

Hamamelis virginiana

[Synonyms : *Hamamelis androgyna*, *Hamamelis angustifolia*, *Hamamelis corylifolia*, *Hamamelis dioica*, *Hamamelis macrophylla*, *Hamamelis orbiculata*, *Hamamelis virginiana* var. *angustifolia*, *Hamamelis virginiana* var. *henryi*, *Hamamelis virginiana* var. *orbiculata*, *Hamamelis virginiana* var. *macrophylla*, *Hamamelis virginiana* var. *parvifolia*, *Trilopus dentata*, *Trilopus estivalis*, *Trilopus nigra*, *Trilopus nigra* var. *catesbiana*, *Trilopus parvifolia*, *Trilopus rotundifolia*, *Trilopus virginica*]

WITCH HAZEL is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to eastern North America it has small brownish-yellow inside, bright yellow flowers that have a spicy fragrance and leaves which turn yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as *Amamelide* (Italian), American witch hazel, *Amerikansk trollhassel* (Swedish), *Amerikantaikapähkinä* (Finnish), Common witch hazel, *Guvercin ağ* (Turkish), *Hamamélis* (French), *Hamamel virgínsky* (Slovak), Hazel nut, Head-wood, Long boughs, Pistachio, Snapping hazel, Snapping hazelnut, Southern witch hazel, Spotted alder, Striped alder, Tobacco wood, *Trilopo* (Italian), *Vilín virgínský* (Czech), Virginian witchhazel, *Virginische Zaubernuss* (German), *Virginischer Zauberstrauch* (German), White hazel, Winterbloom, Wood tobacco, Wych hazel, and *Zaubernuss* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of Autumn changeability, consolation, enchantment, inspiration, mysticism, ‘a spell’, and ‘a spell is upon me’.

The brownish-black capsular fruit ripen the following Autumn and explosively and loudly eject their shiny black seeds distances as much as 15-40 ft.

The leaves and young flower-bearing twigs are collected and distilled. The bark is collected and sold in strips. A colourless tincture is made from this bark by distillation and, if concentrated, yields a fatty green substance.

Warning – unlike the distilled witch hazel the undiluted tincture from the bark can cause disfigurement of the skin.

Virginiana means ‘of or from Virginia (United States)’ which itself was named after the English ‘Virgin Queen’ Elizabeth I (1533-1603).

In North America, Indian tribes had harnessed witch hazel’s qualities in various ways. The glossy black seeds were sacred beads in Menominee medicine rituals and some tribes, including the Menominee, rubbed athlete’s limbs with a plant decoction as an aid to suppleness. The Potawatomi used the twigs in a sauna for easing sore muscles.

Cherokee Indians took an infusion of the leaves and bark internally to ease fevers, period problems and sore throats, and like the Chippewa, Mohican and Iroquois tribes they also used it externally to aid the healing of wounds, sores and some skin diseases. In addition the Iroquois employed it to treat a wide range of problems, including various heart and kidney disorders, dysentery and cholera, some lung ailments, asthma and coughs, blood disorders and rheumatism, and also used it to enhance appetite and ease childbirth problems. Mohican Indians and the Iroquois tribe both applied it to bruises. The Iroquois used it in remedies for some venereal diseases too and for toothache. They and the Cherokee looked upon it as a remedy for tuberculosis, and the Chippewa Indians used witch hazel to treat sore eyes and to cause vomiting when this was required. The Mohican tribe also applied it to insect bites.

Early North American settlers used the local species, similarly to the English hazel they were familiar with (otherwise known as mountain ash, *Sorbus aucuparia*) for divining (or 'witching') water – and gold or buried treasure as well. Some believe that it was the tree's use for divining (or dowsing) that led to its name. From 1735 or 1736 when the first plant was imported into Europe by the English botanist and naturalist Peter Collinson (1694-1768) forked branches of witch hazel were used in England as divining rods for water.

In more recent times some North American army recruits have been instructed that witch hazel provides the ideal camouflage material (or it would be if it grew in the areas where it might be needed). It is pointed out that leaves on these branches removed from the tree can take several weeks to wilt and drop off. At the other end of the scale North American boy scouts have been taught to rely on the witch hazel for providing toothbrushes adapted from its twigs.

The edible seeds are rarely eaten.

Today witch hazel is a commercial ingredient in cosmetic preparations eg. creams or astringent lotions. It can also be found in pharmaceutical preparations such as haemorrhoid ointments or eye washes and in toiletry products ie scented soaps, mouthwashes and aftershaves.

It was from the North American Indians that settlers learnt of the tree's medicinal qualities. These once included its use in the treatment of haemorrhages, tumours, ulcers and backache. Herbalists also recommended it as a remedy for diarrhoea and dysentery, as well as for burns, scalds, and insect bites. Today witch hazel can be used for treating haemorrhages, varicose veins, piles, sprains, bruises, spots and blemishes, and it is an ingredient in commercial eye drops.

It is the birthday flower for 9th August.