

Witch Hazel Plant by Sally Cureton

One of the most unusual native plants in this area is Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*). What is truly unique about this plant is its bloom time - September to November. When other plants are thinking about dropping their leaves and getting ready for winter, a Witch Hazel bush produces its yellow flowers. They are small flowers, about 3/4" long with 4 petals each. Each one is monoecious, meaning that it has both male and female reproductive organs, but acts as either the male (producing pollen) or female (producing fruit). The showy petals attract pollinators such as small gnats and bees. After pollination, the Witch Hazel seed will not be fertilized until spring. The resulting fruit then ripens just as the next year's flowers begin to open in late autumn. Each fruit develops into a fuzzy capsule that will burst open to send its seeds up to 25 feet away. If the seed is not eaten by a forest animal, it will germinate two years later.

Witch Hazel leaves are a deep green, and become a rich golden color in the fall. Each leaf is 3-6 inches long with wavy or scalloped edges. In the eastern forest, this is a common shrub, ranging from Quebec to Minnesota and south to Florida. Witch Hazel will grow in dry or moist woods. With a lovely smooth gray bark, it is a slow-growing plant that will eventually attain a height of about 15 feet. This was one of the first plants to be adopted from American shores for gardens in Europe, as early as the mid 1600's.

The Witch Hazel plant has had many uses over the centuries. Traditionally, these were the branches that were used as "divining rods" to find underground sources of water. The lotion known as witch hazel is made from the plant's bark. The name is thought to refer to its reputation in medieval times as a plant that would guard against witches and magic. A great plant for anyone's yard, Witch Hazel is a resilient shrub that will grow in light shade. With its unusual fall color, slow growth and attractive plant structure, it would make a nice addition to anyone's landscape plan.

