



Hamamelis vernalis 'Amethyst' Photo: Susan Elliott

FEATURE ARTICLE

WITCH HAZELS

Chris Strand

A FEW YEARS AGO I was asked if I would speak to a friend's garden club about witch hazels. I enjoy talking about witch hazels but I am also aware that my interest in this group of plants is right on the border between passionate interest and full-blown "plant nerdiness." I try to walk that line carefully. The talk went well and was followed with several good questions, including the last one which I still think about, "How did you ever get so interested in witch hazels?"

The witch hazels, shrubs in the genus *Hamamelis*, are not a large group of plants. There are 2 species of *Hamamelis* native to Asia and there are at least 2 species, but perhaps as many as 4, native to North America. One of the unique qualities of these plants, a quality that immediately gets the attention of 4 season gardeners, is their flowering time. All witch hazels flower at odd times of the year. Our North American common witch hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*, flowers in the fall with clear yellow, fragrant flowers. In January, the North American vernal witch hazel, *Hamamelis vernalis*, comes into bloom with small red, orange or yellow frost-proof flowers. In February and March the Chinese *Hamamelis mollis*, Japanese *Hamamelis japonica*, and hybrid witch hazels *Hamamelis* × *intermedia* come into flower. The flowers of these Asian species and hybrids are larger and range in color from clear yellow through to deep carmine red. Come autumn, most of the Asian witch hazels, *H.* × *intermedia* hybrids, and selections of the vernal witch hazel have exceptional fall color, in shades of scarlet and orange that rival the display of any *Fothergilla*.

Growing these plants in your garden somehow seems like cheating. As leaves fall in autumn you can harvest boughs of the common witch hazel to create a fragrant, spring-like bouquet for your table. As I write this today on January 4th the temperature is 25° F and yet I know that when I walk past our vernal witch hazel I can warm the small orange flowers with my breath and smell their fragrance. Best of all, when my early snowdrops and winter aconite bulbs come up later this winter, I know

they will be sheltered beneath umbrellas of yellow and apricot hybrid witch hazels in flower. The durability of these plants is not limited to their flowers. All but the vernal witch hazel are native to woodland areas and grow in soils that are moist, well-drained, and rich in organic matter. They will adapt though, and can thrive in sharper drainage or clay if care is taken to mulch and irrigate them appropriately. The vernal witch hazel is native to the gravelly banks of streams and seems more adaptable, thriving in both organically rich but also in thin soils.

The selections of witch hazel offered this year by the University of Delaware Botanic Garden are the best of the best. They are a mix of exceptional tried-and-true cultivars, recent introductions, and in one case, a brand new North American species just described in the botanical literature. With careful addition of just some of these witch hazels to your landscape, you can easily create a garden that is in flower 12 months of the year.

Which leads me to the answer I gave to that almost existential question, "How can you not be interested in witch hazels.?"

Chris is the Director, Garden & Estate at Winterthur Museum & Country Estate. He has written articles on witch hazels for the American Horticultural Society's magazine American Gardener and also for the Royal Horticultural Society's New Plantsman. Before coming to Winterthur, he was the Director of Green Spring Gardens, a 27-acre public garden in Alexandria, Virginia, where he established the National Collection of witch hazels. As part of that, Chris received a grant to collect and document witch hazel cultivars in Europe along with Tony Aiello of the Morris Arboretum. Chris has also worked at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, Callaway Gardens, and the Denver Botanic Gardens.



(Above top) *Hamamelis* × *intermedia* 'Jelena';
Hamamelis × *intermedia* 'Arnold Promise' Photos: Melinda Zoehrer



Hamamelis virginiana Photo:Rick Darke

FEATURED PLANT

Latin Name	Common Name	Mature Size	Light	Soil	Pot Size, Plant Size	Price
<i>Hamamelis mollis</i> 'Sweet Sunshine'	Chinese Witch Hazel	10-15"	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$35
Fragrant, bright yellow flowers burst out in late February into March.						
<i>Hamamelis mollis</i> 'Wisley Supreme'	Chinese Witch Hazel	10-15"	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$35
Selected at Wisley Garden, London, England, this cultivar has larger pale yellow flowers that are sweetly fragrant, typically opening in February. Leaves turn a nice yellow to yellow orange in the fall.						
<i>Hamamelis ovalis</i>		8-15'	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$35.00
UDBG is excited to offer this newly discovered species of witch hazel! Found in Mississippi, this species is distinct in that it has larger foliage that is paler colored underneath, slightly rhizomatous, and red colored flowers. It is an early flowering species that should flower in February in this area. N						
<i>Hamamelis vernalis</i> 'Amethyst'	Vernal Witch Hazel	6-10'	☉●☂		5 g, 4-5'	\$75
The flower color of this native cultivar is unique; reddish purple with a hint of violet. Flowers open in February on upright plants. In fall, the foliage turns a brilliant scarlet. N						
<i>Hamamelis vernalis</i> 'Sandra'	Vernal Witch Hazel	6-8'	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$35
The new foliage emerges with a purple flush before changing to green for the rest of the summer. In the fall, leaves transition from yellow to orange and eventually turn scarlet. The flowers are golden yellow and have a spicy fragrance in February into March. N						
<i>Hamamelis virginiana</i> 'Green Thumb'	Common Witch Hazel	6-8'	☉●☂		10 g, 3-5'	\$75
The cultivar name may refer to the green center of the leaf that is surrounded by a broad band of yellow, as if a green thumb was back lit by the yellow sun. The variegation is stable and does not burn in sun; the foliage turns yellow in the autumn. Fragrant flowers are a pale yellow and appear in October into early November. N						
<i>Hamamelis virginiana</i> 'Harvest Moon'	Common Witch Hazel	15-25'	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$35
The vase-shaped habit is ideal to display the profuse lemon yellow flowers produced in October. Much showier plant than the species, the leaves emerge reddish bronze in the spring and during subsequent flushes of growth in the summer. N						
<i>Hamamelis virginiana</i> 'Mohonk Red'	Common Witch Hazel	10-15'	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$35
This is a very floriferous selection with yellow fall color. Flower petals are red at the base fading to straw color at the tips creating an overall brick red display in October into November. N						
<i>Hamamelis vernalis</i> 'Quasimodo'	Vernal Witch Hazel	3-4'	☉●☂		2 g, 2-3'	\$45
Witch Hazels can be a bit large particularly in smaller gardens. If this is your situation, this cultivar is the answer. The dense, compact habit makes it the right size for even the tightest spots. Flowers have orange petals with maroon sepals, producing an overall orange color on the plant October to November. N						

Latin Name	Common Name	Mature Size	Light	Soil	Pot Size, Plant Size	Price
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Angelly'	Hybrid Witch Hazel	6-8'	☉●☂		5 g, 3-5'	\$75
The compact growth holds the clear light yellow flowers densely together to increase the color display in the February to March garden. Flowers are sweetly fragrant. The new foliage emerges with a reddish coppery tint and later turns bright yellow in the fall.						
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Arnold Promise'	Hybrid Witch Hazel	8-15'	☉●☂		5 g, 2-3'	\$45
This popular cultivar is distinct for the plant's vase shape. It is a late flowering (late February to March) shrub that produces bright yellow flowers that are strongly sweetly fragrant. The fall foliage is orange-red, unusual for a yellow flowered plant.						
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Barmstedt Gold'	Hybrid Witch Hazel	8-12'	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$35
The brilliant display of gold colored flowers February into March makes this stand out at considerable distance in the landscape. Plants are upright becoming more rounded with age. Plantsman Tim Brotzman calls this one of the very best witch hazels.						
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Birgit' Hybrid	Witch Hazel	10-15"	☉●☂		5 g, 3-5'	\$75
'Birgit' is the darkest red flowered witch hazel to date, blooming with a mild fragrance in February and March. The fall foliage is butter yellow suffused with orange red.						
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Diane'	Hybrid Witch Hazel	8-12'	☉●☂		5 g, 2-3'	\$45
Long considered one of the best red flowered cultivars, 'Diane' produces mildly fragrant flowers in January and February. It has a spreading habit; wider than tall. The fall foliage is maroon to yellow-orange to crimson.						
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Feuerzauber'	Hybrid Witch Hazel	8-12'	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$45
Sometimes listed as Firecharm or Firecracker, it is a strong grower with coppery-orange to red, sweetly fragrant flowers in January to February. It is an upright to vase shaped grower with orange red fall foliage.						
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Primavera'	Hybrid Witch Hazel	8-10'	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$35
The extreme number and density of flowers create quite a show in January and February. Flowers are clear yellow with a sweet fragrance. An upright, vase-shaped habit with foliage turning yellow in fall.						
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Rubin'	Hybrid Witch Hazel	12-15'	☉●☂		5 g, 3-5'	\$75
Vigorous plants with a rounded habit produce slightly fragrant, clear red flowers February into March. Flowers hold their color for a longer period as compared to 'Diane'. The fall foliage is yellow flushed with orange.						
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Ruby Glow'	Hybrid Witch Hazel	12-15'	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$45
Introduced in 1946, 'Ruby Glow' (also listed as 'Adonis' and 'Rubra Superba') has warm, deep coppery-red to red-brown colored flowers that glow in the January and February landscape. Plants are notably vase shaped and turn orange and red in the fall.						
<i>Hamamelis</i> × <i>intermedia</i> 'Westerstede'	Hybrid Witch Hazel	8-12'	☉●☂		3 g, 2-3'	\$35
Abundant, slightly fragrant, primrose yellow flowers are produced in February and March. Plants have an upright habit and the leaves turn yellow-orange and red in the fall.						



Hamamelis vernalis Photo:Rick Darke