

The Not so Common Witch Hazel



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This small, understory, native tree is a great plant for trivia questions such as: What tree has small fragrant yellow flowers, blooms in autumn well past frost, takes one year to discharge its seeds after flowering, has naked buds which will never be X-rated, and is rarely identified by students on identification quizzes? If you guessed Common Witch hazel (*Hamamelis Virginiana*), you are well ahead of the pack!

Common Witch hazel is a little known small tree that is native from Canada to Georgia and west to Arkansas and Nebraska. It is found in damp woods in the southeastern corner of Minnesota up to Winona County. Today the plants may be found in landscapes in the Twin Cities area and several are scattered around the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

This versatile large shrub or small tree can be grown in sun or shade. It prefers a moist, loamy soil but is somewhat tolerant of urban situations as long as extremely dry situations are avoided. Plant it in a shrub border, near large buildings in shaded areas or as a specimen accent plant in the landscape.

Other than the interesting fall flower color, Common Witch hazel has a gray to gray-brown stem, dark green summer foliage that turns a beautiful yellow to gold color in autumn. However, the flowers are the most distinguishing feature as they bloom in late fall. The perfect (having both functional male and female parts) flowers have four strap-like crumpled petals and have a faint fragrance. Venturing forth only when its yellow leaves have dropped and the late autumn air begins to chill, the flowers last into mid-November before winter wins. Everything shuts down for the winter and then when growth resumes in the spring, the seed capsule develops over summer. By fall, 12 months after flowering, the capsules dry, burst open and scatter the shiny, black seeds up to 30 feet from the tree.

Witch hazel extract was used by Native Americans as a curative for all sorts of diseases. As an aromatic plant, European settlers also had an interest in its essence and extracted it from the dried leaves, bark and stems by distillation. It was used to treat tumors and inflammations and was ingested for hemorrhaging and other types of bleeding. Modern chemistry has found that witch hazel is quite inert, and any value the extract may have as an astringent and antiseptic may well reside in the alcohol essence.

Where did the name witch hazel enter into the picture? Some accounts say the hazel part came from its leaf similarity to the hazel or hazelnut (*Corylus*). The hazel of Europe was famous for its magical properties. Some accounts said one could find witches by the use of it. In early days in America, witch hazel was used in local witchery, to find water or even mineral deposits. A forked

branch, one whose points grew north and south was chosen. By carrying it with a point in each hand and the stem pointing forward, any downward tug of the stem was caused by the flow of water. This was called water-witching by water witches which used a switch of witch hazel which best witched the water. This is probably a witch's tale!