

. . . Where to See

Hamamelis virginiana

*W*itch-hazel grows in small numbers in the understory of dry or moist, typically oak-hickory woodlands, especially in deep soil, or along forest edges and often beside streams. It is widespread in eastern North America from southeastern Canada to central Florida and west to Minnesota and Texas. It is indigenous to nearly all counties of Virginia and is easiest to identify in the fall.



Map source - *Atlas of the Virginia Flora, III* (1992)

The main threat to this still relatively common native species is habitat destruction. To see and learn more about interesting species of plants native to Virginia, visit the VNPS website (www.vnps.org) and contact your local VNPS chapter (details on website) for the times and dates of programs and wildflower walks in your area.

- Text and cover photo by Stanwyn G. Shetler••
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- Inside photo by Lou Staunton••

Gardeners should not collect witch-hazel in the wild and should be certain that all native plants purchased for home gardens are nursery-propagated, not wild-collected. For a list of retail sources of nursery-propagated plants and responsibly collected seeds, see our website or send a SASE to:

Virginia Native Plant Society

Blandy Experimental Farm
400 Blandy Farm Lane, Unit 2
Boyce, VA 22620

540-837-1600; e-mail: vnpsofc@shentel.net

Witch-Hazel

Hamamelis virginiana



2002 Virginia Wildflower of the Year

Virginia Native Plant Society

Witch-Hazel In the Wild

Witch-hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*, is a deciduous shrub or small tree for all seasons. In spring it bursts forth in a new robe of greenery, while in summer its thick, distinctively scalloped leaves with a matte finish form a dense cloak of dark green in the woodland understory. Autumn is when it shines. The leaves turn a rich buttery color, and last year's popping pods loudly announce its presence, as the spidery, lemon-yellow flowers burst forth on the suddenly leafless branchlets. Even in winter it's a standout with its zig-zag, naked twigs, bearing the squat, light brown, two-beaked capsules, both old and new. It is especially appropriate as a Wildflower of the Year because it was first discovered in Virginia, hence its specific scientific name, *virginiana*.

The generic name, *Hamamelis*, dating to antiquity, was coined from two Greek words, meaning "fruit" and "together with" or "at the same time." This alludes to the shrub's unique feature of producing this year's flowers even as last year's capsules are ripening on the branchlets and dispersing seeds. In the Northeast, witch-hazel is the last woody plant of the season to flower, spreading its blooms in September, October, or November. Since the days of the early settlers, who confused it with the real hazel of Europe that was long thought to have special divining powers, true believers have used the flexible withes of witch-hazel as divining rods to dowse or "witch" for water. This seems the most likely of several competing explanations for the common name.

Hamamelis virginiana belongs to the Witch-Hazel and Sweet-Gum Family, a family of about two dozen genera and just over one hundred species of trees and shrubs, distributed discontinuously around the world. Only three genera and about a half-dozen species are native to North America, including two species of witch-hazel and the well known sweet-gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*). The family is of economic importance for some trees with high quality hardwood, ornamental trees and shrubs, a fragrant gum used in perfumes, and lotions, particularly the liniment "Witch Hazel."

A slow-growing, short-lived shrub or small tree, 25 to 30 feet high, with several trunks from a short main trunk, witch-hazel occurs commonly as a large shrub less than 10 feet high with slender twigs and a broad, rounded crown. It reaches its greatest size in the Appalachian Mountains of the Carolinas, where it may ascend to an elevation of 4,000 feet. It may be clonal, spreading from underground rootstocks. The thin, light brown bark is slightly scaly. The simple, alternate leaves are broadly oval, three to six inches long, irregularly scalloped along the margin, and quite asymmetrical at the base. The leaves are host to a number of distinctive insect galls, notably one that is shaped like a witch's hat. Its maker spends part of its life cycle on birch, often a witch-hazel associate. The naked buds lack scales to protect the beginnings of next year's leaves.



The small but showy yellow flowers, borne in clusters of three in the leaf axils, consist of a four-parted calyx, four petals, eight stamens, and two pistils united at the base and forming a single, two-chambered and two-beaked capsule. The strap-like petals are up to an inch long. The flowers are insect-pollinated. The half-inch capsule takes a year to mature, turning from green to brown and becoming woody. It splits open at the top and explosively ejects the shiny black seeds (usually two) up to 30 feet away. This forcible ejection makes audible "snap, crackle, and pop" sounds that can spook one who is walking alone in the woods on a sunny fall day.

In the Garden

Witch-hazel is very hardy and makes an excellent ornamental. With its late fall blooms, explosive capsules, and zig-zag twigs, it makes an attractive and interesting addition to the native plant garden or as a novel highlight in the landscape. Its dense foliage makes this shrub useful for screening out ugly background or providing backdrop for other ornamentals. It does best in sun or part shade and tolerates a wide range of growing conditions. Propagate by cuttings or seeds. Without scarification, the seeds require two years to germinate. It is easier to purchase nursery stock, and several horticultural varieties are available in the trade

..... Other uses

Hedges of witch-hazel have been used as windbreaks for wildlife, but few birds actually eat the seeds. The American Indians dried the leaves for a tea and were the first to use a decoction of the leaves and bark as a liniment for muscular aches and bruises. "Witch Hazel," the liniment long made from an extract of the leaves and/or twigs and bark, depending on where it is made, is still on the market.