

Don't Just Stand and Stare



Martin Stimson Head of School of Horticulture Writtle College continues his very personal accounts of plants that mean something to him. This month he writes about the Witch Hazels, a small group of plants which flower in winter and provide a well known product for the medicine cabinet.

Use your nose as well as your eyes

One warm and showery day in May a few years ago, I got bored with the Chelsea flower show. How could that ever be possible you wonder? I realise that losing interest in this annual horticultural extravaganza is akin to committing a cardinal horticultural sin, but the dense crowds and the affluence were spoiling the day. I left the show and walked down the Thames embankment to the Chelsea Physic Garden. A peaceful, secluded retreat, far from the madding crowd. Inside the garden a few other visitors were soaking up the tranquillity. In the middle of the space, I saw a specimen of *Paulownia tomentosa*, its large purple flowers, on thick bare branches caught my eye. Usually these trees have flowers that are out of reach, thus making horticultural inspection difficult. The tree in question was short and the branches were unusually at eye level. I put my hand onto a branch in order to enable my nose, the honour of smelling the bloom. Unexpectedly the flower nearest my nose fell off, not through physical blundering, but through gentle vibration of the stems. Like a foxglove, which it resembles, the bloom fluttered balletically to the floor. As it came to its final resting point, the voice of a garden volunteer shouted out. "Visitors are not allowed to touch the flowers!" Embarrassing for me, but worth while exploring the bloom, to see if it was scented. I managed to find another when the beaded and tweeded guardian of all nature, had left the zone.



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Paulownia tomentosa,

It was not (as far as I could tell) scented. But at least I tried. At least I knew that there was potential for flowers to smell and I had found out for myself, in my own way. Most people I think, don't even bother to use their nose as a matter of routine in this way. In fact the only time you see people smelling flowers is when they are given a bouquet.

Witch Hazel smells?

Just down the road from my house in suburban Chelmsford, there's a low brick wall circa 1940, protecting a small front garden which faces west. Growing adjacent to the wall, but not quite hanging over it, there's a Chinese Witch Hazel plant about 1.5m high. This plant is *Hamamelis mollis* and typically in January it is covered with golden yellow flowers, clustered like small spiders at the nodes. This year, small tantalising glimpses of colour were evident under the snow which fell in late December, before Christmas day. On glimpsing through Beans *Manual of Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles* it is interesting to note that he tells the reader that the Chinese Witch Hazel is "*undoubtedly the finest of all the species, both as regards flowers and foliage; and because of the early date at which it flowers (it is often in full bloom on Christmas day)*" (Bean, W. J. 8th Edition 1973) This year then, despite an international acceptance of climate change, the branches are bare of leaves as they should be, and the blooms are out, thus making the blooms more conspicuous than if the flowers were secluded under leaves. This contrast between the newly laid moist snow, which stuck to the branches, and the yellow petals is strong, and make it an obvious 'must see' plant. Despite this, most pedestrians, including mothers and children on the school trek,



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When I walk down the same road with my friends I instinctively try to make them stop and enact the proverb "Take time to smell the flowers". (This is the permanent teacher in me I'm afraid and must be annoying to my friends). My upbringing as a gardener encouraged me to never lose the opportunity to stick my nose into a flower to assess the aroma. I'm aware, though, that this is a sense that many people now seem to ignore. In the same way that the freezer and the microwave have removed our connection to the land, so our urban indoor lifestyle has perhaps made us lose interest in one of our senses. I get frustrated that these opportunities are missed.

Winter flowering plants in the garden or landscape are always special. It's a well worn gardening statement, but a truism, that Flowers and therefore flower colour, are in short supply in gardens and landscapes during January and February. Coloured stems, exfoliating bark, broad leaved evergreens, and coloured fruit, all play their part in the winter landscape, but flowers in winter are special. When flowers are scented, the experience is a double pleasure.

Getting Close up and Personal

The Witch Hazels are among my favourite winter flowering plants, probably because in my youth I studied the plant family to which they belong, not as a botanist but as a horticulturalist. The Witch Hazels (*Hamamelis* sp) are well known shrubs and small trees that start the New Year in flower and provide the garden visitor and landscape user with some optimism and hope for the year to come. The shortest day is past, and clusters of flowers, like grated cheese, cling to bare branches in the depths of winter, sometimes with snow capping the twigs. Cold winds and frosts do little to stop the blooms which come in a variety of reds, orange and yellows. Chris Lane maintains a National Collection of *Hamamelis* and runs a specialist Nursery. His website demonstrates each and every cultivar via a photographic collection. <http://www.witchhazelnursery.com>. Its well worth a look to see how four or five species of plant from the far corners of the planet, can be brought together to create floral diversity within what is essentially generic floral similarity.



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Witch Hazels fascinate me for a number of reasons. Firstly there are only four or five species, botanically distinctive because of the narrowness of their petals. The Chinese (*H. mollis*) and the Japanese Witch Hazels (*H. japonica*) represent the east, while the west is represented by the Ozark Witch Hazel (*H. vernalis*), and the well known *H. virginiana*. There are also many hybrids between the Japanese and the Chinese, referred to as *H x intermedia*. The fascination continues for me because the seeds and the seed pods are produced at the same time as the flowers, and the seed is flung large distances from exploding pods which are hard and nutty to feel and touch. When this is combined with a plant of curious leaf shape, unusual form and autumn colour there is as they say almost something for everyone.

Display Value

Despite this array of interesting features, at one level the Witch Hazel can be a discrete plant, especially the American one which flowers when in leaf. They suit the large border, being green and loose in the summer, and sit calmly on the woodland floor where land and space are available. Twice a year they erupt in colour, once in flower and once in autumn leaf colour. Curiously this semi reclusive summer plant is prominent in the world of medicine and herbal remedy. “Go get the Witch Hazel from the medicine cabinet” was the cry that went up in our household, when a bruise was about to appear on young offspring. Witch Hazel is a well known astringent and is a good example of ethnobotanical and medicinal horticulture. Much is written about its use, providing one appreciates that some information is written with the aim of increasing sales.

A story to tell

I also like Hamamelis because they are well documented and have an interesting story to tell. Especially in America where *Hamamelis virginiana* grows wild and free. The use of its twigs by early settlers to divine water, is often cited as the reason for its common name. It is suggested that it had magical ‘wyching’ properties, and it resembled the English Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) our own native water wyching shrub. The similarity is obvious when one examines the leaves. The medicinal properties are also well documented, it being a plant which the American Indians used regularly for a wide variety of ailments and conditions. From this history a large and important distilling industry has developed.



Partners in the Winter Gardens

In the garden landscape I've always felt that Witch Hazels need partners. In the last 30 years or so some notable winter gardens have been developed, which show case plants which come into their own during the winter months. Recently a new winter garden has

Essential Evergreens

Evergreen plants in the winter landscape are a natural and necessary feature, not only to fill in space, but also to provide a backdrop to winter blooms. In traditional herbaceous borders, (those rectangular ones which seem confined to garden history text books), the evergreen background was considered as essential for shelter as for providing contrast against which vivid colours could be presented. In winter gardens, evergreens cover the floor to enable young Witch Hazel blooms to be visible as they are observed from above. Conifers and Laurels give accent points, height and contrast for plants large enough to be viewed at eye level.

In Horticulture scrubby plants are often taken out of natural context and put on a pedestal in a garden. Witch Hazels are treated thus, and as specimens they have character, having an usual form sometimes like a funnel. They look fine on corners of buildings and towards the middle and front of plantings where they become a focal point, around which the rest of the planting can hang. In time their shape and form create interest, but initially it's the winter blooms, and the yellow autumn colour which will turn heads. I once saw one trained as a fan on a black fence in Cambridge which struck me as an unusual but incredibly interesting alternative way to display the flowers.

Lighting up the flowers and the Leaves

After blooming, their leaves individually are conspicuous due to their shape, but as greenery they are rather bland, blending into the background so that other summer colour comes to the fore. In autumn Witch Hazel leaves tend to colour well and add vibrancy to the planting, especially if planted with consideration for the direction of light. Light shining onto the leaves brings out the colour contrast. Light shining from behind (through the leaves) illuminates the back, and filters the light for the viewer. As the sun gets lower in the sky interesting shimmering glows can be created to add tiny accents of light to shady zones. Light coming through the blooms and the leaves rather than directly at the blooms or the leaves, can provide those wow factor moments for visitors and owners alike.. But next time you see a Which Hazel promise me you will take time out to smell the subtlety of its blooms and don't just stand and stare. Use your nose.

To see Hamamelis - go to Hesgarth Hall, Lancaster, the home of designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd on 13th February £8.50 on the door - includes cup of hot chocolate. Tel: 01524 770 313

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