

# Wildflower in Focus

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## Common Witch-Hazel

*Hamamelis virginiana* L.

Witch-Hazel Family (*Hamamelidaceae*)



The only fall-blooming tree in Maryland's native flora, common witch-hazel contributes golden flowers and golden leaves to woodland landscapes from the mountains to the coastal plain. Late autumn hikes are enlivened by the brightly-hued flowers adorning the branchlets of this small tree or shrub. Witch-hazel is a well known herbal and its branches are favored by water diviners.

**Flowers:** Yellow, with 4 small, spreading, ribbon-like petals. Each petal 1/2 - 1" long. Flowers borne in small axillary clusters as the leaves turn gold in autumn. They remain for a time after the leaves have dropped, sometimes into early winter.

**Fruit:** A short, thick, 2-beaked capsule which becomes woody and splits at the top to release seeds. The seeds have a powerful reach. Maryland Native Plant Society President Carole Bergmann describes hearing a popping sound during a hike on Old Rag Mountain in Virginia. Looking up, she saw witch-hazel seeds bursting from the capsules! Capsules take about a year to mature and may remain on the tree for years.

**Leaves:** Alternate, simple, deciduous, 2 - 6" long. Leaf blade is broadly obovate, oblong or ovate with a scallop-toothed margin and unequal base. The leaves often develop small pointed galls known as "witches' hats."

**Growth Habit:** Small tree or shrub.

**Bark and Twigs:** Bark light brown, smooth or slightly scaly. Twigs with slightly flattened, curved end buds that are covered with dense yellow-brown hairs.

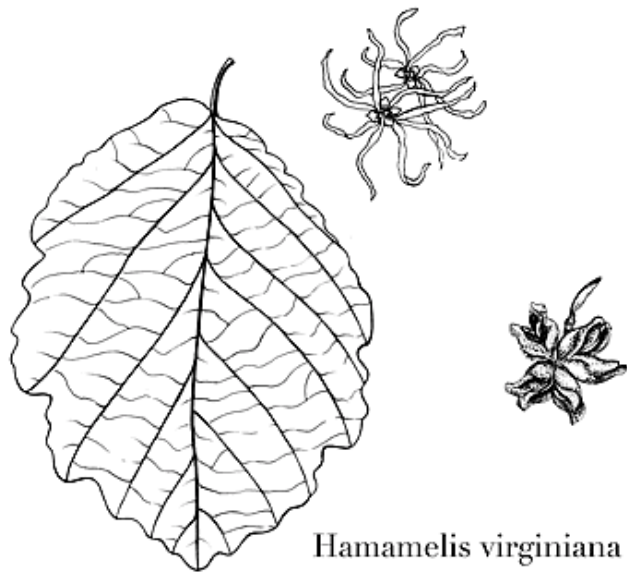
**Habitat and Range:** Woods, streamsides; eastern U.S. and extreme southeastern Canada.

**Herbal Lore:** Common witch-hazel has astringent properties and is the source of witch-hazel liniment and many other topical preparations. Witch-hazel was also used internally by Native Americans as a tea for sore throats, colds and a number of other medical conditions.

**Wildlife Lore:** Squirrels, ruffed grouse and other birds eat the fruits and whitetail deer browse the leaves and young branchlets.

**Similar Species:** The scalloped leaves with unequal bases and yellow autumn flowers distinguish this tree or large shrub from all others in our local native flora.

**Blooming Time:** September - January.



*Hamamelis virginiana*  
Witch-hazel

**Locations:** Maryland streamsides, wooded slopes, upland woods and woodland edges from the coastal plain to the western mountains. Jug Bay Wetland Sanctuary, Rock Creek Park, Little Bennett Regional Park, Black Hill Regional Park, Rachel Carson Conservation Park, Sugarloaf Mountain, Catoctin Mountains and westward.

Common Witch-Hazel article adapted from **An Illustrated Guide to Eastern Woodland Wildflowers and Trees: 350 Plants Observed at Sugarloaf Mountain, Maryland** (Choukas-Bradley and Brown, University of Virginia Press).