

Hamamelis 'Arnold Promise'

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In recent years, this early spring-blooming shrub has become a sensation on the American gardening scene. In his article, Dr. Weaver, a former Arboretum taxonomist, presents the story of the development of this striking hybrid as only a "parent" can.

In botanic gardens and arboreta, plants of closely related species are often grown in close proximity for display, educational, or research purposes. Hybridization between species results much more commonly in such situations than in the wild where the habitats of the same species may be separated by hundreds or even thousands of miles. Over the years many interesting and valuable ornamental plants have arisen in gardens through the unknowing intermediacy of the honey bee, making its daily rounds. *Forsythia x intermedia*, for instance, a hybrid between *F. suspensa* and *F. viridissima*, was first observed to be growing in the Göttingen Botanic Garden in Germany around 1885. Since then, the hybrid has been recreated many times, and has given rise to most of our common garden forsythias. In the same way, a number of plants have arisen at the Arnold Arboretum, including among them one of the finest shrubs ever to originate on its grounds.

In 1928, William Judd, the propagator at the time, collected seeds from a plant of the Chinese witch hazel (*Hamamelis mollis*). Its parent plant, illustrious in itself, had been grown from seeds collected by E. H. Wilson in China in 1905. The resulting seedlings turned out to be not *H. mollis*, but rather

appeared to be hybrids. The pollen parent (analogous to the father plant) was eventually determined to have been a closely adjacent plant of *H. japonica*, the Japanese witch hazel. Alfred Rehder in 1944 named the hybrid *H. x intermedia* because its character was intermediate between its parents. Seven plants grew from the original hybrid seeds collected by William Judd in 1928. The colors of the flowers varied from reddish through coppery-orange to yellow. Most bloomed rather sparsely, and the flowers on others were partially obscured by persistent withered leaves, an unfortunate trait inherited from their Chinese parent. But one was spectacularly different with its profuse, slightly fragrant, clear yellow flowers. Its merit was eventually recognized and it was given the clonal name 'Arnold Promise'.

In general, witch hazels are large shrubs and small trees with a scattered distribution in eastern North America and eastern Asia. Four species are usually recognized. Although they are rarely grown as ornamentals in this country, they are extremely valuable because of their unique blooming times. Our native common witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) blooms from early October through mid-December in good seasons. In some years the Ozark witch hazel (*H. vernalis*) overlaps slightly, but it normally commences to bloom in early January. The extremely fragrant



A close-up of the flowers of 'Arnold Promise.' Photo by Ràcz and Debreczy.

blooms of the Chinese species follow closely near the end of January, and the Japanese species ends the season with its flowers in March. The bright but not spectacular, fragrant flowers of witch hazel would perhaps not be much appreciated if they appeared during the riot of May, but they are a treasure in the drab winter. Its four strap-shaped petals appear very

delicate but they are unharmed by sub-freezing temperatures. They merely coil up like a spring on unusually cold days and recoil with more temperate weather.

Hamamelis 'Arnold Promise' is the very best of the early-blooming witch hazels, at least for New England gardeners. It is a far better plant than either of its parents, particularly

in regard to its flowering. The flowers of *H. mollis* are individually more attractive and they are extremely fragrant. But they are seldom profusely borne in our climate and they are often damaged by severe cold. The flowers of *H. japonica* are larger, but they are rather dull-colored. The flowers of 'Arnold Promise' are unusual among witch hazels in that the spidery petals spread more or less downward rather than outward. They are consistently borne in great profusion, even after the coldest of recent winters, appearing from mid-February to early March depending on the season. The habit of the plant is also better than that of most witch hazels. The original plant, now 52 years old, is a shapely, broadly vase-shaped shrub with numerous, gently ascending stems. It is presently about twenty feet tall

and almost as broad. The autumn foliage is the color typical of many of its genus—clear, bright yellow—and the withered leaves never persist into the winter.

The ornamental merit of 'Arnold Promise' has only recently been recognized, and it is just beginning to be available in the nursery trade. The original plant is still tucked away in a corner of the Administration Building out of view from the passing public. However, its modest position, close at hand, keeps it always in mind of the staff of the Arboretum. They see in it, as Donald Wyman put it so well, "an old friend, known for its performance, counted on because it has been there a long time, and not considered unusual for these reasons." But the 'Arnold Promise' is special. Its promise is the promise of spring.