



Hamamelis virginiana L.

Witch-hazel

Hamamelidaceae (Witch-hazel Family)

Blooming season: Oct-Nov, during and after leaf-fall

Plant:

Shrub to sub-tree, to 8 m tall; main trunk to 10 cm diameter, freely branching.

Typically several crooked trunks grow together (Barnes & Wagner 1981).

Thin, smooth, light brown bark, becoming scaly with age.

Conspicuous horizontal lenticels.

Zig-zaggy twigs.

Shade tolerant, slow growing, short lived.



Leaves:

Alternate, 10-15 cm long oval; strongly asymmetrical base.

Short petiole.

Edge wavy; thin texture.

Terminal bud naked, stalked, yellowish brown, pointed, flattened, hairy.

Flower:

Bright yellow, 4 very narrow, twisted petals; often in clusters of 3.

8 stamens.

Axillary.



Fruit:

Capsule, ovoid, leathery, persistent calyx.

Ripens summer after flowering; persists to following fall.

2 black seeds per capsule, discharged up to 12 m away.

Empty capsules often persist several years.

Can be confused with:

When flowering, there is nothing with which to confuse this small tree. At other seasons its leaves can be confused with hazel (*Corylus*), which has toothed leaves and rounded terminal bud.



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Geographic range:

Type specimen location:

State: Throughout Lower Peninsula, but only occasional in the upper half of it. Rare in Upper Peninsula.

Regional: Southern Quebec to western Wisconsin, south to New England, Georgia, Tennessee, Missouri.

Habitat:

Local: Red maple/witch-hazel area.

Regional: Understory of dry-mesic oak-hickory forests (Barnes & Wagner 1981); sandy dry woods (Voss 1985)

Common local companions:

Red maple, wintergreen, and partridgeberry.

Usages:

Human: Witch-hazel has long been used to make an astringent, using leaves and bark, which, however, are not known to have any essential properties (Rosendahl 1955). This astringent, also used by Native Americans, is reputed to: stop bleeding; soothe insect bites, burns, and poison ivy. It has been used in: eye-washes; as a sedative; liniments and salves; and aftershaves. The twigs and small branches have been used as diving rods, particularly for water and minerals.

Why is it called *that*?

Hamamelis is a Greek name for a tree with pear shaped fruit, which does not explain its use for this tree; Harris (2003) states that it should be interpreted as coming from a Greek word for 'apple' or 'fruit' and that for 'at the same time' - referring to the fruit (actually the empty capsule) and flower being present at the same time. *Virginiana* means of Virginia, perhaps referring to the type specimen location. While some authorities state that the name witch-hazel as a name refers to the use of twigs for "water-witching", it is more likely derived from the Middle English word 'wyche' meaning a pliant branch; and from the resemblance of the leaf to hazel (*Corylus*).