

Growing up, cherry blossoms meant one thing: Spring was here, winter was over. The tree would litter our backyard with celebratory, confetti-like petals. I would scoop them up, revel in their perfect pinkness, and then make a (very) rudimentary perfume by leaving them outside in a bowl of water for a few days. I remember dabbing the faint blend on my wrists and behind my ears, miming what glamorous-to-me women like my aunt did. Flowers made me so dang happy, but I didn't comprehend then, as a child, why this was—beyond the fact that they looked and smelled super pretty.

I know now that they were an emblem of renewal and a beacon of hope, a reminder that even frostbitten Februaries would give way to sunlit Aprils. And I'm not alone in my total delight. Flowers have a magical ability to make us all feel better—studies have shown that hospital patients who are simply surrounded by blooms can have an easier recovery. And the benefits extend beyond the bouquet: Slathering them on our skin and inhaling their aromas can result in a healthier disposition and more radiant complexion. Behold the science of flower power...

SKIN CARE

Truly, let's give it up to Mother Nature for being the original cosmetic chemist. Because whatever you're looking for in a skin cream—smoothing, softening, brightening—the natural world has it in spades. "Flowers are rich with ingredients like essential fatty acids and antioxidants," says New York City integrative dermatologist Cybele Fishman, M.D. And every part of them has potential: Roots can contain resurfacing acids, seeds have hydrating oils, and petals can have

protective antioxidants, notes cosmetic chemist Ron Robinson, founder of BeautyStat.com.

But you can't just mash a marigold into a jar and hope it works out. You must carefully extract the goods, and the method—steam distillation, cold-pressing, and carbon dioxide extraction are popular techniques—depends largely on what part you're extracting (e.g.,

you can't steam-distill a flower's seed).

That said, the specific extraction process used, while fascinating, doesn't really impact the product's efficacy, says NYC dermatologist Whitney Bowe, M.D.: "There won't be much of a difference in results." Instead, check where the flower falls on the ingredients list; the higher it is, the bigger a player it is in the formula. Which floral cream is best for you? We've bouquet'd the most science-backed blooms, at right.



TO BRIGHTEN:

Peony

The root of this beaut makes for an effective dark-spot lightener. "It reduces inflammation by releasing heat shock proteins that lessen pigment," says Fishman. **Try (1) L'Oréal Paris Age Perfect Cell Renewal Rosy Tone Cream, \$25, at drugstores**

TO FIRM:

Rose

A rose by any other name... would be rose hip seed, if you're a derm. The berry-like nubbin gets left behind after the rose has bloomed, and studies show its fatty acid- and antioxidant-rich oil smooths out lines by encouraging cell regeneration. **Try (2) Pai Rosehip BioRegenerate Oil, \$40, credobeauty.com**

TO CALM:

Chamomile

This bud's soothing compound, bisabolol, prevents redness and irritation by blocking proteins in the skin from sending inflammation-related messages to the surface. It's ideal "for people with sensitive skin and rosacea," says Bowe. **Try (3) Belif The True Tincture Essence-Chamomile, \$46, sephora.com**

SCENT

There are natural ways to recover from a long day that don't involve the words *pinot* and *grigio*. The scents of flowers "can be very powerful in their ability to make us feel better and change our mood or motivation level," says Pamela Dalton, Ph.D., a cognitive psychologist at Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia.

When you smell a flower, its odor molecules (and there are many, by the way—lilac isn't just lilac, it's an array of chemical compounds) light up a pattern of olfactory receptors at the very top of the nose, sending electrical signals up to the brain. But before the information makes it to the olfactory cortex to be processed (in other words, before we know it's rose versus gardenia), it goes to the olfactory bulb, which modulates our emotions, explains Dalton. Meaning:

A smell's first priority—the first stop on its commute—is to impact how we feel. And flower scents are a perfect way to tune our emotions because, unlike some smells (eau de hot garbage and the like), they are generally very pleasant.

This effect occurs whether you smell a bud at the bodega or in a bottle, says Dalton. It also doesn't matter if "what you're smelling has been distilled from a real flower or was created in the lab." To your brain, it's the same molecule. And although each flower has different compounds that research says can elicit different emotional responses, Dalton stresses you should do some experimenting yourself: "If you hate lilies like I do, they aren't going to relax you no matter what studies say." With that in mind, consider the list at right a head start.

TO RELAX:

Neroli

This eau, made from bitter orange tree blossom, acts like a sedative. Studies have found it lowers blood pressure and cortisol levels—an antidote to news-induced anxiety. **Try (4) Rag & Bone Neroli Eau de Parfum, \$140, rag-bone.com**

TO BOOST CONFIDENCE:

Ylang-Ylang

Got a big job interview? Sniff this: Studies show the oil helps bolster self-esteem and reduce jitters. **Try (5) Diptyque Eau Moheli Roll-On, \$48, nordstrom.com**

TO GET IN THE MOOD:

Jasmine

This white flower revs sex drive, potentially due to its high levels of the compound indole—whose sensual aroma is similar to that of...your body. **Try (6) Lake & Skye Jasmine Floral Water, \$69, lakeandskye.com**



POWDER FRESH

Forget gilding the lily. Dust the pearlescent shimmer of Lancôme La Rose a Poudrer (\$60, lancome-usa.com) along cheekbones to really radiate the rose.

YOUR SKIN CAN SMELL!

Well, sort of. Olfactory receptors (the mechanisms that allow us to smell) don't exist just in our noses. Scientists have found them all over our bodies, including in our armpits! A recent study from Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany, published in the *Journal of Biological Chemistry*, uncovered receptors in our melanocytes, skin cells that produce pigment. More fascinating: These skin receptors are activated by beta-ionine, an odor molecule in violet flowers. As far as the scientists know, only the nose's olfactory receptors generate a sensory response in the brain (a.k.a. smelling)—but that doesn't mean we can't utilize other receptors for other purposes. The next part of the researchers' work will focus on using the skin receptors to treat both pigment issues and melanoma, a type of skin cancer that originates in the melanocytes. ■