

Chanel has invested in Madagascan land to ensure quality control of the rare vanilla orchid used in its Précision Sublimage Essential Regenerating Cream, £150. Then there are the 'luxury' brands – ranges backed by dermatologists and surgeons who we think know what's best for skin and are prepared to stake their names on it.

It's given that the boom in surgical procedures (up by a massive 293 per cent over the last ten years) has upped the skincare ante. Rinaldi reports an increase in customers at Harvey Nichols' Beyond Beauty demanding advanced pre- and post-surgery products, as well as 'lift and fill' alternatives to the knife. But whether they work as well as Botox or do the job ourselves is a moot point. If you can get Botox for as little as £150 which could last for three months, doesn't that £250 pot of cream seem a tad on the steep side? So, what makes any cream great value for skin?

For surgeon Dr. Jean-Louis Sebagh, it's the right concentration of ingredients, formulated in a way skin can actually use. "Think of a chocolate cake. Is that chocolate 20 per cent or 80 per cent?" he asks. "The more concentrated the product, the higher

the cost," agrees US surgeon Dr Barry Cohen, who lists percentages of actives on the packs of his glycolic acid-based pH Advantage range. "It's a fair bet that cheap brands don't contain much that's active," he cautions. "But £500 for a cream? That's absurd."

"The only two things that get rid of wrinkles," claims Dr Leslie Baumann, chief of the University Of Miami Division Of Cosmetic Dermatology and author of *The*

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Skin Free Solution (Hodder Mozing, £16.99), "are prescription retinoids like Retin-A and tretinoin. Vitamin C may help too, but it's hard to formulate – (it must be in special air-proof packaging and at the right pH to penetrate skin. And it could take years to work."

We may as well face it, there are no instant fixes or miracle cures. What skin needs more than anything is our patience (at least give your cream enough time to pay you back) and protection against harsh

environments. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," confirms Baumann. "We may have great tools like Botox, but the best-looking skin now has been protected with retinoids, antioxidants and antioxidants." Exciting breakthroughs worth paying for, she says, include co-enzyme Q10, abundant in Elizabeth Arden's Prevage, £145, stable vitamin C in Skinceuticals CE Ferulic, £115, and anti-inflammatory mushrooms in Dr Andrew Weil For Origins Mega-Mushroom Face Serum, £40.

An increasing number of experts stress that nutrition, too, plays a crucial role. "Creams protect against environmental stress, but eating smart foods repairs cells internally," believes skincare expert Dr Howard Murad. Eggs, spinach, soy, flaxseed oils and healthy granules all contribute lipids essential for skin-barrier strength, while water both from food and the glass prevents dryness. Keeping stress under control with exercise and massage maintains skin's well-being. "Giving up sun and smoking are two very definite ways of preventing skin damage," adds Cohen.

It seems some of your best investments come straight from nature, if not less as fresh air. ■

Cream of the crop

Whether it's an occasional treat or a monthly necessity, we've picked the best super-creams

Under £100



Lancôme Absolue Premium Be Advanced Replenishing Cream, £81



YSL Hydra Feel Care/et Hydrating Water Crème, £32



Pro-Ferm Protective Day Cream, £55

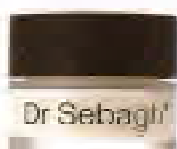


Skin NY Radical Restoration Complex, £90



Murad Age-Diffusing Serum, £40.50

Over £100



Dr Sebagh Crème High Meli Essence, £120



Sternoc-HS SO-NUTRIUM LUXURY CREAM, £110



pH Advantage Hydrate Wrinkle Relief Cream, £125



MY Ferulose Microspherule Facial Creamer, £440



Drôme de La Mer The Firmess, £1,500



Sternoc-HS Hydrate Thermal Deep Wrinkle Serum, £150



La Prairie Skin Care Line Cream, £254



RéVive Intense Youthizing Serum, £370