

Don't Second-Guess Yourself When Plant Shopping

By Susan Camp

Remember the old saying, “Life is short. Eat dessert first”? I have discovered that this applies to plant shopping, too. If you discover the perfect perennial, shrub, or tree, buy it. You won't regret it later, but you will be sorry if you pass it by.

Ten years ago, we had a pretty witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) growing at the edge of the grove. One winter, it faded away, and I miss it. Jim and I saw a healthy specimen at a recent plant sale, and debated about buying it, but ultimately walked away. Wrong decision.

Witch hazel is not a true hazel (*Corylus* spp.) tree, although the two share some superficial characteristics. Witch hazel received its name from English colonists who noticed the resemblance of the leaves to those of the European hazel. The term “witch” likely derives from the Middle English “wych,” meaning bendable, in reference to the tree's pliant twigs and branches. The use of a forked branch of witch hazel as a divining rod for dowsing or water-witching to locate underground water is another possible source of the name.

H. virginiana is native to eastern North America, from southern Canada to Florida, as far west as east Texas. Reaching from 10 to 30 feet in height with a spread of 15 to 25 feet, witch hazel grows along stream banks and forest edges in well-drained sandy loam or clay that is mildly acidic to slightly alkaline. The tree has shallow roots and prefers moist soil. It is neither drought nor salt tolerant. Witch hazel will grow in partial shade, but produces more flowers when planted in full sun.

Not a showy tree most of the year, the witch hazel displays striking gold fall leaf color. The delicate, crinkled, ribbon-like yellow flowers appear in late fall to early winter. Their fragrance is sweet, and cut branches are used in winter flower arrangements. Witch hazel is monoecious, which means the tree contains both female and male flowers and produces fruit on its own. The fruit is a brown nutlike capsule that contains two black seeds and is said to taste somewhat like a pistachio. When ripe, the capsules explode with a loud crack, ejecting the seeds as far away as 30 feet. Birds and mammals also disperse the seeds.

There are no serious insect pests, although eastern tent caterpillars, Japanese beetles, and witch hazel leaf gall aphids can damage leaves. Powdery mildew and fungi that cause leaf spot can cause cosmetic changes, but chemical control is not required.

Besides winter interest, witch hazel has been valued for centuries for its medicinal properties. Native Americans used the bark to treat wounds and skin ulcers and brewed a tea from the leaves to treat dysentery, internal bleeding, and respiratory illnesses. A decoction of twigs and leaves was used to ease the itching and burning of insect bites and sunburn. Early colonists adopted the use of witch hazel extracts and shipped the trees back to England.

Witch hazel contains tannins, chemical compounds with antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Witch hazel oil is one of the few herbal preparations approved by the FDA for inclusion in nonprescription salves, lotions, and astringents for skin care, pain relief, and hemorrhoid treatment. As with all herbal preparations, patients must take precautions to avoid skin irritation from topical products and stomach, liver, or kidney damage from oral preparations. Allergic reactions to witch hazel are rare.

NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entry “*Hamamelis virginiana*,” the PennState Extension article “Witch Hazels: A Promise that Spring Is on the Way”; and the Missouri Botanical Garden entry “*Hamamelis virginiana*” all provide information on growing this fascinating and useful tree.

The little witch hazel, so nondescript most of the year, provides us with fall color, fragrant winter blossoms, health care products, and an interesting history. It might even help us find water.

We regret not buying it. We are looking for another one, and next time, we will try to remember this lesson.