

Witch-hazel

Hamamelis virginiana



The witch-hazel of eastern North America is one of our woody plants that straddles the line of definition between a shrub and a tree. In favorable habitats or with accumulated age, the plant can attain heights of over 25 feet and diameters of 6 inches or a little more. In a majority of cases, witch-hazel is a multi-stemmed shrub 6 to 16 feet tall and with a crown spread just as wide.

Witch-hazel ranges over a wide area, mostly east of the Mississippi River, and is especially conspicuous in the Appalachian Region. It occurs at nearly all elevations, but is less common above 5500 feet elevation. The favorite habitat is moist soils and cool slopes, in understories of mixed hardwood or oak forests. In the Piedmont and Coastal Plain regions, the plant is found in swampy woodlands, bottomlands, and along streams.



The name witch-hazel is of European origin, applied because the foliage superficially resembles that of the hazel, or hazelnut (*Corylus*), these nut-producing shrubs of the birch family known also as filbert in Europe. The "witch" part of the name is thought to be derived from the European word "wyche", meaning a long, pliable branch. The very long, flexible branches of witch-hazel apparently reminded early settlers of things like the wych elm, and use of forked and limber branches were particularly employed in the use of "witching" for water sources underground.

Medicinal uses of witch-hazel was widely practiced among both Indians and settlers, and continues to this day. A major use of the inner bark extractives (from branches) is for an astringent and anti-oxidant. Astringent properties of witch-hazel oil is popularly used in skin lotions, soaps, deodorants, and anti-wrinkling creams. A tonic is also made from the branches. A wide range of ailments are treated by witch-hazel oil, including insect bites and stings, poison ivy, skin lesions, cuts, burns, eye inflammations, diarrhea, and hemorrhoids.

The witch-hazel is identified by its oval leaves with scalloped edges and a short petiole. The twigs have no discernable odor in the inner bark, but do have distinctive naked terminal buds- that is, buds with no overlapping scales. The bark is thin,

gray, and smooth. The most conspicuous, and unusual, trait of witch-hazel is its flowering ability. Opening from November to December, the small flowers with their yellow, straplike petals appear at a time when freezing temperatures are the norm. Just prior, or during, the flowering of this plant, the ½-inch brown capsules mature and begin to split at the tip. When the gap is sufficiently wide, the two oblong, tapered seeds that are under pressure by a bony interior chamber are shot forth, sometimes to a distance of 20 feet.

The other species of witch-hazel native to North America is the springtime witch-hazel, *Hamamelis vernalis*. It occurs mostly west of the Mississippi River, especially along rocky streambeds of the Ozarks of Arkansas and Missouri. Its sweet-scented, orange-tinted flowers open from January to March. In cultivation are two Oriental species, the Japanese (*H. japonica*), the Chinese (*H. mollis*), and the hybrid of these two (*H. x intermedia*). There are many cultivars of these exotic witch-hazels in the horticultural trade.

Cultivation of witch-hazel requires no particular difficulties, only that enough room is afforded for these large, spreading shrubs. They are tolerant of shade or sun, and acid or neutral soil. The root systems are fibrous and coarse, and lend well to transplanting. Container growing must be done with well-drained media, as fungal root rots may easily destroy much of the root system.

In the landscape, the branching pattern is rather loose or open, and the growth habit is generally seen as coarse in landscape texture. Often, the foliage may become infested by gall aphids which cause peculiar cone-shaped growths on the upper side of the leaves. These are not detrimental to the health of the plant, and the black birch is also an alternate host for another, more inconspicuous phase of these insects.

Witch-hazel does provide some yellow fall color to woodland understories, but the spidery yellow flowers are the real attraction at a time when most color has left the forest.

