



In the Raw

Natural ingredients in skin care

by Monica Schuloff Smith

American consumers are increasingly seeking out healthier lifestyles, and this national trend has fueled the growth in natural cosmetics. While some pundits argue the value of natural or organic formulations in skin care, others offer caveats and advise professional skin care practitioners to be cautious when treating individuals with from-the-kitchen-cupboard ingredients. Nevertheless, botanical, edible, natural ingredients have found their way into the esthetics market via the self-employed, single-room esthetician, day spas, and multimillion-dollar global skin care manufacturers.

According to a 2005 Euromonitor International report, The Growth of Natural Ingredients, cosmetic and toiletry sales and growth have waned and stagnated since 2000, because manufacturers, in an effort to improve revenues, have capitalized on growing consumer interest in health and wellness by investing in new products made with natural ingredients.¹

"This investment looks to be paying off, with certain industry sources predicting that the natural/organic color cosmetics, hair care, and skin care markets grew by an estimated 9 percent a year between 2003 and 2008. This growth is expected to provide a boost to the total cosmetics and toiletries sector, which Euromonitor International forecasts to grow by only 1 percent a year to 2009," according to the report.

Naturally Popular

Szilvia Hickman, owner of Szep Elet (the exclusive distributor of ilike organic skin care), feels consumable ingredients are very popular because they connote freshness, healthy living, and good nutrition. She says the body reacts viscerally to things that are good for us.

According to Lynn Parentini, licensed esthetician, massage therapist, and owner of Esthetic Alternatives, Inc., the natural trend has increased the popularity of raw, handmade, organic recipes because consumers demand less processing of goods. In addition, Parentini believes handmade spa product recipes allow clients to experience unique, artisan-type, custom treatments.

"This unprocessed, fresh, and natural approach will allow your clients to experience the benefits of having their skin anointed with nature's bounty without preservatives, chemical fillers, or buffers," Parentini says.

Melanie Sachs, esthetics educator and certified ayurvedic lifestyle counselor for Diamond Way Ayurveda, agrees. "I believe

that there is an increasing awareness that what you put on your skin can travel into your bloodstream and with that comes an increasing suspicion that man-made additives and preservatives could possibly be harmful," Sachs says.

Ada Polla, president and CEO of Alchimie Forever, notes that if plant ingredients are perceived as good, food-grade ingredients must be even better. "From-the-cupboard ingredients are not only perceived as safe and pure," Polla says, "but also as something of a return to a more simple life, to the homemade grandma remedies, so to speak."

The Challenges

Still, even with from-the-cupboard ingredients, there are many challenges identifying which are best for certain skin conditions, and whether the form they are in will even work. In addition, when used in the spa setting, there are issues with availability, ingredient freshness, and storage.

"Most spas that use them tend to only have a limited range of items such as cucumbers for the eyes, herbal teas, etc.," Hickman says, adding many esthetics professionals opt instead for all-natural, organic lines that offer consistent quality, longer shelf life, and reproducible results.

"I have not personally seen an increase in from-the-cupboard ingredients used in handmade formulations but only in specific types of spas, such as those that have organic themes," says Dr. Howard Murad, CEO and founder of Murad, Inc.

A big concern with natural ingredients is spoilage. In general, recipes made in-room for same-day treatment should be used immediately or refrigerated and used within hours. But for bottled product, product lines run the risk of being deemed not so natural if formulators include such chemical preservatives as parabens. This is the challenge for traditional skin care companies who want their natural lines to have credibility in a very discerning market segment, Sachs explains.

"As there are more and more concerns about side effects and environmental effects, some leading companies around the world have put tremendous effort into developing all-natural preservative systems for their products," Hickman says.

In addition to spoilage, the allergen factor is also a large concern. Because allergies with natural ingredients may be an issue for individuals who tend to be allergic to fruits, herbs, or vegetables, estheticians should query their clients and test the product



What's Your Favorite Ingredient?

Szilvia Hickman: My favorites are not necessarily new and trendy at the moment—rather well-proven. Grapes, which contain bioflavonoids, biosugars, grapeseed, minerals, tannins, and vitamins; yogurt, which contains lactic acid to speed up the rejuvenation process and bind moisture for soft, supple skin; avocado, which contains minerals, oils, and vitamins; goji berry, which combines carotenoids with amino acids, fatty acids, and vitamins to smooth wrinkles; and açai, which contains flavonoids, minerals, and vitamins, plus essential amino and fatty acids to reduce inflammation, strengthen cells, and fight free radicals.

Dr. Howard Murad: Durian is a native plant to Asia that offers a one-two punch to inflammation. Pomegranate down-regulates the formation of free radicals because it contains high levels of ellagic acid, the strongest polyphenol antioxidant. Goji berries are another favorite because they contain 500 times more vitamin C by weight than oranges. The berries also up-regulate cytokine expression, which is important for a healthy immune system response and healing.

Lynn Parentini: I vote aloe vera as being an extremely practical, fresh necessity. The transparent gel from the pulp of the meaty and succulent leaves of aloe vera has been used for thousands of years to treat burns, skin infections, and wounds, and numerous other dermatologic conditions.

Ada Polla: Apples, blueberries, and tomatoes. Apples are antioxidant; they contain malic acid as well as quercetin, the same iron chelator as that present in blueberries. In addition, apple extract offers tightening and astringent properties. Blueberries offer vaso-protective activity, antioxidant activity, and iron-chelating activity for additional antioxidant and antiaging effects. Tomatoes contain lycopene, an antioxidant that has been shown to have anticarcinogenic properties, as well as a number of carotenoids with antioxidant properties.

Melanie Sachs: Organic oils and essential oils. Without oils we cannot age to perfection and without essential oils we don't have the purest most powerful messengers that make positive change possible.

before using any recipe or cosmetic line. Place a small amount of the product on a client's inner arm; wait to see if there is any reaction. Itching, redness, or tingling may indicate an allergy.

"Natural ingredients are generally gentler, but we do find if a food bothers the inside of the body, it is likely to irritate the skin," Sachs says. "For example, those with milk allergies may react to yogurt and hay fever sufferers can be irritated by honey," Sachs says.

Parentini concurs. "If someone is allergic to nuts, do not use any nuts in treatments. If the client is very allergic in general, use common sense and use ingredients that are extremely gentle, for example, oatmeal, grapeseed oil, Chinese clay, and cucumber." She warns irritation from mechanical exfoliating ingredients like nuts, sea salt, and seeds can be too harsh for skin and may cause tiny abrasions. She says these ingredients should be pulverized finely enough to avoid this.

Polla thinks estheticians should be cautious: "While making one's own concoctions sounds like a pure, romantic, yet still effective therapeutic approach, I would caution estheticians against this. Formulating products for the skin, whether based on food ingredients or not, is a science and requires expertise. While a homemade banana mask (a nice name for mashed banana) would most likely not hurt a client, it would most likely not help either. In order to be effective, the right molecules from the banana would have to be extracted, and penetration enhanced so that they could penetrate at the very least to the stratum corneum, if not further."

As long as the products and ingredients used still deliver the results a particular client is seeking, then the ingredients offer professionals a way to meet the increasing demand for natural alternatives, according to Sachs. "There is also the added benefit that they are healthier for the therapist to be handling on a daily basis."

Murad recalls having an esthetician on his spa staff in 1995 who would use crushed cucumber and strawberries on clients every day as mask treatments. He notes that not many esthetics professionals did this at that time. It required getting fresh fruit and vegetables every week, time in the morning to prepare the ingredients, more time to mix the ingredients, and then store them appropriately. "It just became easier for her to use bottled products from the shelf," he says, adding that as a self-described "ethnobotanist," he incorporates many powerful, natural ingredients from all over the world into his own line.

With the explosion of natural products, new regulations may be imposed to protect the public from known allergens. These regulations in the European Union and United States would force manufacturers to disclose allergenic ingredients, experts say.

"Since many synthetic ingredients are actually found to be safer than natural ingredients," reports Euromonitor, "this could potentially damage the market for some natural cosmetics and toiletries products."



Proceed With Caution

If skin care therapists want to make their own concoctions, all ingredients should be disclosed to clients to make sure the client has no known allergies.

If you choose to mix your own, Hickman first suggests you make sure the ingredients are organic. Second, identify reliable base ingredients and the best formulation for the task at hand, all the while considering consistency and freshness. Third, because air contact and waterborne bacteria or fungus spores can break down the beneficial elements of natural ingredients, keep your end-product cooled below 40 degrees. Finally, never boil raw ingredients. High temperatures will eliminate vitamins and benefits, Hickman says.

According to Murad, if attempting your own mask recipe, you need to first make sure the fruit or vegetable is very fresh and really clean. Also, the ingredients should not be kept in the refrigerator for too long as they lose their benefits the longer they've been sitting.

"Understand that on different days your natural fruit and vegetable ingredients will have different qualities," he says. "Sometimes they're really sweet and sometimes they're really tart. You have to know a lot about the fruit. For example, if you want an acidic mask, you're going to look for fruit that is not quite ripe; if you want a calming and soothing mask, you would look for fruit that is more ripe."

If you decide to make your own, you needn't be petrified, Parentini says. "If you can make a cup of tea, if you know how to stir, if you have two to three minutes, you can compound your own spa recipes," she says. "Compounding will allow you to have a competitive, cost-effective, unprocessed, fresh edge to your spa menu, and is definitely in line with the current green movement."

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¹ The Growth of Natural Ingredients, Euromonitor International, http://www.euromonitor.com/Natural_ingredients_drive_growth_in_cosmetics_and_toiletries (accessed 8/17/2008).