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My Search for a Totally Natural, Environmentally Friendly Fragrance

Writer Madeleine Deliee wanted to smell good while doing good for the environment. Here's what she learned trying to go clean for a cleaner conscious.

By Madeleine Deliee OCT 10, 2019



DINA BELENKO PHOTOGRAPHY / GETTY IMAGES

For most of my adult life, I've been pretty good on going organic. I bought organic food. I used organic cleaning products. I wanted to be conscious about what I was using and eating as it relates to treating our planet better. But, until recently, I was rather lax about the naturalness of another part of the daily routine: perfume.

When I sprayed on a scent before heading out into the world, I pretty much still put whatever struck my fancy on my body without considering the ecological effects of both my health and the planet. Thus, I needed to clean up my act — but the process ended up being far more overwhelming than I bargained for.

At first, I thought I could just hold onto some vestiges — I mean, maybe my old standby perfume wasn't so bad, I reasoned. Well, Cynthia Korman, one of the founders of Phlur — which creates hand-crafted, hypoallergenic, vegan and cruelty-free fragrances — set me straight. "You probably remember this from science class as a kid: skin is the largest organ of your body and it absorbs what you put onto it," she says. Yes, but I still wanted it all: healthy and eco-friendly, while not reeking like a head shop.

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Korman confirms that I'm not alone in my quest for perfume that both smells good and is good for me. "I think people are becoming more conscious in general about the foods they eat and the products they use in their home, but unfortunately the FDA doesn't require fragrance companies to disclose what's in their products," she says. Which could be worrisome when you consider that, according to the Environmental Working Group, many popular perfumes and colognes can contain a dozen or more synthetic materials, many of them derived from petroleum.

"A rose may be a rose," reports the EWG. "But that rose-like fragrance in your perfume may be something else entirely, concocted from any number of the fragrance industry's 3,100 stock chemical ingredients, the blend of which is almost always kept hidden from the consumer."

This means that transparency rests with manufacturers and some are more forthcoming than others. “We’re one of the only fragrance companies to disclose all of our choices and decisions, including ingredients,” Korman says. “But decisions around some ingredients can be a real gray area, and our guiding principle has been: if an ingredient is iffy, let's not use it.”

That’s important to many consumers, like Michelle Moreland, a Florida yoga instructor. About five years ago, Moreland realized she couldn’t tolerate artificial fragrances. “I can't do anything synthetic. It makes me sick,” she says. “Genetically, my body doesn't process the chemicals.” That means avoiding scents in everything from cleaning products to personal care items.

Moreland relies on essential oils from Purify Skin Therapy because she knows exactly what she’s putting on her skin and can adjust it according to her mood or health needs. Michele Karas, a New York writer, rethought her fragrance after her old standby was reformulated — and after she survived breast cancer. “I found [Amber Oil by DollyMoo] at a yoga conference and have been getting compliments and saving money,” she says. “I can't say I'll never indulge in a more traditional perfume again, but I'm loving this new, healthier discovery.” Moreland is more absolute and is skeptical about the idea of a clean or natural fragrance. “It depends on what their definition is; it can be pretty loose in that industry,” she says.

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It's true that the terms organic, natural, and clean are liberally utilized in the green cosmetics market — and, as Moreland points out, definitions are less than crystal-clear. "Organic," according to the USDA, means that at least 95 percent of ingredients used are organically produced. "Natural" and "clean" are hard terms to regulate, thus less clear when it comes to determining how health and environmentally conscience a product is. Phlur, a "clean" company, states that they use minimal skin irritants and additives, while ensuring their ingredients are responsibly sourced. By Rosie Jane also uses the "clean" label, which their site characterizes as "without the icky stuff: no parabens, phthalates or hormone interrupters" while also environmentally concerned. One Seed is "natural," meaning their scents contain all-natural ingredients with at least 80 percent organic content, "gentle on both the skin and the environment."

It's no wonder that consumers like Sandra Mhanthe, a lawyer in Ireland who describes her own perfume collection as "a fragrance for every occasion," dismiss these terms as baloney. "Natural doesn't equal ethical or clean," she states. "There is no such thing as a 'clean' fragrance. It is an oxymoron." What's more, the natural vs. clean debate isn't even clear among manufacturers. One maker I talked to insisted that clean is superior to natural: some natural ingredients, such as sandalwood, are not sustainable and others, like lavender essential oil, often trigger allergic reactions. However, another maintained that natural is better: clean perfumes may contain untested or potentially questionable chemicals, such as diethylphthalate for denaturing alcohol. Thus, it doesn't appear that this argument has a single answer.

Thoroughly confused by conflicting opinions and positions, I reached out to someone who's better informed than just about everyone on this topic. She's a senior researcher for the government — remaining anonymous to keep her employer happy — who deals extensively with personal care manufacturers. "In theory, I think that clean vs. natural fragrance is a meaningful distinction," she told me. "Clean fragrances only use the safest components, whether they are natural or synthetic, and natural fragrances only use ingredients found in nature and could have some toxic properties." After checking into several brands, however, she gave me some bad news: only one, One Seed, fit the "natural" profile and even it "will still contain sensitizers and other problematic components." The rest didn't fare much better in her estimation. "I would say that none of them are 'clean' fragrances. They all still contain toxic components. So, if you're a person who is sensitive to fragrances, you will likely be sensitive to these 'clean' fragrances as well."

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Natural and clean fragrances have the potential to be safer, because they often contain fewer components than conventional perfumes.

Well, cue my disappointment. But, since I'm not fragrance sensitive, natural/clean still seemed like the better option, even if it came with some necessary evils. However, my researcher friend advised caution here as well. "[These products] have the potential to be safer, because they often contain fewer components than conventional perfumes," she allows. Even so, her investigation revealed some sneaky toxicants. "It's hard to make a clean fragrance!" she says.

So, is it worth it? Several companies let me try their offerings and, on a positive note, nothing I tried made me smell like a Phish concert. I loved By Rosie Jane's Angie perfume- — one of the loveliest honeysuckles I've found, clean or not — and my husband enthusiastically approved Phlur's Ameline, and Ellis Brooklyn's Myth. After hearing all the science, though, I am now wondering if I'm best served skipping all of it and sticking with rosewater. It may just be that, for me, this is what the future smells like.