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NATURALLY: Blooming into the fall and winter months with witch hazel

By DANA DRISCOLL Special to the Gazette 14 mins ago

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According to Penn State Extension, witch hazel is one of the few plants that can actively "launch" its seeds. When the seed capsules dry out, internal pressure builds until they literally burst open, shooting seeds as far as 30 feet with a small popping sound.

As we begin moving closer toward the winter solstice, trees drop their leaves and the heavy frosts come. In this time of late fall, you might walk through White's Woods and notice a strange sight — little bright yellow clusters of blooms covering the witch hazel trees. It seems odd to see such blooms as the forest goes bare and everything else is dying back, but this is the season of the witch hazel (Hamamelis virginiana).

Witch hazel has many names, including winterbloom (for obvious reasons), tobacco wood, snapping alder, or wyche elm. Witch hazel is called “tobacco wood” because you can smoke the inner bark and leaves as a tobacco substitute (or as a nice smoke in their own right, combined with other herbs). The last name, “wyche elm,” probably comes from the Anglo-Saxon term wyche, which means “bendable.” Because it is so flexible, witch hazel is a popular wood for crafting “witching rods,” or dowsing rods — a tradition that persists in our region.

Witch hazel is often found as an understory tree in both evergreen and deciduous forests, and is one of our dominant understory trees in White’s Woods, along with the spicebush (Lindera benzoin). Witch hazels are shade-tolerant, slow-growing, and often have a growth form with several smaller trunks coming up from a central root ball; the trunks often grow crooked and at odd angles.

The older they are, the thicker and more abundant the different trunks are. When the flowers open in the fall, they also open their seed pods, shooting out two black seeds from each pod. Witch hazel prefers rich and damp soils and can be found throughout the eastern half of the United States.

The small but striking bright yellow flowers emerge just as the leaves of the tree begin to turn yellow in the fall. Even after the leaves drop and freezing temperatures set in, the flowers continue to persist for some time. Here in western Pennsylvania, you can find them sometimes into late December or beyond! The flowers themselves look like a little yellow firework or sparkler — the bud opens up and over two dozen very thin, long flower petals unroll and twist around. From a distance, they almost look like little pompoms popping out from the branch. When the flowers emerge, the tree also expels the two shiny black seeds at a distance of up to 30 feet.

Witch hazel has a number of uses for humans — the most famous being the product labeled witch hazel that you can find in any pharmacy. The clear liquid that you purchase at the store is a steamed distillation of the branches of the witch hazel tree. This product is used for mouthwashes, reducing inflammation, addressing skin irritation, helping sore throats (especially if inflamed), hemorrhoids, acne, and more. This use is consistent with those of Indigenous people, who use witch hazel as a tea, liniment, and poultice for a range of internal and external applications.

The tradition of dowsing was imported from Europe with the colonization of the Americas. Europeans used hazelnut trees; here they used either witch hazel or American hazel (Corylus americana), both of which are dominant in our region. Dowsing is performed by turning one's arms up and holding a rod in both hands. By observing subtle movements of the rod, one can sense the direction and location of various buried treasures, which can include buried springs, mineral deposits, gold, silver, or salt.

As witch hazel is native to North America, this dowsing tradition ties to the larger folk traditions of Appalachia and beyond. When we purchased our current home in Penn Run, we were told by the previous owners that they had employed a local dowser to find the spring on the property in the 1970s when the house was built. I was also told that this dowser (whose name I do not know) dowsed regularly in our area, cutting fresh witch hazel sticks each time. Many of the springs and wells in the area were discovered by him.

So, as you are taking a walk in White's Woods in the fall, look for the small witch hazel blooms as the tree's leaves first go yellow, then brown, and then drop. The blooms will persist, sometimes to the New Year, making this wonderful forest friend a joy to find.

I see witch hazel as a beacon of hope, blooming when everything else is dying back and in decline. I think that's a powerful message. So go find some witch hazel and sit with her for a bit.

Dr. Dana Driscoll, a professor of English at IUP, has been teaching wild food foraging, herbalism, and sustainable living for more than 10 years. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.