

Witch Hazel

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Witch hazel provides burst of color

In the bleakest part of winter when our eyes long for some color, the witch and winter hazels can lift our spirit and bring a spark to the landscape. Let's explore these two wonderful shrubs as possible additions to your yard.

WITCH HAZEL has the botanical name *Hamamelis* and was named in 1753 by the botanist Linnaeus who saw the leaves, flowers and prior year's fruit all at once on a native witch hazel, thus choosing "hama" (at the same time) and "melon" (apple or fruit). In Japan witch hazel is "mansaku," which translates as "rich crop" or "earliest flowering." Japanese villagers used the flexible branches to make rafts, baskets and shelves. The cut flowering branches are often displayed in tea ceremony arrangements.

Attributes of this plant include having all season appeal, a long (4 – 6 week) flowering period, being hardy, relatively maintenance free, and ignored by most pests (except, unfortunately, deer). Plants range from 6 feet - 25 feet at maturity and are slow growing. Smooth brown to gray bark, handsome oval leaves, sometimes with downy undersides and fall color of all sorts liven up the autumn garden.

The best show appears in winter when shaggy, spidery blooms (many varieties highly scented) appear down the length of the bare branches. Flower colors range from pale yellow through orange to strong reds—even some purple. After bloom, two-parted capsules of fruit, each about ½-inch long and containing one glossy, black seed, split open to release the seed as far away as 30 feet.

Shrubs can be upright, vase-shaped, rounded, spreading, horizontal spreading or weeping, depending on the variety you choose.

The North American native witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) is a fall flowering variety and is the plant grown and harvested for the extract of its bark and roots that is distilled into the common astringent of the same name. American Indians used parts of this plant to heal swelling and bruising. It is now classified by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as a Class 1 drug.

January is a good time to visit your specialty nursery to view different plants for color and fragrance. Look for a good shape and be prepared to pay a bit, because most witch hazels are grafted plants and therefore take more work to start. Planting them near a well-travelled walkway, in a confined space to hold their scent, or in a place where they can be viewed from a window will allow you to appreciate the plants in the winter months.



Close-up of the flower of “winter glow” witch hazel. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Some of the best varieties are the hybrids labelled *H. x intermedia* which are a cross between the Asian species (*H. japonica*) and the Chinese species (*H. molis*). Examples of this hybrid include these highly rated plants: “Arnold Promise,” “Aurora,” “Barmstedt Gold,” “Diane,” “Jelena,” “Palleda,” “Rubin,” and “Westerstede.” Each differs in autumn and winter colors, height and fragrance (or lack of), so do some research before buying.

Witch hazel needs winter chill to achieve full flowering. For best results, temperatures must be under 45 degrees for a certain number of hours. While an evergreen background makes their color more visible, avoid planting in too much shade or the plant becomes straggly and flowers will suffer. They flower better when planted under deciduous trees so they are exposed to winter sun.

Hamamelis prefer neutral to slightly acid soil with good drainage and compost added to the planting hole. It takes 3 – 4 years for the new plant to reach its stride, and those young plants must be watered in summer to ensure good root growth. Poor early care stunts future development. If there is marginal leaf scorch, or if the plant is holding the leaves vertically, watering is needed.

To maintain good shape or a smaller size, prune yearly after the tree has flowered. Cut the previous season’s growth back to two growth buds to encourage maximum flowering next year. Be sure to prune any suckers below the graft line on grafted plants.

In woodland gardens consider planting with Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*), *Viburnum tinus*, *Daphne odora* or shrubby dogwoods for a varied winter landscape. Winter flowering hellebore or heath, cyclamen and snowdrops are also nice complements.



“Jelena” is a sweetly fragrant upright witch hazel with copper toned flower color and orange-red fall leaves. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

WINTER HAZEL is distinct from witch hazel in several ways. The botanical name of winter hazel is *Corylopsis*. The plants are shorter, with heights ranging from 4 feet – 10 feet, and the shape is rounded. Winter hazel blooms in late winter, whereas witch hazel blooms from late fall to earliest spring depending on the variety. Flowers on the winter hazel have a hanging bell shape, are soft yellow in color and have a sweet fragrance, in contrast to witch hazel’s spicy/citrus fragrance. They also have wide range of bloom color and long, skinny petals which look much like fireworks or spiders.

Winter hazel prefer acidic, well-drained soil and to be set into the earth level with the ground. Plant them where they are protected from severe winds and mid-day hot sun. Once planted correctly, they require little care but if the shrub shows signs of nutritional deficiency, fertilize with a rhododendron/azalea supplement in early spring.

Finding named varieties at specialty nurseries can sometimes be difficult but also rewarding when you find one. Some of the most readily available ones include *Corylopsis glabrescans*, *C. pauciflora*, *C. sinensis* and *C. spicata*.

Evaluate your landscape and determine where witch hazel or winter hazel can add a welcome burst of color and scent to surprise and delight you in winter.

RESOURCES:

- “Winter Hazel: Showy, Fragrant Garden Shrub. Ed Hume Seeds. www.humeseeds.com/efcory.htm
- “Which witch hazel should be in your yard?” Chicago Botanic Garden. www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/smart_gardener/which_witch_hazel_should_be_your_yard
- “Witch hazel: a magical plant for winter.” Bunny Guinness. *The Telegraph*. February 4, 2014. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/plants/10614419/Witch-hazel-a-magical-plant-for-winter.html>
- “How to Grow: Witch Hazel.” Val Bourne. *The Telegraph*. February 2, 2009. www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/howtogrow/4436574/How-to-grow-witch-hazel.html
- “Witch Hazel: Queen of Winter.” Earl Nickel. *Pacific Horticulture*. October 2008. <https://www.pacifichorticulture.org/articles/witch-hazel-queen-of-winter/>.
- “Witch Hazels.” Tim Brotzman. *Fine Gardening Magazine*. Issue 89. <https://www.finegardening.com/article/witch-hazels>
- “Witch Hazel, Winter Hazel: What’s the Difference?” *Horticulture Magazine*. <https://www.hortmag.com/weekly-tips/witch-hazel-winter-hazel-whats-difference>

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.