Witch Hazel: A Late Fall Beauty in the Appalachian Woods

By Elizabeth Byers

Through the gray and sombre wood
Against the dusk of fir and pine
Last of their floral sisterhood
The hazel's yellow blossoms shine.

- Excerpt from "Hazel Blossoms" by John Greenleaf Whittier (1874)

I step out of my car into the chilly parking lot at the edge of the Otter Creek Wilderness, and reach into my pockets to pull on woolen gloves. The muted forest spreads before me, with a narrow trail reaching into the sun-speckled depths of hemlock and rhododendron. Frosted leaves crunch under my feet as I walk along the creek, enjoying the peacefulness after a busy week at work. As I am contemplating the wintry change of seasons, a faint, spicy fragrance wafts across the trail, and I stop in welcome surprise at the splash of color in front of me.

Witch hazel

Chris Evans, The University of Georgia/ www.forestry.org

A small tree, with bright yellow strap-like flowers that look like tiny party streamers or gaily colored spiders, arches alongside the trail. This is witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), the last woody plant to flower in the autumn forests of West Virginia.

Witch hazel belongs to a small but ancient family of shrubs and small trees that are native to the Appalachians and to the temperate forests of China and Japan. In addition to providing a cheerful display when the rest of the forest is preparing for winter dormancy, witch hazel has a long history of traditional use in North America. In the 1840s, Theron Pond of Utica, New York, entered into a partnership with the Oneida tribe to make and market an astringent lotion from witch hazel bark, which was marketed under the trade name "Pond's Extract." It was the first mass-marketed cosmetic actually made in America.

Early settlers adopted a special use for the flexible, green branches of witch hazel. They would cut a forked branch, strip it of leaves, and walk across their land holding the forks of the branch with the palms upward. Legend has it that the branch would twist until it pointed to wherever fresh water or valuable ore was hidden in the ground. This was called dowsing or "water-witching."

Witch hazel is uniquely adapted to late fall blooming, with petals that curl up tightly when the temperatures drop and unfurl again in the warming sun. This adaptation protects the nectar and pollen for warmer days when insects venture out. The flowers attract fall and winter moths, including the feathered thorn moth.

The tree's scientific name, *Hamamelis,* literally means "together with fruit," and refers to the fact that witch hazel is the only tree in the North American woods to have ripe fruit, flowers and next year's leaf buds all on the branch at the same time. The shiny black seeds take a full year to mature. About the time that the flowers bloom, the seed capsule suddenly bursts open with a loud "snap," explosively discharging the seeds as much as 40 feet from the tree. The seeds are eaten by ruffed grouse, northern bobwhite, ring-necked pheasant, white-tailed deer, beaver and cottontail rabbit.

The next time you are walking in the winter woods, keep an eye out for this interesting tree. Witch hazel grows in every county in the state.

Witch hazel

Illustrated flora of the northern states and Canada

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