

Witch Hazels



Witch-hazel (*Hamamelis*) is a genus of flowering plants in the family Hamamelidaceae and are part of the order Saxifragales.

Saxifragales have an extensive fossil record. The existing members are apparently remnants of a formerly diverse and widespread order.

Medicinal Uses: Witch hazel is a vasoconstrictor and was widely used externally as an astringent for skin care, to reduce bleeding (men often used it to heal shaving nicks) and swelling (e.g. hemorrhoids). It was also swallowed to cure internal bleeding. North American natives showed the early settlers how to concoct it, and this technique travelled back to England as the American witch-hazels were planted there. It is still used in many commercial health care products.

The Saxifragales order, as it is now understood, is based upon the results of molecular phylogenetic studies of DNA sequences. It is not part of any of the classification systems based on plant morphology. The group is much in need of comparative anatomical study,

The name, *Hamamelis* means "together with fruit", referring to the simultaneous occurrence of flowers with the maturing fruit from the previous year. The witch-hazels are deciduous shrubs or (rarely) small trees growing to 3–8 metres (9.8–26 ft) tall, rarely to 12 metres (39 ft) tall. The leaves are alternately arranged, oval, 4–16 centimetres (1.6–6.3 in) long and 3–11 centimetres (1.2–4.3 in) broad, with a smooth or wavy margin. *H. virginiana* blooms in September–November while the other species bloom from January–March. Each flower has four slender strap-shaped petals 1–2 centimetres (0.39–0.79 in) long, pale to dark yellow, orange, or red. The fruit is a two-part capsule 1 centimetre (0.39 in) long, containing a single 5 millimetres (0.20 in) glossy black seed in each of the two parts; the capsule splits explosively at maturity in the autumn about 8 months after flowering, ejecting the seeds with sufficient force to fly for distances of up to 10 metres (33 ft), thus another alternative name "Snapping Hazel".

Etymology

The name Witch in witch-hazel has its origins in Middle English wiche, from the Old English wice, meaning "pliant" or "bendable". "Witch hazel" was used in England as a synonym for Wych Elm, *Ulmus glabra*; American colonists simply extended the familiar name to the new shrub. The use of the twigs as divining rods, just as hazel twigs were used in England, may also have, by folk etymology, influenced the "witch" part of the name. Witch-hazels are not closely related to the true *Corylus*, though they have a few superficially similar characteristics which may cause one to believe that they are.

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Geographic Distribution and Historical Notes:

This genus contains five species: three species in North America (*H. ovalis*, *H. virginiana* and *H. vernalis*), and one each in Japan (*H. japonica*) and China (*H. mollis* - *mollis* means "soft", and refers to the felted leaves, which turn yellow in autumn) and close to 100 cultivars.

H. virginiana is native to eastern NA from Nova Scotia to Minnesota, south to central Florida and eastern Texas. It was one of the first American plants to be adapted for ornamental use in Britain and was known as early as the mid-16th century there. *H. vernalis* is native to the US between the Deep South and the Great Plains and is called the Ozark Witch Hazel because it grows wild on gravel bars and rocky stream banks in the Ozark Plateau. It shares its range with the more widespread *H. virginiana*, and some natural hybridization can occur between the two. Unlike the lone wolf *H. virginiana*, spring witch-hazel has several cultivars to its name, though they are rarely found at nurseries. *H. ovalis*, big-leaf witch-hazel, is known only from a very small area in the headwaters of one creek in southern Mississippi and was first noticed in 2004. One interesting theory is that the new species might represent a rediscovery of the "lost" species *Hamamelis macrophylla* that was discovered and offered for sale in 1812 by John Lyon, a Scottish nurseryman who worked out of Philadelphia and made commercial collecting trips as far south as Georgia and Florida. *H. mollis* is a native of the West Hubei and Kiangsi provinces and grows naturally in scrub and woodland from 1500m to 2500m.

Hamamelis virginiana was introduced into English gardens by Peter Collinson, an avid British gardener, who maintained correspondence with plant hunters in the American colonies. Nowadays, it is rarely seen in the nursery trade except for woodland/wildlife restoration projects and native plant enthusiasts.

Much more common is *H. mollis*, which has bright red flowers that bloom in late winter instead of the yellow blossoms of *H. virginiana* which tend to be lost among the plant's fall foliage. The plant-hunter Charles Maries collected them for Veitch Nurseries in China in 1879, they languished in nursery rows for years until put on the market in 1902. E.H. Wilson brought back more of these plants in 1918. Numerous cultivars have been selected for use as garden shrubs, many of them derived from *H x intermedia* Rehder (*H. japonica* × *H. mollis*). Belgian horticulturalists Jelena and Robert de Belder selected for red cultivars and found three: the first, with bronze flowers, was named 'Jelena'; the next, with red flowers, was named 'Diane' (the name of their daughter); the last, with deep red flowers, was called 'Livia' (the name of their granddaughter).

Hamamelis japonica is not rare in Japan. It can be up to 10 m tall and 30 cm in diameter. It is reported to be well known to Japanese villagers in part for its remarkably early flowering. The branches are also strong and pliable and can be twisted and used for fastening rafts and timbers when building or repairing traditional houses. The species is also planted as an ornamental in Japan where many cultivars no doubt exist. It was first introduced to gardens in the west by von Siebold in 1863.

What's New

***Hamamelis* × *intermedia* (hybrid witch hazel)** is a hybrid of garden origin between *H. japonica* and *H. mollis*. Its Latin name refers to its intermediate appearance between those two species. The yellow, orange or red flowers with twisted petals appear on bare stems in midwinter through early spring.

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Numerous cultivars have been developed, many of them prized as garden subjects. The following have gained the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit: - 'Angelly', 'Arnold Promise', 'Barmstedt Gold', 'Diane', 'Jelena', 'Pallida'

Some Cultivars

- H. × intermedia 'Diane' AGM: The finest red flowered witch hazel. It has a long flowering period throughout midwinter and is lightly scented. Height 2.5m (8ft). Spread 3m (10ft).
- H. × intermedia 'Jelena' AGM: One of the best cultivars, unscented coppery orange flowers appear in early to mid-winter. Height 4m (13ft). Spread 4m (13ft).
- H. × intermedia 'Pallida' AGM: Thought to be the best sulphur-yellow cultivar for garden use. Height 3m (10ft). Spread 4m (13ft).
- H. mollis 'Wisley Supreme': Flowering in January, it has a good scent and bright yellow flowers. Height 3m (10ft). Spread 3m (10ft).

H. virginiana: Bears yellow, scented flowers in mid-late autumn, rather than in winter. Height 4m (13ft). Spread 4m (13ft).

Propagation

Commercially, most witch hazels are grafted or budded onto Hamamelis virginiana rootstocks. Rootstocks and species-plants are raised from seed.

Pruning and training

Hamamelis need little pruning if you have room to let them grow freely to their full size. Simply prune out any dead or damaged wood, cutting to healthy young growth. Remove any congested, crossing or weak shoots. Remove suckers in autumn, after leaf fall, as these will probably be from the rootstock plant (most Hamamelis cultivars are grafted onto Hamamelis virginiana). Look for shoots that hold onto their leaves for longer into the autumn and originate close to or below soil level. Follow such shoots down and cut at the point of origin.

Problems

Root diseases such as Phytophthora root rot and honey fungus are the most serious problems of Hamamelis. Witch hazels can sucker. To minimize this problem, avoid planting too deeply and do not bury the graft union (visible as a bulbous part of the stem near to ground level).

Witch Hazel www.finegardening.com/plants/

Meet the parents

All four major species of Hamamelis are tolerant of partial shade and valued as large shrubs or small trees that flower when few other plants are in bloom. All are fragrant to some extent, though some selections are so intoxicating that they saturate the calm winter air. Common witch hazel (H. virginiana, Zones 3–8), native to the eastern United States, presents its faintly scented yellow flowers just as the nearby hardwood trees are losing their autumn leaves. The astringent witch hazel is distilled from the bark of this plant.

More shrubby and native to Missouri and Arkansas, the Ozark or vernal witch hazel (H. vernalis, Zones 4–8) might be blooming by Christmas in a mild winter. This plant's yellow- to-reddish flowers are usually the smallest but most profuse within the genus, with a fragrance that ranges from delicate to a bit husky.

The blooms of the regal Chinese witch hazel (H. mollis, Zones 5–9) and the more delicate Japanese witch hazel (H. japonica, Zones 5–9) follow soon thereafter. The Chinese witch hazel is

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always some shade of yellow, broad petaled, and usually sweetly scented. Its Japanese cousin can have yellow or reddish flowers with petals that are narrower, more spiderlike, and with a less intense perfume. Chinese witch hazel has fuzzy leaves that turn yellow in autumn, whereas the Japanese variety boasts smooth leaves that turn shades of burning red and orange.

In the early 1920s, Boston's Arnold Arboretum happened upon a cross of the two Asian species, producing hybrids now classified as *Hamamelis* × *intermedia* (Zones 5–9). At about the same time, similar hybrids were appearing in European collections with differences in flower size and color, time and profusion of bloom, fragrance, leaf retention, fall color, and plant habit.

Favorite Hybrids

H. × *intermedia* '**Arnold Promise**' is an end-of-season, light-yellow-flowering hybrid introduced by the Arnold Arboretum almost 40 years ago. One of the first American selections ever made, it remains one of the best. 'Arnold Promise', with its vase shape, is richly scented and usually displays a mixture of yellow, red, and orange fall foliage.

H. × *intermedia* '**Barmstedt Gold**' produces modestly scented flowers in a dark yellow that really stands out against an evergreen background. Its petals are more than an inch long and quite feathery, and fall leaf color is yellow. A vigorous, spreading cultivar from Germany, it may be a bit difficult to find but is worth hunting down.

There are far fewer red cultivars than there are orange or yellow. *H.* × *intermedia* '**Diane**', introduced by Belgium's Arboretum Kalmthout, has been the benchmark for dark-flowering witch hazel hybrids for many years. Fading to rich copper tones, this variety's deep red color does vary in intensity from year to year. Like most red-flowering selections, its scent is very faint. The petals are broad and about 1 inch long. Fall color can be a vivid mixture of red, yellow, and orange.

H. × *intermedia* '**Jelena**' is another vigorous-spreading selection from Arboretum Kalmthout. The stunning copper-orange flowers are about 1 inch long with a very faint scent. Fall color is orange-red.

H. × *intermedia* '**Pallida**' is a low, wide-spreading, early-flowering cultivar introduced by the Royal Horticultural Society. The flowers are paler, larger, and more sweetly scented than those of 'Arnold Promise'. Fall color is yellow. '

'Pallida'

Hybrids

The Asian species *Hamamelis mollis* and *Hamamelis japonica* are the two most likely to hybridize because of their overlapping flowering periods and similar habitat preferences.

One of the first accounts of this hybrid is that of Mr. Johan Lange of the Charlottenlund botanic garden in Denmark in 1920. Lange, who raised plants from seeds collected from a specimen of *Hamamelis mollis*, wrote: "*The mother plant is undoubtedly a good and pure H. mollis, the differences cannot be explained as a splitting in the f2 generation, they are obviously quite different and are definitely hybrids as three H. japonica stand nearby.*". In 1953 Mr. Lange named a selection of these seedlings *Hamamelis japollis* 'Nina' (later revised to *Hamamelis intermedia* 'Nina').

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In 1954 Alfred Rehder, taxonomist at the Arnold Arboretum, became the first to publish a description of the *Hamamelis japonica* x *Hamamelis mollis* hybrid. Seeds had been collected from Chinese Witch Hazels at the arboretum in 1928, but the following spring “*none of the seedlings turned out to be true H. mollis, all proved to be intermediate between H. mollis and H. japonica of which several varieties are growing in the arboretum*”. One plant of these hybrids combines the best qualities of the two and was named *Hamamelis x intermedia* ‘Arnold Promise’.

Soon nurseries discovered the possibilities of this new cross and began developing cultivars. Perhaps the ‘Société Anonyme Horticole de Calmpthout’, the later Arboretum Kalmthout, introduced the most famous series of cultivars. This nursery near Antwerp (Belgium) has been a locus of Witch Hazel breeding since the 1930ies. The director at that time, Ir. Antoine Kort has more than just a passing interest in *Hamamelis*: he published articles on the genus in Belgian horticultural journals and is said to have hybridized and grown hundreds of Witch Hazel seedlings. Kort carried out some experimental breeding work of which he introduced *Hamamelis x intermedia* ‘Ruby Glow’ while still alive. Other selections of his hand have been introduced by his successors, Robert and Jelena de Belder from the 1950ies on.

Hamamelis x intermedia Rehd.

The cultivars of *H. x intermedia* have been selected for their variation in flower colour, flowering time, fragrance, leaf pubescence and autumn colour. Average height is 4,5 to 6m. Leaves range from slightly to densely pubescent beneath and are 5 to 18 cm long. The cultivars range in autumn colour from yellow to bright red. Flower colour is variable and petals range from 1,5 to 2cm long. Fruit is on average 1,5cm. In Europe most *Hamamelis x intermedia* flower in January and February.

http://www.provant.be/en/leisure_time/domains/arboretum_kalmthout/collecties/hamamelis/botanice/hybrids/

Locations at VanDusen

The Accession Book lists about 50 different witch hazels in the database, but this may not reflect the actual number today. Most appeared to be planted in the 1970s, and a few in the 1990s. They are mainly found in the ENA, SH, and Rhodo Walk gardens. There is a specimen of *H. vernalis* 'pendula' at the corner of 37th and Oak that appears to be half weeping and half normal. There are 2 *H. x brevipedata* waiting to be planted in the service yard at this writing: The numbers after the plant name refer to bed numbers.

H. x brevipedata: 6, 98 78

H. feuerzauber: 127D 78

H. x intermedia ‘Hiltingbury’: 139 78

H. x intermedia 'Jelena': 90A, 28, 13C

H. x intermedia 'Orange Beauty': 46E, 5
74

H. x intermedia 'Pallida': 90A, 124, 126, 127,
15A

H. x intermedia 'Ruby glow': 46D, 5, 28

H. japonica 'Arborea': 139

H. japonica 'Sulphurea': 139

H. mollis: 46D, 73

H. vernalis 'Lombart's Weeping': 29 90

H. vernalis 'pendula': 27n 3 27A

H. virginiana: 27, 46D, 27A, 46E 27A

Wed. Team, November 2013