

Witch Hazel *Hamamelis virginiana*

By Joyce Tuharsky

At a time when few plants are blooming, Witch hazel adds sparkle to the autumn landscape. The four narrow, crinkled petals of its yellow to cream-colored flowers create a delicate, spidery appearance on bare branches, persisting even after leaf-drop.

Hamamelis virginiana is a deciduous shrub or small tree that is native to eastern North America. It has a short trunk and numerous spreading, crooked branches. The young branches with slender zigzag twigs are brown and slightly fuzzy. With age, the thin bark turns a silver-grey with rough patches. The leaves are alternate, elliptic to nearly circular in shape, and irregularly round-toothed along their wavy edges. They are 2-6 inches long and have 5-7 prominent veins. Medium green above and pale below, the leaves turn bright yellow in the fall. At maturity, Witch hazel can reach 12 to 20 feet tall, spreading 10 to 15 feet wide.

Hamamelis is Greek for "fruit" and "together," referring to the plant's habit of producing flowers at the same time the previous year's fruits mature and disperse. The capsule-like fruit (1/2 inch oval, brown, woody, hairy) contains two shiny hard black seeds. These nutty seeds were savored by Indians of the south. After ripening the following summer, the capsules to split open explosively and shoot the seeds up to 30 ft in all directions.

The origin of the name Witch hazel is uncertain. It may have come from an Old English word "wyche" meaning "pliable", because the twigs bend easily. It is called hazel because it resembles the hazelnut shrub, though it is not closely related. Witch hazel is also associated with divining for water as its forked branches were used by some early settlers to locate underground springs.

For centuries, Witch hazel oil has been valued for its astringent, tonic and pain-relieving qualities. Today, it is one of very few American medicinal plants still approved in non-prescription drugs by the Food and Drug Administration. Recent studies have shown that Witch hazel may have antioxidant, radiation-protective, and antiviral properties, with potential for many more medical applications.

In the wild, Witch hazel often grows as an understory shrub, at the edge of a bog or field, preferring evenly moist, acidic soil. It provides seeds for birds, and browse for deer, rabbits and beaver. However, browsing doesn't harm this plant, and can actually create a fuller shrub. Reasonably care-free, Witch hazel has been found to tolerate urban environments, and is rarely bothered by pests or diseases. The branches can be cut and brought indoors to flower where their soft sweet perfume can be savored. However, be careful to remove the seed capsules from the previous year...or the warm indoor air will cause them to split and spew out seeds across the room!

More information and photos on Witch hazel are available at:

http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=havi4

<http://www.stevenfoster.com/education/monograph/witchhazel.html>

http://www.floridata.com/ref/h/hama_vir.cfm