

How to take a



Loaded with oils, swirling with salts or as part of a glow-giving skincare routine... senior beauty editor Alexandra Friend finds out how to take her bath to a magical new level

There's not much in life I haven't marked with a bath. High days and low moods, relationships ending and new ones beginning (though a cramped tub for two is never quite the luxurious treat it seems!); it's all happened to the tune of a rushing tap. I've idled to the murmur of Radio 4 and read entire novels in one long, skin-wrinkling sitting. Most memorably, I've inched my way into hot water and healing salts after the death of my beloved dad, and bonded with a midwife over the scent of lemongrass left on my skin by the last bath I had before my daughter was born. I've unravelled in baths and put myself back together in them; whatever I've sought, I've always found it in the tub. And I am not alone. At the time of writing, online beauty and wellbeing retailer Cult Beauty (always a great barometer of the nation's mood) reports a 296% year-on-year leap in sales of oils, soaks and bath salts, with an even bigger 466% jump during the peak lockdown months of April to July.

'Bathing has come into its own this year,' says Deborah Hanekamp, New York energy healer and bath-time devotee. 'We've had to turn inward in so many senses and have embraced bathing as a powerful way to take care of ourselves.' Her guide to turning your bath into a watery ceremony (*Ritual Baths*, HarperCollins) is published this month, with recipes for everything from finding your purpose to connecting with the phases of the moon. There's a crystal here, a smudge stick there and all sorts of petals and powders in-between, but over Zoom from her home in Brooklyn, she tells me that the most transformative ingredient of all is intention: 'We all have an urge to make ourselves feel better when we put ourselves into the bath - and that's healing.'

Even a simple pause before dipping in a toe, she says, can turn a bath into a ritual: 'If you're not sure where to start, just take a moment before you enter. You can think

about something you want to release, but even if you're not focusing on anything at all, the pause helps you shift into relaxing mode.' Sarah Coonan, buying director at Liberty London and another dedicated bather, agrees. 'The ritual in preparing my bath is as important as the bath itself,' she says. 'I'm focused on turning this bath into a delightful experience, not thinking about how stressful my day has been.'

Much of Sarah's bath-time prep is about landscaping; she'll rearrange the plants in her bathroom, and line the wooden caddy across her tub with pretty mirrored or marble trays, wax tapers in elegant glass candleholders, nubbly natural sponges and, often, a glass of wine. 'There's a different view every time I lie down,' she says. 'I'll have some crystals around the bath, too. If I'm particularly stressed, I place them on my chest and forehead. My husband thinks I'm insane, but they're beautiful to look at and I find the weight of them entirely soothing. Even if it's a placebo effect, it helps!'

Once in the water, Sarah will read a book or listen to a podcast, or she'll search for sound baths on YouTube and drift away on a soundscape of gongs, cymbals and singing bowls. And while Deborah prescribes meditation or singing rituals in her book, she equally enjoys 'a good Billie Holiday bath'.

Neom founder Nicola Elliott finds a combination of breathing exercises and essential oils so impactful, the instructions are printed on some of the brand's packaging. 'Breathing in for the count of seven and out for 11 allows for absorption of the oils not only through the skin but through inhalation, too,' she says. 'It's a very special double whammy.' She recommends a soak of 10-15 minutes, to allow the essential oils and breathing exercises to work. She also likes to layer her therapeutic scents by lighting a candle 20 minutes before she takes her bath, allowing the room to fill with aroma. For Nicola, a soak like this is more treatment than bath, creating a sense of calm by stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system (an effect often called 'rest and digest').

For maximum stress-relief or an energy boost, choose candles that contain potent concentrations of quality oils, such as **Neom Limited Edition Real Luxury 3-Wick Scented Candle** (1), £46, or **Kalmar Joy Candle** (2), £45.



YOUR BATHING CHECKLIST

LIGHTING... Keep it soft and low, with tapers, tealights or scented candles. Overhead lights can set off extractor fans or give off a low electrical hum - another good reason for turning them off.

SOUNDS... For a non-tinny soundtrack when using a smartphone, try a portable Bluetooth-enabled speaker such as **Ultimate Ears Wonderboom**, from £59. It's waterproof, too.

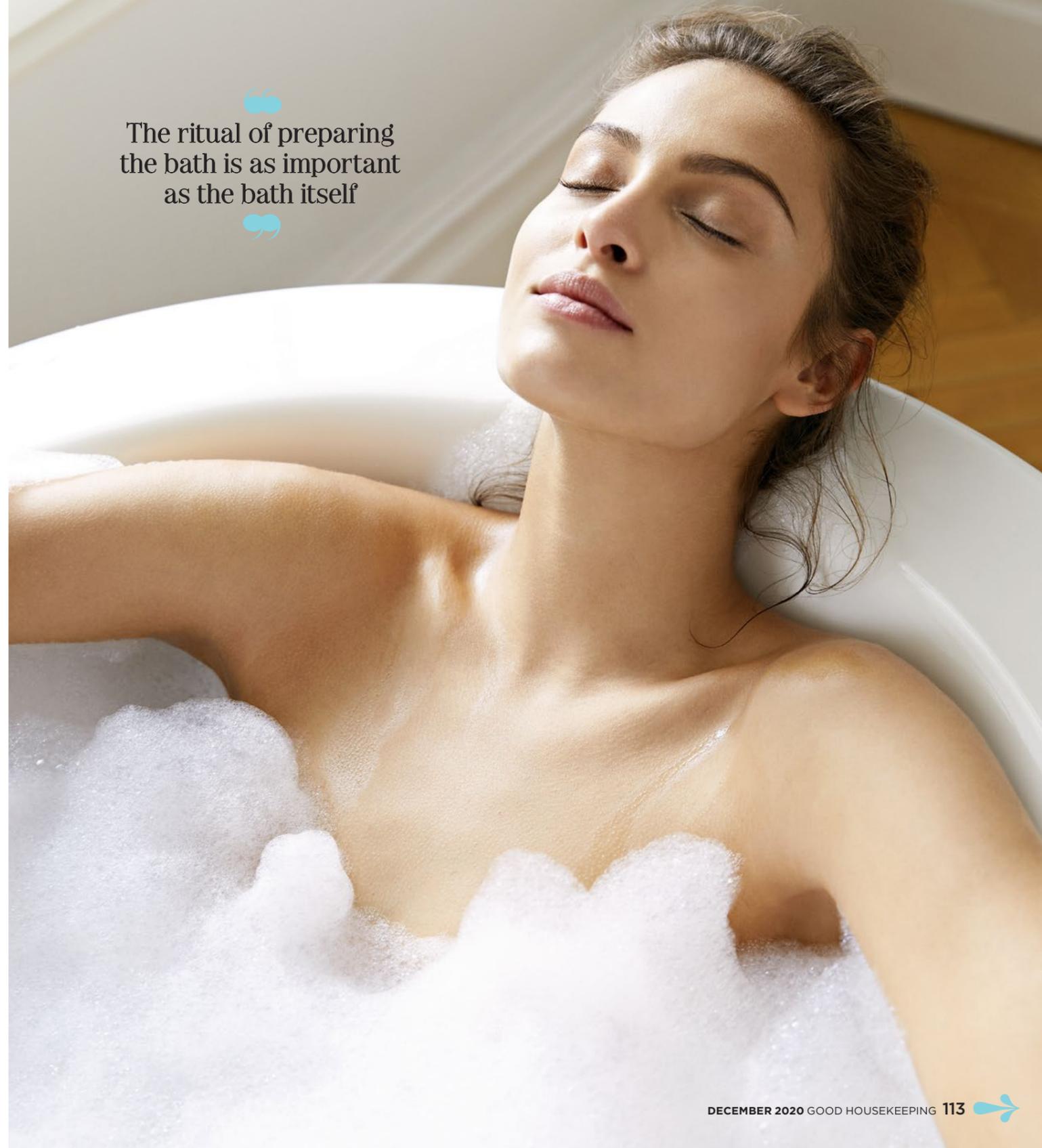
WATER... Self-care is personal, so bathe at the temperature you're drawn to, but be mindful that extreme heat doesn't suit dry or sensitive skin.

MAKE IT PRETTY... Even tidying away cleaning products or kids' bath toys makes a big difference.

EVERYTHING WITHIN REACH... Plan ahead carefully because there's nothing worse than having to get out of the bath to fetch something you've forgotten.

better bath

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SOAK IT UP

Social media platform Instagram is a great source of 'bath-spiration', from Sarah Coonan's beautifully stocked bath caddies (@sarah_coonan) to Deborah Hanekamp's petal-strewn tubs (@mamamedicine), plus breathtaking bathrooms from every corner of the globe (@artofbathrituals). For 20-minute sound baths with easy meditation prompts, follow lifestyle writer Jasmine Hemsley (@JasmineHemsley).



PHOTOGRAPHY: JON COMPSON/GALLERY STOCK

For Arabella Preston, co-founder of Votary skincare, a bath is part of her evening skincare routine. 'I bathe early,' she says, 'partly to get my night-time serums and moisturisers on to my skin as soon as possible, but also because I like to feel my evening is stretching out ahead of me.' After removing make-up and SPF with a first cleanse, Arabella smooths a second cleanser (an oil this time) over her face and neck (her **Votary Cleansing Oil** (3), £45, comes in deliciously scented Rose Geranium and Apricot). 'I like a hot bath,' she says. 'I'm not saying it's for everyone, and certainly there are skin conditions such as eczema that don't suit it, but I have to wince a little bit when I get in. The oil acts as a nourishing mask, but also protects my skin from the drying effects of the steam. When I'm ready to get out, I wring out a flannel in the hot water and put it over my face for a moment to bring the oils to life. I have a good inhale, then use the flannel to physically lift away the dead skin cells while I'm removing the oil. It leaves my skin brighter and makes a clean,



smooth base for my skincare. So, yes, it feels good and there's a ritual element, but there's a practical side, too.'

Arabella might add a few pumps of bath oil to her tub but often bathes in 'just the pure, clear water'. Sarah Coonan has 'a whole arsenal of products', to suit season and mood. 'If I want something indulgent, I'll go for oil,' she says. 'If I'm achy or stressed, I'll choose salts.' Favourites include **Aromatherapy Associates Deep Relax Bath & Shower Oil** (4), £49, and **Aveda Stress-Fix Soaking Salts** (5), £32. Deborah Hanekamp is adamant that the components for a transformative soak are easily found in the kitchen: 'There is something beautiful about knowing we have everything we need. The rosemary from your spice rack or a beautiful pebble you picked up from the beach are amazing ingredients to pop in your bath.'



Certainly one of the best baths Sarah ever had contained just half a tub of bicarbonate of soda (said to ease sore muscles and soothe sensitive skin) and a handful of petals from her garden. 'It smelled incredible,' she says.

As for me, I've taken my bathing to the next level in the course of writing this feature. I might add something from my balcony garden to whichever oil or salt I choose; I'm mindful in the way I get into the water; and I light a candle every time - often a tealight in a holder that glows (I love **Vanderohé Moon Lights** (6), £22 each). I've even put in a request with a colleague who lives by the sea for a cup of ocean water; an ingredient in one of Deborah's ritual baths. And if that isn't a deep dive into the healing properties of the tub, then I don't know what is.



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THE LUXURY TUB

Find something special for your bath night.



1 Dr Teal's Soothe & Sleep with Lavender Foaming Bath, £8.99

Therapeutic bubbles with a good slug of lavender.

2 Aromatherapy Associates Rose Bath & Shower Oil, £49
In the hands of this serious aromatherapy brand, rose oil has noticeable mood-boosting properties.

3 L'Occitane Almond Milky Bath, £26

One of the most deliciously scented ranges in beauty finally has a bath soak.

4 The Body Shop Pear Bath Blend, £8

This sustainable option smells good, and does good, too, using 'wonky' fruits that would otherwise have been wasted.

5 Farmologie Unfragranced Body Wash, £5.99

When there's a lot going on in the tub, a simple body wash comes into its own.

6 Soak Sunday Midnight Storm Botanical Bath & Body Oil, £14

Gives a gentle jolt to the senses, with aromatic basil and ginger.

7 Lush Beauty Sleep Face & Body Mask, £13

With dreamy lavender and neroli, for pre-bedtime bathing.

8 Bloom & Blossom Pyjamarama Dry Body Oil, £20

A sleep-inducing body oil with grounding frankincense.

9 Weleda Rosemary Invigorating Bath Milk, £14.95
Revitalises on dull winter days.

A WORD ON SALTS...

Salts are a powerful bathing aid but can be confusing. Soapsmith founder Samantha Jameson explains which salt does what. (If you want the benefits from all three, try her handmade Bath Soaks, with coconut milk powder, nourishing plant butters and essential oils, £25 each.)

EPSOM SALTS (also known as magnesium salts) soothe muscles, aid swollen joints and help with recovery from sports injuries as well as general aches and pains.

SEA SALT aids relaxation but can also ease achy muscles and joints, calm irritated skin and stimulate sluggish circulation.

DEAD SEA SALT contains 10 times more minerals than normal sea salt, and can assist in restoring a healthy status quo to the body, especially the skin and muscles. □