

A common woodland tall shrub or small tree of this area that is often overlooked or taken for granted is the witchhazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*. It is a common plant, usually found on terraces above a wet or dry creek but never in a major flood plain. The plant is lovely and interesting in any season. It grows in clumps of usually four or six stems. The trunks grow to an inch to four inches in diameter with some minor sprouts. It grows to a height of twenty feet or so, in a pleasing ascending manner. Where they grow naturally, they seem happy as there is usually a small grove. Underneath, one can usually find Christmas ferns and other woodland plants, some real treasures and others weedy. There is very little weedy about the witchhazel.

The common name of witchhazel comes from the fact that the European *Hamamelis* resemble the hazelnut in leaves. It was "bewitched" because it bloomed out of season and bore no edible nuts. It was a favorite wood for the forked limbs used by "water witches." Witchhazel leaves are a pleasing medium green, about two to five inches long and broad, with some indentations. It is a slightly rough, elongated leaf with some prominent (reticulated) veining. The two parts on either side of the midvein are slightly unequalled, somewhat like an elm leaf. The petiole is short.

The trees are long-lived. Colonies or individual trees can last a lifetime. They are both shallow and somewhat deep-rooted so they can take drought conditions well. They are woodland trees, but grow well on the edges of roads and rights-of-ways. This time of year, in the fall, when the leaves begin to color, witchhazels become conspicuous with their bright yellow leaves, just a shade lighter than golden perhaps, but still a brilliant yellow. This happens when most hunters go to the woods to hunt. Usually there is ample moisture that nothing is struggling to survive. Just as frequently, there is a light covering of fallen leaves on the ground that makes a crunchy noise when walking. It is a glorious time to walk in the woods. In spite of all of the glories of autumn, few people notice the full beauty of the yellow flowers that spangle the branches of the little trees themselves. This because the flowers and leaves are the same shade of yellow and the leaves are most visible. At a certain time in the afternoon, the flowers have a very pleasing fragrance, not a floral fragrance, but an understated medicinal odor that is difficult to describe. It is this fragrance that has become associated with certain skin lotions and rubbing alcohol that has become to be a medicinal smell.

From reading the literature on native plants, I learned that people in Appalachia skin the small trees for the bark. It is then processed to get the essential oils or ingredients, which is then used in lotions and rubbing alcohol for the astringent properties. As far as I can find from the books, this is the only medicinal use of this tree. Locally, I know of no one who has collected the bark for personal use.

This is one of those native plants to enjoy in the woods and in the garden. They are easily grown from seeds. That brings up the subject of the fruits, which are small capsules that develop through the winter into the following late summer or early fall. The dark brown apple sized seeds are ejected with an explosive force, scattering the seeds away from directly below the mother plant. In fact, the seeds are being scattered up until the plant begins blooming, so it takes a year for the seeds to mature.

It is the beauty of these small trees that make them a real woodland treasure. There are some differences in the times of blooming and the size of the yellow flowers. Most bloom at the time of fall coloring, when the curly yellow petals radiate and twist, giving the illusion of more than the four petals. Others bloom after the leaves have fallen, giving an airy effect, yet pleasing, especially for the time of the year. Most begin blooming about Thanksgiving and some bloom as late as New Year's Day.

Witchhazels are a part of the composition of the eastern forests of the United States, particularly in the Southeast. I do not know how far north they grow, but they do grow into central Missouri and into the Ohio Valley. They grow into northern Florida and into eastern Texas. There are other witchhazels in the United States and in the Orient. This is another classical example of the species found in the eastern United States and in the Orient. Another species that is found in the mountains of Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri is the more shrubby *Hamamelis vernalis*. It has reddish or coppery flowers as do others from China and Japan that usually bloom in midwinter.

Lately, there has been a concerted effort to hybridize witchhazels and there are now hybrids ranging from bright yellow to coppery red. All are excellent garden subjects, but like all other garden plants, they must be well watered for a year or two. Most hybrids are rooted cuttings, best left to the professional nurserymen, where failures are about as common as successes.

None of the books list witchhazels as a species for bird or butterfly gardening. I'm sure there is always some wildlife eager to eat a twig, flower, or seed of some plant. Nothing goes to waste in nature. Really, the best way to enjoy these wild plants is to see them growing in their natural habitat. In recent years, the economy has produced vast areas of highly developed monocultures, such as pine trees, cotton, rice, wheat or lawn grasses. Enjoy what is being left as nature. If you want to try witch hazels on your place, please plant some seeds and plant them for your children or grandchildren. Carl Amason is a superior plantsman who lives and gardens near Calion, Arkansas.