

# Making a Mint of Money: Essential Oils' Export Success

By Jill Lee

Growers in the Pacific Northwest find themselves awash in green-breezy emerald fields of spearmint and peppermint that can be converted into export dollars.

U.S. essential oil exports totaled more than \$530 million in 1999, up slightly from the year before. The single largest seller, not counting blended products, is peppermint oil. The runner-up is orange oil.

## Who Buys the Mint?

The essential oils of mint can flavor anything from toothpaste to cookies. Canada is the largest market for U.S. essential oils—the value of sales there grew by 21 percent in 1999. While that market is respectable, it is not the fastest growing.

Canada purchased only about \$75,000 more peppermint oil in 1999 than it did in 1998. During the same timeframe, however, China's purchases jumped from \$1.2 million to \$5.5 million, more than a four-fold increase.

Lebanon increased peppermint oil purchases from the United States to roughly \$250,000 in 1999, almost doubling 1998 sales. Peru also showed sharp growth, with U.S. sales totaling more than \$18,000 in 1998, but more than \$300,000 worth in 1999.

For spearmint oil, the top customers were France, Mexico and the United Kingdom.

## Other Winning Oils

One positive sign was the growth in cedarwood, clove and nutmeg oils. The value of exports grew by 44 percent, from \$3.7 to \$5.3 million. Belgium-Luxembourg boosted U.S. exports by purchasing more than \$200,000 worth of these oils in 1999—

three times the sales of the year before.

The United Kingdom remains the United States' strongest customer, lapping up \$3.7 million in oils. Sales to the United Kingdom account for almost 70 percent of U.S. total sales for 1999.

Orange oil exports increased by less than 3 percent in 1999. Still, at \$20.7 million, this category's exports outpaced sales of nutmeg and clove oils, while other citrus oils such as lemon or lime lost ground.

Predictably, this market is mainly one of developed nations. At \$5.7 million, the Netherlands was the leading customer for U.S. orange oils. Japan came in second at \$4 million. Switzerland, Ireland and the United Kingdom were also million-dollar markets for citrus oils.

## Power Combinations Dominate

While pure essential oils have their market, there is yet another subcategory of essential oils that outsells them all. "Mixtures of odoriferous," an awkward term referring to pleasant combinations of plant oils used in foods or drinks, are the potions of power in this commodity. Think of them as the perfume of the culinary world, for they give foods distinctive scents and flavors, making them more appetizing. Their total sales for 1999: over \$270 million, up slightly from \$257 million the year before. That is more than the \$228 million sold for the "single-note" U.S. essential oils combined. ■

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