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.

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
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.

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


USDA Plants Database. *Hamamelis* www.plants.usda.gov