

The Essentialist

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Hand-Milled Soap Additives

For home-based soap makers, nothing is quite as exciting as individualizing hand-milled/[hand-crafted] soaps by including additives, fragrances, and colors. These ingredients are mixed in when a batch of basic soap is re-melted to make milled soap. (Note, however, that basic soaps may also be milled without adding extra ingredients.)

Additives

Additives are substances which not only alter the overall look of a given soap but which also lend their own special qualities to it. These substances range from honey, a wonderful skin softener, to oatmeal, the gentle scrubbing qualities of which enhance facial and body soaps.

Almond meal, which consists of the finely ground kernels of blanched almonds, acts to unclog skin pores and absorb excess oil from the skin.

Almond oil (sweet) is the debittered cosmetic oil derived from almonds and contains protein and several vitamins. Well known for its ability to soften the skin, this oil is used in many cosmetics, soaps, and perfumes.

Aloe vera gel, a healing substance extracted from the aloe plant, is used worldwide to heal burns and skin abrasions.

Althaea roots (marshmallow roots), from the plant *Althaea officinalis*, are used widely in bronchial treatments and also serve as wonderful skin softeners. The plant is easily grown in the garden, but the roots may also be purchased at many health-food stores.

Anise oil, a medicinal oil extracted from the seeds of *Pimpinella anisum*, is believed to be attractive to fish!

Apricots have been used for centuries in cosmetic preparations, as they have skin-softening properties and are high in mineral salts and vitamins. Fresh or dried apricots may be used in soaps.

Avocados, available at your grocery store, were once used as an aphrodisiac. We make no guarantees on that score, but the oils have an ancient history of use in cosmetics.

Benzoin is a resin that acts as a fixative for fragrances in soaps and as a preservative. Use benzoin in its powdered form.

Borax, a mineral which contains sodium, is valued in cosmetics for its ability to soften and disinfect the skin. The sodium in high concentrations of borax may curdle your soap, however, so use this mineral sparingly.

Bran is the broken outer husk of any grain and acts as a mild abrasive in facial soaps. You'll find bran at health-food or grocery stores.

Buttermilk is the sour liquid left after butterfat is separated from milk or cream. Always use the freshest buttermilk possible and include it only in basic soaps which are hard in consistency, as it tends to soften soaps considerably.

Calendula flowers have a long history as skin softeners. They are very soothing to sensitive and dry skins and are excellent additions to facial soaps. Use the petals only, either fresh or dried, first removing them from the heads and discarding any seeds.

Carrots are high in vitamin A and many other vitamins, and their essential oil also contains a good bit of vitamin E. Purchase bright orange, fresh carrots for use in soap.

Chamomile flowers, from the *Anthemus nobilis* plant, add a slightly astringent quality to soaps. This herb is commonly sold as a tea; the crushed flower heads may be used straight from the tea bags. Do avoid chamomile if you're allergic to pollens!

Cinnamon makes a dark soap with a pleasant spicy aroma. It is mildly abrasive to the skin, has gentle antiseptic properties, and adds longevity and character to soap lather. Use ground cinnamon only.

Clay, also sold as French clay or facial clay, is widely used for cosmetic purposes because it draws out and absorbs oil from the skin. Soaps made with clay are therefore somewhat drying. Red, green, or beige clays are available from many health-food stores.

Cloves are antiseptic, but can be irritating, so use this spice only in small amounts. Use oil of cloves or commercially ground cloves; grinding whole cloves will damage plastic blenders or plastic food processors.

Cocoa butter is an emollient and adds soothing properties to any soap. The rich, solid oil is white and will not affect the color of your soap.

Coffee is used in soaps to absorb odors from the skin. Use fresh unbrewed grounds.

Cornmeal absorbs oils and has long been used for its mildly abrasive qualities, which help to unclog skin pores. Either white or yellow cornmeal will work well.

Cucumbers, when liquefied and added to soaps, act as mild cleansers and as astringents.

Flowers of sulfur have been used as an antiseptic and as a remedy for mild skin problems for many years. Ginger, when included in soaps, warms the skin. Use it sparingly and in ground form only.

Glycerin is a sweet, syrupy, colorless by-product of commercial soap making and acts as a soothing skin emollient. Cold-process basic soaps retain their natural glycerin and can be further enhanced by adding more glycerin when they are milled.

Honey has been used as an emollient for centuries and makes an excellent addition to soap. Use any raw honey of your choice. Because honey will soften soaps during the milling process, select a basic soap recipe that yields a hard soap.

Kelp, often sold as "sea vegetables," includes several types of large leaf-like algae, all rich in iodine, vitamins, and minerals. The algae add a slippery feel and mild ocean scent to soap. Purchase kelp in powdered form.

Kiwis, the fruit of *Actinidia chinensis*, are widely grown in New Zealand, where they're esteemed for their medicinal properties. They are also available in the produce sections of many grocery stores. Kiwis contain protein and mineral salts and are rich in vitamins.

Lanolin (also called wool wax) is the wax taken from sheep's wool and is unsurpassed in its moisturizing and skin-softening properties. Use it with caution, however, as it's also a common skin-contact allergen. Lanolin should be used in its raw state, in very low concentrations.

Lavender flowers add a nice touch to lavender-scented soaps and help to hold the scent as well. Use the blossoms fresh or dried and as finely ground as possible.

Lemons can be incorporated as juice (fresh or reconstituted), as grated peels, or in the form of dried granules. Renowned as a food and cosmetic ingredient, lemons are also medicinal; the oil in the peel is antibacterial in nature, and the peels contain high levels of vitamin C.

Lettuce contains many vitamins and makes a very mild soap. Use any variety of clean, fresh lettuce.

Milk (cow or goat) has been used since ancient times as a natural cleanser. When using raw goat's milk, make sure it's as fresh as possible. Instant powdered milk may be substituted for fresh or bottled cow's milk. Select a basic soap that is hard in consistency, as dairy products will soften any soap to which they are added.

Myrrh is the gum derived from *Commiphora myrrha*, a tree native to the Middle East. It has been valued since antiquity for its antibacterial qualities. Purchase myrrh in its powdered form.

Nutmeg is a fragrant spice which adds zest to lemon in soap recipes. Use nutmeg in its powdered form.

Oatmeal has long been used to soothe sensitive or irritated skin. Select long-cooking or rolled oats for soaps: quick-cooking or instant oats may thicken your soap too quickly, turning it into a rubbery glob that will be nearly impossible to mold. Grind the oatmeal into moderate-sized pieces in a blender or food processor.

Pectin, sold in powdered form at most grocery stores, will come in handy when you make shampoos, as it will keep the liquid shampoo from separating.

Peruvian balsam (also known as balsam of Peru and as tolu) is obtained from *Myroxylon balsamum*, a tree native to parts of South America. This thick, sticky liquid has a warm fragrance and is a common ingredient in cosmetics of all types. Use in liquid form.

Pumice is ground volcanic rock. It varies in color from white to almost black and is used in soaps as an abrasive. Use only pumice that has been finely ground.

Rosemary leaves, from the *Rosmarinus officinalis* plant are very fragrant and have a mildly astringent effect on the skin. Use in powdered form.

Rose water is an emollient liquid made from commercial rose oil; it lends to soap its gentle fragrance, softening properties, and in some recipes, color.

Rosin, the finely powdered residue left after distillation of pine resins, helps bars of soap to retain their shape and produces large amounts of lather. Mix the powder with vegetable oil (any type will do) before adding it to the soap.

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is a pungent spice which has antibacterial, astringent, and antibacterial qualities. Use sage in its powdered form.

Sand, which is used as an abrasive in soap, must be clean and completely free of debris. Play sand, used in play boxes and available at many home centers, is suitable.

Strawberries contain several acids (including citric, tartaric, salicylic, and ascorbic) that make them effective as skin tighteners. These fruits are also high in Vitamin C and have been used cosmetically as a skin whitener. Use fresh strawberries when possible; frozen berries will also work, but do drain off and discard the syrup.

Sweet birch oil (from the *Betula alba* tree) has been used for years in Northern Europe to soothe skin afflictions such as eczema. In Scandinavia, people use birch trees to flog their bodies after taking saunas. By jumping into icy water afterwards, they effectively trap the birch oil in their skin pores. You may find it easier to include the oil in your soap!

Tea tree oil is a healing oil derived from the tree *Melaleuca alternifolia*. Use in essential oil form.

Vitamin E oil has been used for many years to soothe the skin and prevent wrinkles. Use in undiluted form only.

Wheat germ, the inner germ of the wheat kernel, contains an oil which is purported to be excellent for the skin. The mildly abrasive germ and emollient oil are often used in facial and body soaps. Purchase either the germ or the oil from a health-food store or grocery store.

Witch hazel is a mildly astringent liquid distilled from the small tree of the same name. It cleanses the skin and closes the pores.

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[Spelling & typographical errors have been corrected by C. Haug, The EssentialList editor]

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holly@standeyo.com

<http://standeyo.com>

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