

THE MYSTERIOUS FALL-FLOWERING TREE

In the springtime our parks are aglow with beautiful wildflowers and colorful blossoming trees, such as the familiar cherries and magnolias. However, some of our native plants wait until the fall to bloom, including one small tree found throughout the parks of New York City. The common witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) starts to flower when its leaves turn yellow and begin to drop. The multi-stemmed tree, with outer stems often grow out at an angle, making the canopy look wide, rather than tall, usually reaches a maximum height of less than 10 feet in our area. Witch hazel has mostly smooth, gray bark, sometimes with a pattern of horizontal pores, or lenticels. The broad, wavy-toothed leaves range in size from 3-6 inches. Often the tops of the leaves are riddled with galls. These are small, cone-like projections rising above the leaf surface that house insect eggs or parasites. Witch hazel has rounded fruit capsules that explode when ready, launching seeds as far away as 50 feet! This mechanical dispersal helps spread the seeds over a wide area, increasing the trees' chance of survival in the shady understory.



Witch Hazel Flowers

By far the most unusual feature of the witch hazel is the time of year that the tree flowers. The odd-looking blooms appear as the leaves begin to fall in the late autumn. The wispy, pale-yellow flowers grow in clusters in the leaf axils. Each flower has four thin petals that are an inch to an inch and a half in length. They have the ability to curl up to avoid cold temperatures and to open again during warmer weather to take advantage of insect activity. At the time of flowering, most of the neighboring trees have already dropped their leaves, thus witch hazel provides some color during the bleakest, and chilliest, season of the year.

Witch hazel was important to both the Native Americans, and later, to the colonists who learned about the plant from them. Native people not only ate the oily seeds, but used extracts from the highly-tannic bark and twigs for medicinal purposes. The ailments that were treated included sores, cuts, bruises, tumors, coughs, colds, eye infections, dysentery, hemorrhoids, and aching muscles. In the mid-nineteenth century, witch hazel extract was patented, leading to its commercial production shortly thereafter. The woods of northwest Connecticut supply much of the witch hazel used in the extracts sold in American pharmacies today. Witch hazel also provides food for wildlife such as grouse, pheasant, bobwhite, deer, rabbit, and beaver. It can be found along the Atlantic coast from Nova Scotia to Florida and inland to Ontario and south to Texas. Some places to look for witch hazel in New York City are Inwood Hill Park in Manhattan, Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, Alley Pond Park in Queens, and the Green Belt in Staten Island.