

## Thai Herbal Balms, Oils, and Hair Treatments

Massage oils are generally not used in traditional Thai massage, except for certain conditions when they might benefit a particular condition or when massage may be contraindicated. In these cases, specific types of medicinal oil are prepared to correspond to the therapeutic needs, physical conditions, and elemental dispositions of each person. In Thailand, traditional herbal recipes are popular, and healers and herbalists make their own medicines, balms, and oils from herbs, roots, rhizomes, flowers, plant leaves, tree bark, and distillations purchased from herbal apothecaries. Local companies make rubbing balms in small quantities, and larger companies prepare and sell hot herbal balms to retailers and for export.

### Varieties of hot balm

Making hot herbal balms requires access to fresh Thai herbs, rhizomes, and concentrated liquid distillations, but these are generally not available outside of Thailand. In addition, it's difficult to produce strong balms by working at home in your kitchen. Because of this, it's usually best to buy commercial Thai balms from import stores and online companies. Thai rubbing balms are available in many countries around the world. Yellow balms often have greater amounts of plai and turmeric, white balms tend to have more menthol and camphor, and red balms contain more turmeric and clove. Other ingredients such as cajeput and cassia are also found in hot balms.

If Thai rubbing balms are available for purchase in your area, find one you like, and use it when needed. Here are some popular brands:

**Monkey Holding Peach Medicated Balm™** is an excellent product, with a base of camphor and menthol.

**Wangprom Green Balm™** contains larger amounts of camphor and eucalyptus, and the yellow variety features a base of plai.

**Tiger Balm™** is the best known and most widely distributed commercial Thai balm in the West. The white version has a base made mostly of camphor, and the red variety has added clove and cassia oils.

### Application and use

For areas of tightness, soreness, and physical restriction, and pains in the back, chest, and shoulders, analgesic balms are very effective. When applied to the chest and throat, they can alleviate discomfort due to colds, congestion, and sinusitis. In Thailand, balms and oils are sometimes applied three times in the same area while rubbing in a circular motion. The repeated applications, combined with deliberate medium-pressure rubbing, allow the medicinal properties to be absorbed through the skin. While the heat is being transferred through the layers of the body, use incremental pressure as you work the areas being treated. Remember to wash and dry your hands immediately after applying balm, whether on yourself or on another person's body, and before you treat other areas. Use water or a homemade cleansing spray, and dry your hands thoroughly with a hand towel. Some balms and creams may be used on the feet, and also at the end of the session while working on the shoulders, neck, and face. Lightly scented herbal balm is excellent for finishing touches on the neck, face, and forehead, when the client is in final supine position. A small dab on the third eye area of the forehead can help to work the entire face.

## Homemade balms

To make hot, cool, or skin-nourishing balms, you need a double-boiler or two normal cooking pots, one large and one small. If you use two pots, and you plan to make balms on a regular basis, use the small pot exclusively for this purpose, since over time it will retain the scent of the herbs and essential oils. Add enough water to the large pot so that the bottom of the smaller pot floats on the surface of the water, with its handle resting on the rim of the larger pot. Boil the water in the bottom pot, then lower the flame, and place the smaller pot inside. Mix your oils, crystals, and wax in the smaller pot, and use a wooden spoon or chopstick to stir the mixture as it cooks. Have small glass jars or metal canisters and tight-fitting lids nearby, as well as a pot holder.

### *Warming Thai balm*

As mentioned earlier, it's difficult to reproduce the strength of commercial rubbing balms when you make them at home, but if you'd like to try to make your own hot balm, here's a recipe for a simple warming balm using essential oils, menthol and camphor crystals, carrier oils and beeswax.

#### INGREDIENTS:

- 60 ml (about 1/4 cup) of coconut oil \*
- 30 grams (about 2 tablespoons) of grated beeswax
- 60 drops of peppermint oil (about 1 ½ teaspoons) \*\*
- 60 drops of white camphor oil \*\*
- 20 drops of eucalyptus oil
- 20 drops of clove oil \*

\* You may substitute or use a blend of raw sesame oil or safflower oil

\*\* To make a stronger balm, substitute 3 teaspoons of menthol crystals and 3 teaspoons of camphor crystals instead of the essential oils.

**DIRECTIONS:** Heat the carrier oil and beeswax in a double-boiler over low heat. Stir with a wooden chopstick until the wax is melted. Remove from the heat, and stir in the crystals and essential oils. Allow it to cool for at least 5 minutes, and then pour it into a small glass jar or metal container. Allow the balm to completely cool and to solidify to your preferred viscosity before covering with a lid.

This recipe creates one small jar of clear or pale yellow balm. If you would like a darker yellow color, you can add turmeric powder when you are mixing the ingredients into the hot oil. After experimenting with this recipe, you may decide to vary the thickness and strength of the balm by re-melting the balm and modifying the amounts of beeswax and other materials. More wax will make the balm thicker, and more essential oils or crystals will make it stronger and hotter. Keep notes of your proportions as you make adjustments.

While the above balm is fine for use in conjunction with general massage, hotter balms address areas of more intense and localized soreness and muscle aches. Stronger carrier oils can be pre-made by simmering fresh herbs, hot chili peppers, and roots in oil on a low flame for a long period, and then straining and mixing the infused oil with beeswax and other ingredients (see Rubbing Oil recipe).

Many recipes for Thai hot balm often include plai, turmeric, garlic, cassia, and hot chili peppers, resulting in stronger, more antiseptic balms. If you have access to these ingredients, you can experiment further. Decoctions are also made by combining fresh herbs in a pan with a small amount of water. The mixture is boiled until almost all of the water is evaporated. Then it is strained, combined with oil and wax, and cooked over low heat until even more water has evaporated.

## Other balms, creams, and oils

### ***Face balm or cream***

#### INGREDIENTS:

- 1/8 cup of coconut oil
- 1/8 cup of raw sesame oil
- 2–3 tablespoons of beeswax

#### DIRECTIONS:

Vary the amount to make a thicker balm or a thinner cream. Add essential oils sparingly. You may experiment with flowery and fragrant oils like jasmine, frangipani, lemongrass, or lavender, or use an earthier scent, such as cedarwood, sandalwood, or kaffir lime. Add only a few drops at first, and then increase to get the balance and strength you desire. Mix all ingredients in a double-boiler. Once the mixture is evenly combined, pour it into a small container. Let it completely cool and harden before you close the lid.

### ***Foot balm or cream***

#### DIRECTIONS:

Use the same basic oil and wax recipe as above, and combine varying amounts of peppermint (or menthol crystals), and/or eucalyptus, lemongrass, and ginger. Rub vigorously into the tops and bottoms of feet, between toes, and into the calf muscles of each leg. Wrap each foot in a cloth or towel, and allow the cream to remain on the feet for a few minutes. If you like, you can continue to work the feet and calves by stretching, compressing, and activating pressure points through the towels. When you unwrap the feet, make sure to remove all the cream, wash and dry the feet, and then wash your hands.

### ***Lip balm***

#### DIRECTIONS:

Mix 1 part beeswax and 2–3 parts of coconut or sesame oil on a low flame until melted. If a scent is desired, use a flowery essential oil very sparingly, and avoid using oils such as eucalyptus, camphor, or mint that could irritate mucous membranes.

### ***Rubbing oil***

#### DIRECTIONS:

Massage oil for sore muscles can be made from fresh chili peppers, turmeric, and essential oils. Smash 7 fresh Thai chili peppers and a few pieces of turmeric root, and add them to a frying pan with ½ cup (4 ounces) of carrier oil, such as coconut, raw sesame, or vegetable. Heat it on a medium-low flame until the ingredients start to bubble, and stir it occasionally to thoroughly toast the peppers and turmeric. After a few minutes of simmering and stirring, turn off the heat. Let the mixture cool, transfer everything to a small covered jar, and store it in a dark place at room temperature. After a few days, strain the oil into the double-boiler, and heat it until it's warm. Turn off the heat and add 4 teaspoons of pepper-mint essential oil (or 3 teaspoons of menthol crystals), plus 2 teaspoons of clove essential oil and 1 teaspoon of eucalyptus essential oil. Stir the mixture again, let it cool, and store it in a covered jar or a squeeze-bottle.

use this oil to massage sore areas of the body, but not as a general rubbing oil. Don't use it on sensitive skin, open wounds, or near the eyes or nostrils. Wash your hands thoroughly after each application. If you like, you may prepare base oil in this way, and then use it for the Warming Thai Balm recipe mentioned previously.

## **Traditional Thai hair treatments**

In Thailand, the crushed rinds of kaffir limes and other fruits are widely used in shampoos, hair lotions, and hot oil treatments. Fresh kaffir limes are difficult to find outside of Southeast Asia, and when they are available, they can be expensive. Fresh and frozen kaffir lime leaves and essential oil are more easily available, as well as bergamot essential oil. Bergamot (citrus bergamia) is a different fruit than kaffir lime (citrus hystrix), but it has similar antiseptic and hair-conditioning properties. The following are two hair treatments you may want to try.

### ***Warm herbal oil treatment***

For dry or brittle hair, put 3–4 tablespoons of coconut oil in a small pan or pot designated for this purpose. Add a few tablespoons of fresh lime or lemon juice, and about 5 drops of kaffir lime or bergamot essential oil. (If you have access to fresh or frozen kaffir lime leaves, pulverize 7 leaves in a blender with a small amount of water to make a thick paste.) Heat all the ingredients on a low flame until warm. Place a towel or cloth over your shoulders, cover your shoulders and neck, and apply the mixture to your hair. Rub it into your scalp and along the strands of your hair, from the roots to the ends, and massage the head and scalp to encourage absorption. If possible, sit outside in the sun (or in a bright place) for 10–15 minutes, and allow the mixture to further penetrate your hair and scalp. Finally, shower and rinse the oil mixture out of your hair with warm water. If your hair remains too oily afterward, use a light, natural shampoo, and rinse again.

### ***Watermelon rind cleansing treatment***

Watermelon is available almost everywhere, and this lather-free Thai recipe leaves your hair clean and smooth. Cut the rind from a few slices of watermelon, and peel off some of the outer green skin, leaving mostly the white inner rind. Cut into smaller pieces, and put it in a food processor and pulse to make a fine paste. Add a few drops of water, if necessary, to reach the desired consistency, and until the rind is completely pulverized into a wet paste.

Place approximately 2 full cups of the finely blended watermelon rind into a bowl, and add the following ingredients: 7–10 drops of kaffir lime or bergamot essential oil + 2 tablespoons of lime or lemon juice + 1 teaspoon of melted coconut oil. Mix everything with a wooden tool until the ingredients are blended. Transfer the mixture to a container, and use it like shampoo in the shower to wash and clean your hair. You may also heat it slightly before using it. Save the remaining mixture in the refrigerator for future use in a covered jar or container.

## **Poultices for Topical Application**

An herbal poultice or plaster is a paste of plant material that is applied to the skin in order to treat disorders or relieve soreness, itchiness, and inflammation. After preparation, herbal ingredients are sometimes mixed with a natural bonding agent, such as rice, flour, or starch. The paste is kept in place on the skin, sometimes covered with a cloth or gauze, and removed and reapplied at regular intervals until symptoms are reduced.

Some Thai poultices and plasters use herbs, flowers, and plants readily found in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia. The traditional poultice recipes below use ingredients that are common in Thailand but easier to find in other regions.

## **How to make an herbal poultice**

### *Using fresh materials*

Chop the herbs, roots, and rhizomes into small pieces on a cutting board. Transfer them to a mortar, and crush everything together until it becomes a pulp. As you chop and mash, the materials release natural juices and the mixture becomes soft. Mash it just enough to break down the fibers in the leaves and roots. You may also use a blender or food processor, though it's commonly believed that doing it manually results in stronger medicine. If you do use a food processor, pulse the blades through the materials rather than run the machine continuously.

If the mixture is thick enough, you can apply it directly to your body, but if it is watery, thicken it with rice flour or tapioca starch. Stir in a little powder until you obtain the desired consistency and spread it onto the affected area of the skin. Apply a generous amount, and make sure that the herbs are spread evenly. Wrap the area with a layer of gauze or cotton cloth to hold the paste in place. You may even apply a layer of plastic wrap over the finished poultice. This helps to contain the juices so they don't leak or stain clothing or bedding.

### *Using dried materials, or mixing fresh and dried herbs*

Making a dried-herb poultice is less work than using fresh herbs because it's quicker and less labor-intensive. The medicinal properties in dried herbs are weaker than fresh herbs, but they are still effective. You can also use a combination of fresh and dry ingredients for a poultice. Combine dry herbs and powders with just enough hot water to moisten them, and then add your prepared paste of fresh ingredients. Mix it all together, and thicken it if necessary before application and wrapping.

## **A few types of herbal poultices**

### *Salt for infections and abscesses*

Salt plasters are helpful to pacify and diminish newly forming minor infections or abscesses. Use thick grains of salt, or break rock salt into smaller pieces. Mix with a few drops of water and rice vinegar, and add some overcooked mashed rice or rice powder as necessary to form a paste. In the early stages of an infection or an abscess anywhere on the body, clean the area well, apply the poultice, cover lightly, and keep in place for a few hours.

### *Clove oil for upper body skin tags*

Skin tags are small protrusions or flakes of skin that occur with aging and from exposure to the elements, especially around the neck and the face. Clove essential oil is an effective way to remove them. Apply it generously to the entire area with a cotton swab, and allow the oil to remain on the skin until it evaporates. Repeat several times a day until the tag falls off. If you don't have access to clove oil, you can make a fine paste using clove powder and a few drops of a mixture of water, vinegar, or alcohol. Avoid touching your eyes and nostrils with the oil or paste.

### *Garlic for warts and skin tags*

If you don't mind the smell, fresh garlic can effectively treat a number of skin conditions, including warts and skin tags. Crush and pulverize a few garlic cloves in a mortar to make a paste. Add some rice flour and a few drops of water or vinegar as needed. Apply the paste on the area you wish to treat, cover it with a bandage, and leave it for several hours. Later, wash the area with warm water. Repeat daily for a few days until the wart or skin tag disintegrates.

### *Ginger for inflammation*

Ginger is an effective anti-inflammatory, even when used in small quantities. To ease irritations and inflammations, make a ginger plaster at home by mixing crushed/pulverized ginger root and/or ginger powder with hot water. Add a small amount of rice flour or cassava flour to make the mixture slightly sticky. Create a spreadable paste in a glass or wooden bowl by adding boiling water as you stir the mixture thoroughly. Dip a washcloth in the bowl, apply it directly to the area of the body that is inflamed, and allow it to be thoroughly absorbed into the skin by using circular rubbing movements. Re-soak the cloth in the ginger mixture and repeat as needed. Allow the paste to dry for some time, and then wash it off with warm water.

**Bulb and rhizome mix for foot fungus** Use 3 parts of fresh turmeric (or turmeric powder) plus 2 parts of fresh galanga root (or ginger root) plus 1 part of fresh garlic. Combine all the ingredients in a mortar or a food processor, and pulverize them thoroughly. Add a few drops of vinegar if necessary to make a paste. First, soak the foot in vinegar, or clean it thoroughly with a vinegar-soaked cloth. Rice vinegar is commonly used in Thailand, but any type of vinegar will be fine. Once the foot is cleaned and dried, apply the paste to the affected area, and expose it to as much natural sunlight as possible. Repeat the process several times a day until you see results.

*excerpted from the book "The Art of Thai Massage"*