

A Collection of Aromatherapy Recipes: From the Still Room

by Alexandria Brighton

Introduction

Women as healers and care-givers for their families and communities pre-date written history. From time immemorial, women were expected to give birth, nurture, heal, protect, provide for and spend their days steeped in the tradition of the wise women before them, caring for themselves and their families – and quite often, the entire community. The skills a woman brought to her marriage would very well determine whether or not that family would live in comfort, have enough to eat, stay well and prosper. The things we have come to accept as the comforts and necessities of life were placed entirely in the realm of womanly arts.

The woman's arts reached their peak during the late middle ages till the early part of the last century, in the time of the stillroom. The stillroom was a room separate from the kitchen but usually within close proximity which contained a still. Unlike the large outdoor stills used for making alcoholic beverages, the stillroom still was a smaller and simpler version used to distill herbs to extract their essence for use in medication, cosmetics, salves and many other household uses.

The stillroom was perhaps the most important room in a home, especially the more wealthy manor houses, where the lady of the manor – with the help of the servants, may have to minister healing to everyone living on or working for their land. In these times, the nearest doctor, if there was one, could be several miles away and accessed only by horse or worse still, on foot, thus requiring a manor house and later a homestead to be self sufficient. The stillroom and the special women who worked there were revered and valued for their knowledge and skill, as they sustained the health and well-being of those in their care, often totally responsible for saving and prolonging their lives.

The stillroom recipe book was passed down from mother to daughter and training in the stillroom arts had direct relation to the value a young girl could bring to a marriage. The word “*recipe*” originally referred to a medicinal formula, and a recipe book for the stillroom may contain everything from medicinal recipes to cough syrups, cosmetics, cordials, liquors, liniments, perfumes, pomanders, food preservation, jams and jellies, wool dyeing, candle making and soap making. Everything that sustained and added quality of life to the family might be found in the stillroom recipe book. Family recipes were closely guarded secrets much like some of the favorite recipes passed down from our ancestors are today. Grandma’s famous pie crust or turkey gravy recipe becoming a family legacy passed to the next generation.

Today, with the increasing interest in aromatherapy, essential oils and other natural forms of health care, the arts of the stillroom are again gaining recognition and are truly the birthright of every woman. Whenever you make a simple herbal recipe, scent a homemade candle, enjoy a potpourri from your own herb garden , make an herbal vinegar or preserve food, you are participating in the preservation of the tradition of the woman’s arts and the legacy from the long-forgotten stillroom.

When the stresses of our fast-paced lives makes us long for the simpler times, take out your stillroom recipe book, select a favorite recipe and step back in time. Join the many women who have gone before you, feeling the connection with these women who have preserved the traditions, celebrations, and warm family memories we enjoy today.