

The Herb Society of America's Notable Native™ Herbal Shrub/Tree 2020

Hamamelis virginiana L. Witch hazel



Family: Hamamelidaceae (Witch hazel family)

Latin Name: *Hamamelis virginiana* L.

Common Name: Witch hazel, American witchhazel

Growth: Shrub/small tree to 20', deciduous

Hardiness: Zones 3-9; temperate deciduous forests

Light: Full to partial sun

Soil: Rich, slightly acid, well-draining soil

Water: Moderate moisture levels

Use: Medicinal; fragrant flowers; divining rods for well-witching

Propagation: Seeds; layering in spring or autumn; softwood cuttings

Hamamelis virginiana, Witch hazel.
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History & Description

The genus *Hamamelis* (from the Greek hama = together and melon = fruit, ie, flowers and fruits at the same time) comprises three North American species (*H. virginiana*, *H. vernalis*, *H. ovalis*) and two Asian species (*H. mollis*, *H. japonica*). The genus received its name from Linnaeus who noted its habit of blooming and fruiting at the same time.

A cross between the two Asian species (*H. x intermedia*) is used by nurseries to produce cultivars that flower in yellow to pinks, reds, and purples.

Fossils dating to the Eocene (c. 33.5 million years ago) have been found in the Warman Clay Pit in northwestern Tennessee that appear to be closely related to our *Hamamelis*.

Witch hazel is a deciduous shrub or small tree with a short trunk, often multi-stemmed, with numerous spreading, crooked branches. At maturity, it is 15 to 25 feet tall. It has thin bark and shallow roots. The fruit is a woody capsule containing two seeds.

An inflorescence usually consists of 3 spicy sweet flowers, each with 4 slender strap-like yellow petals with 4 short yellow stamens in the center. The petals range from neatly flat to charmingly crumpled.

The flowers of witch hazel open in late Autumn at about the same time the fruits from the prior year ripen. Some Native

Americans believed witch hazel was a magical plant because it defied the usual order of nature, blooming just when other plants are preparing for winter.

Culture & Habitat

Witch hazel is found on a variety of sites but is most abundant in mesic woods and bottoms. In the western and southern parts of its range, it is found in moist cool valleys, moist flats, on north and east slopes, in coves, and ravines. In the northern part of its range, it is found on drier and warmer sides of slopes and hilltops.

Slightly acidic soil that drains easily assures a healthy plant though it will also grow in red clay.

There are few pests that bother *Hamamelis* species, but among them are the spiny witch hazel bud gall aphid (*Hamamelistes spinosus*). The spiny gall is produced from bud tissue and houses the aphids until they mature. It does not harm the shrub in limited numbers.

Propagation

Witch hazel reproduces mainly by seed. Maturing after the second winter, the woody seed capsules burst open, explosively discharging their seeds from four to thirty feet from the parent plant. The seeds germinate the second year after dispersal. Dispersal by birds is rare.



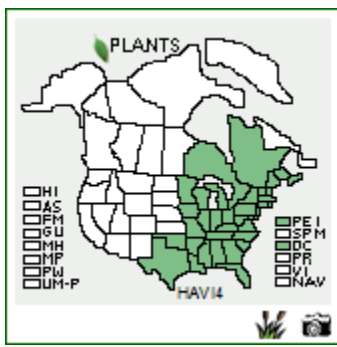
Spiny bud gall, home to aphids, on Witch hazel twig. ©K. Schlosser, 2017.

There are also reports of successful propagation by layering and softwood cuttings. Plants damaged or cut can re-sprout from the roots.

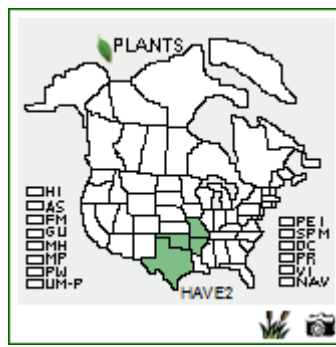
They are pollinated by bees and small flies.

Hamamelis virginiana has a markedly low (<1%) fruit set. This is attributed to the flowering time and consequent limited number of available pollinators, the breeding system of the plant, clumped nature of the distribution of plants, and limited seed dispersal.

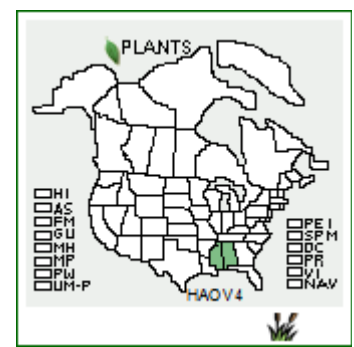
Even so, this is not a rare species, and it is a delight to find in the woods. Autumn is, of



Left– *H. virginiana*



Center– *H. vernalis*



Right– *H. ovalis*



Old (top left) and new (center) woody seed capsules.
K.Schlosser, 2017.

Forked branches of Witch hazel were, and still are, used as divining rods to locate underground water. Some claim the name Witch hazel is taken from the Old English name for Wych Elm, a tree of England with bendable stems and leaves that resemble *Hamamelis*—*wych* is an old Saxon word for bend. When divining, the branch is held perpendicular to the ground, and while walking slowly across the property, if the branch bends toward the ground, water is to be found below and a well is dug.

The fruits of Witch hazel are eaten by ruffed grouse, northern bobwhite, ring-necked pheasant, and white-tailed deer. The fruit is also frequently eaten by beaver and cottontail rabbits.

Plant Sources

Many nurseries carry *Hamamelis* species, especially the new cultivars. If you want the species, ask for it. There are also online sources available. Look for sources close to your area.

References

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H. virginiana, October 6, 2009. Acadia National Park, Maine.
K. Schlosser

Mione, Thomas and Bogle, A. Linn. Comparative Ontogeny of the Inflorescence and Flower of *Hamamelis virginiana* and *Loropetalum chinense* (Hamamelidaceae), *American Journal of Botany*, 77(1): 77-91. 1990.

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course, a special time as the flowers frequently start to come into bloom as the fall leaf color, a bright golden yellow, comes into its glory.

Witch hazel is an understory plant that provides nesting sites for various bird species that prefer to build nests in low lateral branches of trees and shrubs.

They are lovely planted against the backdrop of dark evergreens, planted along the edges of native hedges, woodland, and naturalized borders and as wildlife plantings.

Uses

Medicinal extracts, lotions, and salves are prepared from the leaves, twigs, and bark of witch hazel. The distillate is used to reduce inflammation, stop bleeding, and check secretions of the mucous membranes. Its attributes were long known to Native American tribes and quickly adopted by colonists.

This fact sheet was produced by the members of the Native Herb Conservation committee of The Herb Society of America, Inc.

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