

Community

Sunday, January 28, 2001

Ohio PTA Web site honored

The Ohio PTA Web site, www.ohiopta.org, was chosen by Lightspan's StudyWeb researchers as one of the best educational resources on the Internet. Selected for its comprehensive size and organization, the Web site offers resources ranging from education news and legislative activity to bulletin boards and links to other relevant education sites.

AROMATHERAPY

Chemist searches for healing powers through her plant-based soaps, lotions

By Janet Podolak
News-Herald Staff Writer

Gentle chamomile soothes and helps with headaches. Lemon-grass is as good for stress as it is for dry skin. Rosemary stimulates mental activity and aids oily skin, while lavender relaxes and helps heal acne.

Chemist Tracy Knake is a scientist through and through. Yet she's convinced that herbs play an important role in well-being and skin care.

She knows that dry, itchy skin and a vague sense of depression don't have to be by-products of a Northeast Ohio winter. She also knows that people need a little extra help when sunshine is in short supply and cold, dry air conspires to chap skin.

She tackled the well-being issues of winter on the home front before she began producing soaps and lotions for others.

Aromatherapy combined with the integrity of good ingredients are a large part of the answer.

"The nose is the only direct opening to the brain from outside the body," Knake says. "Once a fragrance is inhaled it triggers a nerve impulse that reaches the part of the brain that interprets smell."

That message goes to other parts of the brain which transmit it to the rest of the body, she says.

"Everything I make is plant-based," she said. She uses expensive essential oils in her products so they can be personalized for her customers' needs. Because they are super concentrated, only a few drops of the oils are needed.

It takes 350 pounds of pressed rose petals to make a single ounce of rose absolute, for instance. It sells for about \$40 for a sixth of an ounce.

But rose oil is a powerful scent in the lexicon of aromatherapy.

Consider a spa

Are you into unguents, massages, exfoliants and aromatherapy, but still looking for the perfect spa to put them all together at a perfect price?

If so, check out the recent Spa magazine, \$6.95 on newsstands.

The magazine has a list of more than 800 spas worldwide. Surely one has a Jacuzzi with your name on it.

It's an antidepressant that's also an antiseptic and an aphrodisiac. It's good for mature dry skin, helps PMS and serves as a mild sedative.

"When I began making hand-made soap, I discovered that the glycerin is removed in processed soap," she said. "Removing the glycerin makes soap last longer, but it also makes the soap hard on the skin by drying it."

Manufacturers typically use the glycerin they remove from soap to make skin softening products. They're, in turn, sold to counteract the dryness caused by a combination of cold, dry weather and processed soap.

Knake first began making soaps for her own use, taking her knowledge of chemistry and her affinity for herbs to a new level. The soaps Knake crafts in her Chester Township loft not only keep the glycerin intact, they include the finest palm, coconut and olive oils.

Since her husband, Ed, is an executive chef she has good access to supplies of the fine oils she needs for the cold processing method of soap-making. "It's the oldest of all methods for making soaps," she says.

It's also time-consuming and labor intensive, but the results are



Ken Blazek/News-Herald

Woman at work: Chemist Tracy Knake blends herbs and other ingredients with a mortar and pestle in her Chester Township loft.

soaps that are rich and moist, leaving skin supple instead of dry. The soaps must cure for about a month before they are cut into bars.

Knake has parlayed her chemistry degree and a longtime interest in aromatherapy and herbs into a home business — Essence Maker Aromatherapy. But she's kept her day job doing chemical testing for the city of Solon.

When she and her husband moved to an old house in Chester Township last year, they added a loft laboratory above the garage for her workspace. Here, framed

by icicles beneath the eaves, Knake works in fragrant surroundings using the time-tested ways of long ago.

Herbs harvested from her garden last fall now hang to dry overhead as she crushes ingredients with an old fashioned mortar and pestle. She carefully wraps her transparent and marbled handmade soaps in their cardboard sleeves and decants lotions and oils into an assortment of pretty jars and bottles. She sends out catalogs to those who have left messages on her voice mail and fills phone orders called in while

she worked at her day job.

Weekends are devoted to selling her wares at craft shows and meeting with would-be retailers. She's also studying for a certification as an herbalist and completing aromatherapy courses at the Xenia-based Ohio Academy of Holistic Health.

Although soaps remain the core of the business, she's added lotions, massage oils, lip balm, a salt scrub and even a pet deodorizing spray to her line. Herbal eye pillows are encased in maroon velvet, while Tea for the Tub embraces mineral and sea salts

with lavender and chamomile in big tea bags.

A Web site is in the offing and she's trying to line up a few more retailers.

Knake enjoys feedback from customers who have purchased her creations at craft shows like the St. Anselm's Christmas Show, or at shops like the Loretta Faganucci School of Cooking just up the street, Fowler's Mill and the gift shop at the Beachwood Embassy Suites Hotel.

"People who have tried them love these products," she said. "Many of them ordered gift baskets for Christmas and I'm putting together romance baskets for Valentine's Day."

The demand has inspired a new line of products for babies and gift baskets for bridal showers.

But she's also learning that having a great product is no guarantee of success in today's business world. Sometimes it's the littlest things that can lead to problems.

Mustard Seed Market, the organic supermarket with stores in Solon and Monroeville, canceled her product line when the original labels began to lift up.

"Their customers liked my soaps and lotions, but that wasn't enough," she laments.

She redesigned the labels and offered to teach classes at the Solon store on how customers can make their own lotions, bath soaks and other concoctions. Classes likely will be offered in the spring. Although her products haven't yet been returned to the market shelves, Mustard Seed Market is reconsidering the line.

Reach Essence Maker Aromatherapy at (440) 729-3894 for a catalog or to place an order.



Ken Blazek/News-Herald



Ken Blazek/News-Herald

How to get it: The Essence Maker Aromatherapy line is found at several local retail outlets and craft shows, but the majority of sales are by mail.

A long time coming: Tracy Knake's chunky handcrafted soaps take about a month to cure before they are cut into bars.