The witch of the autumn woodlands

By Edna Greig

In mid autumn, most deciduous trees and shrubs have long finished flowering and instead don the brightly colored foliage that marks their entry into winter dormancy. But there is one native woodland shrub that defies what seems to be the sensible thing to do at this time of year, and that is witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*). At the same time that the leaves of witch hazel turn a golden yellow during the shorter days of autumn, it also bursts into bloom with a multitude of lightly fragrant, lemon yellow flowers.

Witch hazel is a common shrub or small tree of dry or moist deciduous woodlands in eastern North America and is often found along trails. It usually grows to about 8 to 10 feet tall in our area and has an open, zig-zag branching pattern. Its leaves are 2 to 6 inches long, broadly oval, with wavy edges. Look for the uneven leaf bases as an easy way to identify witch hazel during the growing season.

The autumn flowers of witch hazel are arranged in clusters of two to four along its slender twigs. Each flower has four ribbon-like petals that are about 1/8 inch wide and 3/4 inch long. The overall appearance is that of yellow spiders clinging to the twigs. When the flowers first open, they mingle with the golden foliage and often go unnoticed. But the flowers usually remain on the twigs for a week or more after the leaves fall. This is when the flowers are most conspicuous, especially when they are lit by the sunshine that passes through the newly open canopy. A good time to seek out the spidery flowers of this witch of the woodlands is right around Halloween.

A Halloween witch hazel hunt may also reveal another fascinating feature of this shrub, for this also is the time of year when witch hazel disperses the seeds formed from the previous year's flowers in a most unusual way. The woody, urn-shaped seed pods are about 1/2 long and are sparsely scattered along the twigs. Each seed pod contains two shiny black seeds. When the time is right, the seed pods will explosively release the seeds with a loud pop. This explosive release can send the seeds flying up to 30 feet away and ideally deposits them where they can germinate free from competition with the parent shrub. This seed popping habit of witch hazel has given rise to another common name, snapping alder.

Witch hazel is the latest flowering of our native shrubs and may have evolved this strategy as a way to avoid competition with other flowering plants for pollinators like bees and flies. But the down side to this strategy is that the cold temperatures of October and November mean that there are far fewer pollinators out and about. This is one of the reasons why witch hazel produces only a relatively small number of those seed popping pods.

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Hamamelis virginiana L.; American witchhazel

Also called snapping alder, witch hazel pops its seeds up to 30 feet away.

Although witch hazel blooms around Halloween, the witch in its common name is probably not related to a broom-riding sorceress. Instead, witch is derived from the Old English word *wych* meaning pliable, referring to the branches. The pliable, crooked branches of witch hazel were used by early settlers as divining rods to seek out underground water. The other half of its common name, hazel, comes from the fact that its leaves resemble those of the American hazelnut, another shrub native to eastern North America.

Native Americans used witch hazel for a variety of medicinal purposes. Today, distillate of witch hazel is produced commercially and sold in pharmacies as a soothing and cleansing astringent. It also is an important ingredient in many cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. The witch hazel used commercially is harvested by cutting its stems to the ground, and most of it is obtained by contract from landowners in Connecticut. Since witch hazel vigorously resprouts after its stems are cut, a new harvest is possible every few years.

Trail Conference member Edna Greig writes occasional columns on natural history topics for Trail Walker.