

Tree of the Month, January 2014: Chinese witch hazel (*Hamamelis mollis*)

January is a quiet time at VanDusen with relatively few visitors, which is a shame because this is when the Chinese witch hazels (*Hamamelis mollis*) are in full bloom - covered in yellow blossoms with a sweet fragrance that hits you as you approach. Like other winter-blooming shrubs, this sugary scent is meant to lure the few pollinators that remain active in the cold months.

Each flower has four very narrow, ribbon-like yellow petals surrounding a dark red calyx cup with four short stamens. The petals unroll like a fiddlehead and can curl up again to protect themselves from extreme cold. The flowers can bloom for six weeks or more. Chinese witch hazels are deciduous, so there are no leaves at this time of year, just flowers on bare branches. In the autumn the leaves turn from green to golden yellow, and finally red.

The 'witch' in 'witch hazel' is from the Middle English word *wiche*, meaning bendable or pliant; according to folklore, witch hazel branches were used as divining rods for finding water, gold, and other buried items. *Hamamelis* is not closely related to the true hazels (*Corylus* sp.), but their leaves are similar, hence the common name 'witch hazel'.

Witch hazels can grow to over four meters in height, and are classified as large shrubs or small trees. They tend to spread horizontally, and their crowns can reach nine meters in width.

Hamamelis mollis is native to eastern and central China. In 1878 it was collected by Charles Maries, an English botanist who was hired by Veitch Nurseries to bring Asian plants back to Britain for the nursery trade. The species has won the RHS Award of Garden Merit.