

SENIOR ADVOCATE

Prime News for Those in Their Prime

Flower Power

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Well, its January, the holidays are over and any signs of spring are still months away. Color is limited in the landscape, sometimes almost monochrome. For those of us that are lucky enough to have Witchhazel planted near the house, finding color is as easy as walking out your front door.

Witchhazel (*Hamamelis* species) is a woody perennial, sometimes defined as a tree, sometimes a shrub. It has a number of traits that help it steal the limelight, including smooth gray bark and attractive foliage. But, no other hardy woody plant, native or exotic, can match the unexpected flower display of the Witchhazel.

Most varieties bloom anywhere from January to March, except for the autumn Witchhazel, which blooms in the fall of the year. The most common flower color is yellow, but flowers also come in shades of orange, bronze, and burgundy-red. The blooms are very fragrant and extremely durable, blooming over a long period. The flowers close up when it is very cold, so they can last for up to a month in temperatures that would decimate the flowers of other plants.

In the wild, they are most often found growing in light shade in the moist, well-drained, acidic soil of low damp woods. However, they are adaptable and can be successfully grown in full sun as long as they are protected from severe drought, heat reflection and sunscald. Relatively slow growing, they do not need much pruning. When given tolerable conditions, they stand up well against insect and disease.

Because of their size and stature, Witchhazels are great for smaller gardens. A good average size is 10-15 feet in both height and width. Sizes do vary among available varieties, so please check with your local nursery.

The Witchhazel has a rich history of use outside the garden setting. Traditionally, branches of *Hamamelis virginiana* were used as "divining rods". People would carry a forked twig loosely in their hands until the twig bent downward, pointing to where to dig for water. Also, extracts from the leaves, twigs and bark were used to reduce inflammation, stop bleeding and as an astringent. The inner bark, cooked into a syrup, was used by Native Americans for coughs and fever. But, modern research has shown Witchhazel to be of questionable effectiveness as a medicine.

The Witchhazel is an agreeable, undemanding landscape plant that deserves more attention than it is currently given. It has just the right mix of beauty and mystery that should make it irresistible for any gardener.