

Witch Hazel

Through the gray and somber wood
Against the dusk of fir and pine
Last of their floral sisterhood
The hazel's yellow blossoms shine

John G. Whittier



One of the pleasures of the winter garden is seeing witch hazel in bloom in the snow. There is no better shrub for fall and winter interest than this scented floral treat. There are several species in the witch hazel family, including the Eastern North American native *Hamamelis virginiana*, the Chinese *Hamamelis mollis*, and the Japanese *Hamamelis japonica*. The blooms of the witch hazels are distinctive, strappy, bright yellow crumpled octopus looking ribbons with red centers on bare branches. *Hamamelis virginiana* blooms in late fall, while the Asian species bloom in late January to March, depending on species and variety. Most large nurseries carry hybrids of the Chinese witch hazel. The [Forest Farm](#) catalog lists 18 species and varieties, including hybrids with variations in color from the “Arnold’s Promise” bright yellow to the “Diane” dark red. An added bonus is fall leaf color, which is the same bright yellow or red as the flower in each variety.

Many of us remember the Witch Hazel in our grandmother’s medicine cabinet. This was (and is still available) as an extract of our Eastern North American native witch hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*. The American Indians used this species as a medicinal for centuries before our grandmothers knew about it. In the 1840’s a patent medicine was developed by Theron T. Pond, in association with the Oneida Indians. The witch hazel industry is now centered in Connecticut, where branches are harvested by landowners who contract with the distilling companies. The branches are chipped to take to the distillery for processing. The branches are cut at ground level, and re-sprout for harvest again a few years later. Witch Hazel extract is mainly used as an astringent to treat skin problems and insect bites, as an anti-inflammatory, and as an ingredient in deodorants, after shave, cloth wipes, soaps and creams.

Another use for witch hazel we are all familiar with is “dowsing” or “witching” for water. This use of the “witching stick” or forked witch hazel branch seems to originate from England, where an elm (*Ulmus glabra*) was called the “witch hazel tree” and was used for this purpose. Apparently our native witch hazel resembles this tree, and was used by early colonists as a substitute. The “wyche elm” or “wyche hazel” had a different root in old English than our Halloween term for witch, but perhaps the similarity of sound made it good for a spooky use. Originally the



term “wyche” meant “flexible”, and thus was suitable for use in dowsing.

Growing witch hazel in the garden is easy as it is a very adaptable shrub. They grow naturally in partial or light shade at the edge of the forest. They can tolerate full sun in the Northwest, and like moist, well-drained acid soil. They do not need fertilizer unless you have very poor soil, but do not like to dry out and may need water if we are in a drought. The large (10–15 foot) shrub can be pruned after blooming, and can be shaped as a multi-trunked shrub or a small tree. Propagation is easiest by tip layering. The seeds are borne on the branches

and pop open explosively to distribute them in nature. If you bring a branch in to force it indoors, remove the previous year’s seed pods or watch out for explosions of popping seeds! The fruits of the native witch hazel are edible, and the shrubs provide habitat for birds in a native landscape.

The most treasured aspect of witch hazel is its bright flowers in the gray of winter. The heavenly scent is an added bonus to lift the spirits and provide medicine for the soul.

References

[Hamamelis virginiana](#)

[WSU Whatcom County Extension Plant of the Month: Chinese Witch Hazel](#)

[Witch Hazel – Hamamelis virginiana](#)