrial proportions. Thanks to her, Grasse's scented gloves were still emitting subtle (as well as not so subtle, depending on the wearer) olfactory messages right into the heady, tumultuous 1780s.

Neroli-scented gloves were then socially *de rigueur*. It was they that carried the Rococo fragrance of Neroli throughout French and Italian society, and probably beyond. And Neroli was nothing more than the distilled oil of bitter orange blossoms. This oil was named after the seventeenth century Italian Princess of Nerola, Anna Maria de La Tremoille, who wore the oil on her gloves and probably her ribbons, shawls and other garments about which we can only speculate. She even took aromatherapy baths with orange flower oil. Way ahead of her time, Italian society soon found itself in emulation of her, and her favorite scented gloves became known as *guanti di neroli*. Eventually the oil itself also acquired the name neroli. The favourite Rococo fragrance did not survive the 1790s reign of terror-but then, the *nouvelle bourgeoisie* had other scents to chose from, among them the sandalwood fans (those potent weapons of seduction).

## The Plant

The original orange tree is the bitter orange, from which the sweet orange is a more recent cultivar. Its home is thought to be South China, where it still is a common winter ornamental. Historically the orange tree spread to India and to the Mediterranean basin over 2,000 years ago: Its Sanskrit name is *nagranja*, its Arabic name *naranj*. The Greek myth of Atalanta figures a 'golden apple' in the Garden of the Hesperides that is most likely an orange. During the twelfth century or possibly earlier, Arab traders and settlers began laying out the first orange plantations in Sicily, Malta, probably Andalusia and possibly Calabria in southern Italy. These were laid out with excellent irrigation systems, some of which survive to this day.

In addition to providing fragrance material for aromatherapy, perfumery and food flavoring, the orange tree also yields the Seville oranges used in the original marmalade.

The orange symbolises different values in different cultures. In Taiwan, for example, oranges and tangerines signify good fortune and wealth. In the South of France there is a tradition of using orange blossoms as bridal decoration-in the bridal wreath, for example. The significance here is most likely the heart's expression of love, joy-and courage! (Although, knowing about Neroli's actions we could also look at it another way and say that the flowers might help relieve the anxiety and stress of getting married . . .) According to Maud Grieve, the exhaustive researcher into herbal traditions from the mid-twentieth century, this French custom came over to England during the early decades of the 1800s, and in some areas may still survive today.

## The Oil

At least sixteen different essential oils and a few absolutes are extracted from various citrus plants-botanically the citrus genus in the rue family-and are derived either from the flower, leaf or fruit rind. The more commonly used oils from this important fragrance family are Neroli (bitter orange flower), Petitgrain (bitter orange leaf), Sweet orange rind, Bergamot (bergamot orange rind), Bergamot petitgrain (bergamot orange leaf), Mandarin rind, Lemon rind, Lime

rind, Persian lime rind, Grapefruit rind (pink and white). At least three of these, Neroli, Petitgrain and Bergamot, have been used in high quality eau de colognes since the seventeenth century when an apothecary first created the original 'Kölnisch Wasser' (the original European perfumers were pharmacists, for the most part). Here these three citrus oils are valued for the fresh, tangy, gently uplifting topnotes they impart. All of these citrus oils are used today in perfumery and aromatherapy. Each has specific as well as common therapeutic actions and indications when used in the environment or topically.

When used in clinical aromatherapy in a nebuliser or one of the other administration techniques designed for internal absorption, Neroli oil is essentially a relaxant remedy. The oil targets mainly the nervous system and thereby the cardiovascular and digestive systems, reducing hyperfunctioning in these systems. Applications include general nervous hyperfunctioning involving stress-related conditions in general, as seen in conditions of anxiety, restless behavior, fear, etc.; and smooth muscle spasms, including the heart muscle itself, such as tachycardia, vascular and cardiac spasms, colic, IBS, stress-caused diarrhea and such like.

Neroli's relaxant effect is balanced by a restorative effect on the brain and a stimulant action on the organs of upper digestion. This is why the oil should be considered for blends addressing such conditions as chronic fatigue and chronic depression on one hand, and forms of indigestion arising from biliary/gastric/pancreatic deficiency on the other.

On the microbial front, Neroli oil can be engaged effectively for managing bacterial and fungal infections, especially digestive and respiratory, and has shown some success with parasitic conditions such as giardiasis and hookworm.

Orange flower water, or Neroli hydrosol, has been in use for almost 500 years by pastry chefs in southern and central Europe, and in the 1920s was particularly used by manufacturers to add crispness to biscuits. This exquisite floral water is also excellent for toiletry and other domestic preparations, including lotions, mists, mouth rinses for gum problems, and various deodorant products. In aromatherapy, Neroli hydrosol is especially welcome for babies and infants, in a diffuser, humidifier, in a carrier oil for infant massage, in the bath water and-in

about a teaspoonful dose-possibly in the feeding bottle itself. Here it carries the same uplifting and calming actions and indications as the Neroli oil itself, but on a very much gentler scale.

Perhaps the best historical example of environmental fragrancing with orange comes from China. There, the highly fragrant finger lemon, *Fo Shou*, *Citrus sarctodactylus*, has been used for millennia on credenzas and buffet tables to fragrance interiors.

## **The Fragrance**

It would be difficult to find a person averse to the smell of oranges. Regardless of whether flower or fruit, whether bitter orange or sweet orange, whether true orange, mandarin or bergamot orange-Orange period is universally beloved. So ubiquitous, we take the orange for granted. This makes a more objective assessment of its aromatic qualities more difficult. However, Neroli oil has seen some research for its psychological effect and continues to be highly valued by aromatherapists worldwide for its particular qualities and functions.

With its intensely sweet floral, somewhat citrusy, fresh fragrance, Neroli can be classified under the traditional elements of Water and Air, promoting harmony, balance and calm on one hand, and clarity, sensitivity on the other. The balanced state of being this oil promotes can be described as a lightness of being, a gentle lightheartedness. This specifically counteracts states of mental-emotional overintensity seen, for example, in people on fiery missions, with moralistic drives, or in those tormented by obsessive, repetitive ideas. As a solution to any problem, Neroli oil seems to seductively suggest we give lightening up, softening and opening up a try. "What is there to loose? Greater intensity?" In conditions of depression, listlessness and discouragement in particular, Neroli's well-established euphoric, mood-elevating effect creates a true en-lightening effect, dispersing the darkness, even the despair, while reducing the intensity. Other euphoric oils here come to mind for a synergistic effect, including Clary sage, Jasmine and Rose.

Neroli oil likewise addresses states of anxiety, apprehension, worry and fear of known perceived dangers, with the additional calming effect achieved through nervous sedation. So for instance, anxiety and panic issues around performance and test situations can be effectively handled with Neroli, including exams, interviews, stage performances and (last but not least) sexual performance. Combinations with other sedative oils (e.g., Lavender, the Camomiles, Blue tansy) and regulating oils (Geranium, Helichrysum, Rosewood, Rose) clearly suggest themselves in this context.

Neroli's Water aspect, arising from its sweet-floral aroma, engenders calm, harmony and renewal. Not only anxiety, but states of anger, frustration and irritability are also appeased. The oil promotes emotional poise and harmony on the feeling level, and a gentle, non-fatiguing mental clarity-especially as regards intuiting functions-on the thinking level. Here Neroli's link with the liver on an energetic as on a physiologic level becomes evident. Neroli is especially appropriate for those in whom liver congestion generates heat that overstimulates the heart-syndromes that are well described in Chinese Medicine.

Another example of Neroli's space creating effect is the way that it promotes an open Heart. The fragrance helps us open to the world with the natural sincerity arising from our true self, with a deep inner joy and confidence. It can thereby help us receive the emotional support and nurture we seek, as well as helping us let go of past negative experiences that we fight or try so hard to avoid. Neroli basically smoothes the exchange between the self and the world, between self and other, an exchange that ideally operates like a well-oiled swing door. Simply put, the fragrance of Neroli promotes the experience of that innocent, generous, playful Heart space when we open and yield our true self in joy and inner passion to another.

Neroli's intimate connection to the heart on an energetic as well as a physiologic level should now be clearer. Joy, confidence and inner courage are two of the heart's main spiritual faculties on an energetic/spiritual level-qualities recognized as such by most of the world's cultures.

## **The Conclusion**

The reasons for the Rococo period's predilection for neroli oil should now be clear, especially after the long, turgid, stultifying reign of the Sun King. It was clearly time to let go of baroque pomp and braggadoccio, and open up to something more light-hearted, unaffected and spontaneous. Enter the Age of Enlightenment. We can only speculate about the depressant and depressing effects of such a long reign, as well as the mixed feelings of anxiety and fear it may have caused in some parts of French society. It seems that neroli oil was instrumental in the healing of French culture and its development throughout the appropriately-named Age of Enlightenment. That that age went on to exhibit the negative aspects of the Rococo, of the neroli influence, is another story . . .

Whereas Sandalwood oil points to the depth of being, the complementary Neroli oil shows us the lightness of being-an equally significant aspect of reality. Far from being unbearable, connecting with the Rococo lightness of being is as essential to our well-being as connecting to its depth. Let's take a tip from the Neroli-drenched Italian princess.