

Eco-Friendly Native Plant of the Month

NOVEMBER 2017

NC NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

REEDY CREEK NATURE PRESERVE



Photos by Will Stuart



Witch-hazel flowers and seed capsule

Hamamelis virginiana Witch-hazel

Late Fall Flowers

Hamamelis virginiana has distinctive spidery yellow flowers and is one of the few late fall blooming native plants that provides nectar for foraging insects. The unusual flowers are pollinated by winter moths and various flies. Appearing just as the leaves are turning yellow, the ribbon-like petals remain as the leaves drop and are not bothered by cold temperatures.

Tree or Shrub?

Witch-hazel can grow to 30 feet tall, which might make you think of a small tree. However, because it tends to be multi-trunked with a wide-spreading canopy, it is more often used as a large shrub and placed as a specimen in the home garden landscape. Witch-hazel is adaptable, and can thrive in dry to moist woods with shade to part sun. Be attentive during drought conditions.

The wide spreading branches and arching form draw the eye even in winter when it is bare of leaves. It is a perfect location for birds to perch in your garden so you can see them, and they can safely search for food. Doug Tallamy reports that 62 species of caterpillars can be found feeding on Witch-hazel.

Exploding seed capsule...

Witch-hazel seeds form from last fall's flowers inside light brown woody capsules that mature on the stem at the same time as the current year's flowers. In late fall the seeds erupt shooting the four black seeds up to 30 feet.

In the woodland garden, Witch-hazel is often combined with *Calycanthus floridus*, Sweetshrub, native Azaleas, Rhododendron,

Possumhaw, *Viburnum nudum*, ferns, and White Wood Asters.

Yes, that Witch-hazel

Witch-hazel was historically used by Native Americans as in tinctures, decoctions of the bark, dried leaves and in poultices to treat a wide range of illnesses. An astringent made from the bark can still be found in stores today. The common name may have come from the use of the forked branches as divining rods for water dowsing or "water wyching."

Be careful when purchasing *Hamamelis virginiana* to be sure that you are not purchasing the midwestern native, *H. vernalis* which flowers in February with smaller reddish flowers. Dr. Larry Mellichamp suggests buying this shrub in November when in flower to be sure.

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