

Essential Oil Shelf Life and Storage



Key points

- To prevent oxidation, protect oils from exposure to air, light, and heat.
- Oils high in monoterpenes are most likely to oxidize, and have a shelf life of 1–2 years.
- Best practice is to purchase essential oils in small bottles, write the date of purchase on the bottles, and store them in a cool, dark place, such as a refrigerator.

Oxidation is the enemy

Oxidation is degrading of an essential oil mainly by combining it with oxygen. How does this happen? Think about how you use your oils. You open the cap to dispense drops, but do you then close it or keep it open? The longer a bottle is kept open, the more chance the oil is exposed to oxygen. Heat and light also contribute to oxidation. Remember, oxidized essential oils are more likely to cause skin sensitization, which you want to be sure to avoid! You may not notice the aroma change of an oxidized oil unless you compare it to that of a fresh bottle, so let's look at best practices to ensure that your essential oils remain therapeutic and safe to use.

Shelf life

Many online essential oil companies provide the shelf life of each essential oil. Charts are also available from some companies. You may see variations that can be confusing, so consider going with the shortest amount of time listed. Using essential oils within this timeframe will give you peace of mind knowing that your essential oils remain therapeutic and safe to use. Best practice is to write the date of distillation (if known) or the date of purchase on your bottles.

1–2 years

Due to their high monoterpene composition, most citrus essential oils have a shelf life of 1–2 years from their distillation date. Other common essential oils with a shelf life of 1–2 years include neroli, lemongrass, frankincense, tea tree, pine, and spruce.

2–3 years

Most essential oils have a shelf life of 2–3 years. These oils have a higher percentage of aldehydes, oxides, monoterpenols, esters, ethers, phenols, or ketones. Some common essential oils in this group include lavender, Roman chamomile, and eucalyptus, but there are many more. Because it is not high in monoterpenes, bergamot (*Citrus bergamia*) is also in this group, despite being a citrus oil.

4–8 years

Essential oils with a longer shelf life of 4–8 years typically have high sesquiterpenes and/or sesquiterpinols. These include German chamomile, sandalwood, vetiver, and patchouli. Although some of these oils may improve in aroma over time, their therapeutic actions may begin to diminish. Some sources thus recommend using these essential oils within 4 years.



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Storage

You just learned that essential oils need protection from air, light and heat, so where should you store them? Consider storing them in a refrigerator. According to essential oil safety expert Robert Tisserand, this storage method can double the shelf life of an essential oil, which could be especially helpful if you use your oils slowly. If you store your essential oils in the same refrigerator as your food, you might want to place the bottles in another container to contain the smell and help prevent your food from tasting like essential oils. Storing essential oils in the refrigerator can also help prevent small children from getting into them. Did you know that accidental ingestion of essential oils by children can be lethal? More information about essential oil safety will be covered throughout the course.

In addition to keeping your essential oil bottles tightly capped and stored in the refrigerator, it's also a good practice to transfer essential oils from larger bottles with dead air space to smaller bottles. This makes the case for purchasing essential oils in small quantities. Best practice is to purchase in 5ml bottles when possible, since there is less room for air to fill the space.

Fortunately, oxidation occurs gradually, not overnight! It's okay if you leave your essential oils in a warm place on occasion. Following the guidelines we just covered for using essential oils within the shelf life timeframe and properly storing them will help to ensure you are using a therapeutic oil without the risk of adverse reactions.

Uses for expired essential oils

You may have realized that you own some essential oils that are past their shelf life or have been improperly stored for therapeutic use, and think you need to throw them away. Don't worry; if an essential oil is no longer suitable for therapeutic use, it can still be used for other purposes. Instead of discarding old essential oils, you may want to use them for cleaning or in other ways around the house. A simple internet search for "household uses for essential oils" will give you a variety of ideas!



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