

# Mystical, Medicinal Witch Hazel

Sheila Connor

**Fall is our native witch hazel's best time. In this season it will reward the passerby with a faint, clean scent reminiscent of spring and the sight of ribbons of gold among equally golden leaves. But because it has long been used as a natural astringent, *Hamamelis virginiana* may be more familiar to most people as a bottle of liquid on a shelf in the medicine cabinet than as an understory species of the New England woodland.**

As an all-purpose home remedy, witch hazel extract has outlived many of the patent medicines of our great-grandparents' day. Commercial manufacture of witch hazel extract began in 1866, when Thomas Newton Dickinson, a minister and entrepreneur, built a witch hazel distillery in Essex, Connecticut. Originally, witch hazel brush was cut locally and then transported either by boat or by horse and wagon to the distillery. The company has always obtained the witch hazel it needs from the forests of southern New England, and most of the harvest now comes from the northwestern corner of Connecticut. And today, as in the past, the brushcutters—farmers and woodcutters working their own land or land they have contracted to clear—sell directly to the distiller. Work begins in October and often continues until late spring. Sometimes only the branches are cut; otherwise, the plant is cut to the ground. But because witch hazel quickly sprouts from stumps, only a few years will pass before a plant may be harvested again. The invention of the portable chipper allowed the refining process to begin right on site, and now the brush arrives at the factory ready to be distilled in stainless-steel vats, where steam is applied for more than thirty-six hours to the chopped brush. The vaporized essence, which comes from the cambium layer just under the outer bark, is "scrubbed" in washing chambers, reheated to vapor, condensed, and filtered. Today's modern equipment and techniques still deal with three

basic elements—witch hazel brush, water, and heat—and T. N. Dickinson's "formula." The clear liquid you see in a bottle of hamamelis extract is 86 percent "double distilled" witch hazel and 14 percent alcohol.

Witch hazel's applications seem to have changed as little as its manufacturing process. The explorer-botanist Peter Kalm reported the use of *Hamamelis virginiana* by Native Americans in treating eye diseases as early as 1751. They called the plant "magic water," boiled the stems and used the liquid not only for their eyes but also to treat cuts, bruises, and scratches. The many modern-day applications of aqueous witch hazel approved by the Food and Drug Administration include treating sores, minor lacerations, sprains, and tired and puffy eyes.

There is also a mystical side to *Hamamelis virginiana*: its use in the occult arts. The common name witch hazel was given to *H. virginiana* by early English settlers because they believed it possessed the ability to "divine." Our native tree was not the first plant to be called witch hazel; the colonists brought the name with them across the Atlantic. Its application is an example of how often a common name reflects an association people make with a plant, rather than an accurate description of it.

In Great Britain, dowsers used their native elm, *Ulmus glabra*, which they called the "witch hazel tree," to find hidden veins of precious metal or underground springs. In



*The enduring commercial success of witch hazel may lie in imaginative marketing. Early advertising of the E. E. Dickinson Witch Hazel Company took advantage of romantic legends, as in this label for a bottle of Witchal, a stronger mix of witch hazel and alcohol: "In the early days it was believed that when the good witches boiled the witch hazel twigs in their caldrons it was a sign that the potion was ready for use when the phantomlike shape of a beautiful young woman could be seen riding through the steam." Apparently the batch in this illustration isn't quite ready.*

Old English, *wice* meant "lively" or "to bend," and as a dowser approached the site of, say, a potentially productive spring, the branch would become "lively" and begin to point to the source.

The pliant branches of the elm were also used by archers to make their bows. When it was reported that the "aborigines" made the same use of *Hamamelis virginiana* for their weapons, it seems that the colonists transferred all the elm's associated powers to the New World plant. Although many plants were used for dowsing, witch hazel became the preferred one for use as a divining rod.

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Sheila Connor is Horticultural Research Archivist at the Arnold Arboretum. This article is adapted from her book, *New England Natives: A Celebration of Trees and People*, published by Harvard University Press, 1994