

Fragrance Glossary

Absolute

The essential oil of scented flowers and other aromatic plants' parts in its purest and most concentrated form. This is obtained after stearoptene has been removed from the concrete by extraction with alcohol. It is extremely expensive. Among the most important oils used in an absolute form are cassie, champac, clary sage, geranium, ylang ylang, jasmine, labdanum, lavender, lily, mimosa, orange flower, rose, tuberose, violet and violet leaf.

Aldehyde

An important group of chemicals, derived from alcohol and some natural plant materials. They form one of a number of chemical groups known as benzenoid compounds which were discovered at the end of the 19th century and are used in manufacturing synthetic materials for modern perfumes. Anisic aldehyde, for example, provides the scent of hawthorn, white decylic aldehyde is used in reproducing the odors of violet, orris, neroli, cassie flowers, rose and orange. Aldehydes can also give perfumes a distinctly individual fragrance of their own. In their pure state aldehydes possess such a powerful and persistent odor that a single drop spilt on a person's clothes will make them so odoriferous as to be objectionable. Therefore, they have to be used with extreme care and discretion. In minute quantities in which they are of greater value to a perfumer, they provide fragrances with a new richness and strength.

Amber

An abbreviated form of ambergris. In perfumery this has nothing to do with the semiprecious fossilized resin of the same name which is used in jewelry. The word denotes a fragrance found not only in ambergris itself but also in several other natural materials, such as labdanum. It is also sometimes used to describe the fragrance of oak moss, and sometimes used to designate the family of perfumes more usually called "oriental."

Ambergris

Since antiquity, one of the most valuable perfume ingredients and also one of the most legendary is Ambergris. It is found in oily, grey lumps floating in the sea, mainly in the Indian Ocean, or cast on to its shores. Speculation about the origin of this material persisted until the 19th century. The substance is excreted by the sperm whale after it has been feeding on cuttle fish. The lumps usually weigh a pound or two, but may weigh up to seventy pounds and occasionally much more. Its odor is most unpleasant in the raw state and it has to be considerably diluted by dissolving in alcohol, when it becomes highly fragrant, with a scent which has a similarity to labdanum. It is usually used in the form of a tincture. The fragrance is very persistent. The weathering of ambergris while it is in the sea is an important factor in its fragrance; ambergris removed directly from the body of a whale, or freshly expelled from it, is nauseating and must be aged over several years before it can be used in perfumery.

Ambergris was not known to the Greeks and Romans and appears to have come into use during early Arabic times. It was included in a list of items sent as tribute from the Yemen to the Persian Emperor in the 6th century AD, and al-Kindi used it in a number of his perfume formulas in the early 9th century AD. It also appeared in a Byzantine list of perfumes permitted to be sold in Constantinople in about 895 AD. It enjoyed a reputation as an aphrodisiac.

Solid ambergris is said to retain its perfume for three centuries or more. In Elizabethan times it was used to perfume gloves because the scent remained despite repeated washing. For centuries it has been very highly valued by perfumers as a fixative. However, because of the growing scarcity and consequent costliness of “floating” ambergris and environmental objections to obtaining it by killing whales, it is now rarely used in perfumery other than in a synthesized form.

Balsam

A viscous, resinous exudation from certain trees and shrubs with a consistency which is thick but not solid. The principal balsams used in modern perfumery are Balsam of Peru, Balsam of Tolu, Balsam of Copaiba, Storax, and Balm of Gilead. They have in common a vanilla like odor. The words Balsam and Balm are often used synonymously. The word “balsam” is also used for certain flowering plants of the genus *Impatiens*.

Bergamot Oil

An orange-scented essential oil extracted by expression from the fruit peel of the Bergamot Orange tree. The tree, which originated in tropical Asia, is cultivated for the oil in Southern Italy, Sicily and Spain and also, to an extent, in South America and West Africa. The name Bergamot is believed to be derived from the Turkish “geg-armudi”, meaning “the prince’s pear”, because the fruit is pear-shaped. The oil, one of the rarer and more valuable perfume materials, has a fresh, fruity fragrance. It appears in about 34% of all women’s perfumes and 50% of all men’s fragrances; it’s also found in colognes and hair preparations.

Cassie

Also known as Cassie Ancienne and Cassie Farnese, extracted from flowers of the Sweet Acacia, a shrub-like tree growing to about 10 feet high in tropical and northern Africa. First cultivated for perfumery in Rome towards the end of the 16th century, the tree is now grown in the south of France, Lebanon and elsewhere. This oil, which is produced as a concrete or absolute, appears in many modern perfumes and is used in fortifying a violet fragrance. It should not be confused with cassis or cassia.

Chypre

An important perfume in Roman times manufactured in Cyprus and made of storax, labdanum and calamus, which gave it a distinctively heady and oriental aroma. This style of perfume continued to be manufactured in Italy into the Middle Ages under a variety of formulas, retaining the name “chypre.” It was also produced in France as Cyprus Powder, with oak moss as a base. In 17th and 18th century France there was a fashion for small models of birds, known as Oiselets de Chypre, molded out of a Chypre perfume paste (one formula required benjamin, cloves, cinnamon, calamus and gum tragacanth as ingredients) and contained in ornate hanging cages.

In modern times the term chypre is used to designate one of the main perfume families. Chypre perfumes are mostly based on oak moss, patchouli, labdanum or clary sage, with addition of flowery notes such as rose or jasmine, and a sweet note such as bergamot or lemon.

The first of the 20th century chypre perfumes was issued by Coty in 1917 with the brand name “Chypre.” It provided fresh top notes of bergamot, supported by traces of lemon, neroli and orange, with a floral middle note mainly of rose and jasmine, and a base note in which oak moss predominated, but with patchouli, labdanum, storax, civet and musk in the background.

Civet

Also called Zibetha, civet is one of the few perfume materials obtained from an animal and also one of the most important. It is a soft, paste-like glandular secretion, yellow and butter-like when fresh but turning brown on exposure to the air. It is taken from a pouch under the tails of both male and female civet cats. These are wild animals native to Ethiopia and nearby parts of Africa and also found in Burma, Thailand and Indonesia. In its original and concentrated form, civet has a very strong and most obnoxious smell, but when minute quantities are diluted they become highly fragrant. It is an excellent fixative and a constituent of many top-quality perfumes of today.

Civet was not known in classical times, nor from its absence in the perfume formulas of al-Kindi, does it appear to have been known in the early days of the Arabic perfume makers. It seems to have been discovered by the Arabs in about the 10th century AD, when it quickly established itself as one of the most desirable of all perfume ingredients. It was well-known in Shakespearean England and was long used for scenting gloves. It is now mostly used in an “absolute” form.

There have been various attempts, sometimes successful, to keep civet cats in captivity in England and elsewhere for the perfume material, but Africa has continued to provide the main supply. “Civetone,” the principal odorous constituent in civet, is now made synthetically, and there are many artificially made substitutes.

Concrete

A semi-solid product obtained by the process of extraction of essential oils by volatile solvents. It consists of the absolute together with stearoptene, an odorless waxy substance, and has the advantage of being a very good fixative. Many natural perfume materials are preferred by perfumers in their concrete form, particularly when the perfume is used in soap. The concretes of essential oils obtained from flowers are sometimes called “Floral Concretes.”

Coniferous

A term used to describe regions where pine, spruce, juniper and similar trees grow. Coniferous notes are smells that have a pine-like scent.

Fougere

In perfumery the term describes a fragrance of fresh, herbaceous notes on a moss and fern-like base. It is especially popular in masculine fragrances.

Galbanum

A gum resin which is collected in small drops from the stems of a giant fennel found in Iran and Afghanistan. A similar resin, of softer texture called Lavant Galbanum is also used in commerce under the general name of galbanum, but appears to derive from other species of Ferula. A resinoid is obtained from galbanum resin by solvent extraction; the main use of this resinoid is in medicine. An essential oil steam distilled from the resinoid is used in perfumery in a strong alcoholic extract. The odor has been described as spicy-green and leaf-like and having a suggestion of musk. Galbanum Oil is valuable as a fixative.

Galbanum appears in the Old Testament as an ingredient of the holy incense and a “pleasant odor.” It is also mentioned by Pliny as an ingredient of the Egyptian perfume called Metopian. As the odor by itself, it is unremarkable and even disagreeable. It seems probable that in ancient times the name referred to the product of a different plant.

Labdanum

A brownish, sweet scented oleo-resin, obtained from shrubs of the genus *cistus*, known as the Rock Rose, found in the Mediterranean area, North Africa and the Middle East. The resin exudes in sticky droplets on hairs on the underside of the leaves and on the stems. It is usually extracted by volatile solvents, or sometimes just by boiling the branches. It is of great importance in modern perfumery. Its fragrance closely resembles ambergris; it is economic in use and mixes well with other perfumes. A valuable fixative in many bouquet perfumes, it provides the main material used for manufacturing synthetic ambers. It is used in 33% of modern quality perfumes and 20% of quality fragrances for men.

Labdanum does not appear to have been known to the Egyptians of earliest times, but was listed by Herodotus in the 5th century BC as an ingredient in many kinds of perfumes and one of the principal aromatics brought from Arabia. It was possibly the “myrrh” of the oldest parts of the Old Testament. Herodotus observed that the Arabs combed it off the beards of goats which had browsed among the bushes.

Musk

Probably the most powerful of all perfume fragrances and certainly one of the most expensive. Musk comes from a preputial follicle which is removed from the abdomen of the male musk deer, found in the Himalayas from Afghanistan to China. The follicle, usually known as a musk pod, is a sac about the size of a walnut and can be removed without harming the animal. In undiluted form it is most unpleasant. The best quality Musk comes from China and Tibet.

Musk was unknown in classical times and reference to its use in perfumes does not appear until the 6th century, when Cosmas mentioned it as a product obtained from India. Soon afterwards both Arabic and Byzantine perfume makers were employing it. It became one of the most important items brought back by Arabic ships from China. It had a reputation as an aphrodisiac. Musk has been a key constituent in many perfumes ever since its discovery, being held to give a perfume life. Musk or synthetic musk is now found among the principal ingredients of about 35% of all quality perfumes and quality fragrances for men.

It is a great fixative. If a drop of musk is placed on a handkerchief the scent will last for forty years. Musk is now mostly used in a synthetic form.

Neroli

An essential oil from the flowers of the Bitter Orange tree native to Southeast Asia, this tree is believed to have been brought into Europe in the 12th century by the Arabs. The name probably came from a prince of Neroli, an Italian whose wife scented her bath and her gloves with it in the 16th century. Its odor has a distinctive smell which combines spiciness with sweet and flowery notes.

Vetiver

A tall, tufted, perennial, scented grass with a straight stem, long narrow leaves and an abundant complex lacework of underground white rootlets. The rootlets have been used in the East for their fine fragrance since antiquity. It is grown in India to protect the soil against erosion. Its odor is deep, smoky, earthy and woody with a sweet undertone. Vetiver is an excellent fixative.

Ylang ylang

A tall tropical tree up to 65 feet high with large, tender, fragrant flowers which can be pink, mauve or yellow. The yellow flowers are considered best for the extraction of essential oil. It is found in Indonesia. Its odor is intensely sweet, soft, floral, balsamic and slightly spicy. Ylang Ylang is sometimes considered a fixative. It is one of the most expensive essential oils in the world.

