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The Spooky, Eerie Nature Of Witch Hazel Bushes

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By R. Kelly Coffey

The witch hazel tree is one of the strangest plants native to the Southern Appalachians. It blooms around Halloween and “spits” its seed with a startling pop. Its gnarled and misshapen limbs confirm that the tree is appropriately named. It creates a tingling sensation when applied to the skin. Its wood supposedly has special powers to detect underground water and salt, as well as gold, silver, and other precious metals. Such characteristics lend an eerie quality to the witch hazel tree, making it an intriguing plant to observe around Halloween.

Knows No Season

Ghost stories and horror movies often emphasize out-of-season phenomena — flies in mid winter, chilly air in the summer — as

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evidence of the supernatural. Because of its unusual life cycle, witch hazel also seems to be responding to an otherworldly force, operating on a different calendar than most plants.

The typical pattern for a plant is to bloom in the spring, develop seeds over the summer, and, after the seeds mature, go dormant in the fall. Witch hazel, however, begins to bloom in late October as it is shedding its leaves, and often continues to bloom after the tree is completely dormant. While the blooms are open, the seed pods from the previous year mature and eject tiny black seeds up to 30 feet. In short, witch hazel goes dormant, blooms, and spreads its seed all at the same time, processes that most plants widely separate over several months.

Witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) can be described as either a large shrub or a small tree. Several sinuous trunks, a few inches in diameter and up to 25 feet tall, extend from a tight cluster at the ground and branch out, in a zigzag manner, into a wide crown. Although it appears that numerous witch hazel plants have sprouted close together, each cluster, in fact, is a single plant. Witch hazel is common throughout the southern mountains, and covers much of eastern North America as well.

Seen from a distance, the bright yellow blooms with thin, stringy petals create quite a contrast with the brown, dormant forest. Since the blooms appear in late fall— a time when most insects are inactive — pollination would seem to be difficult to accomplish. Witch hazel, however, compensates by blooming for a relatively long period, and by taking advantage of the few insects that happen to be operating in late fall.

Insects not normally considered pollinators, such as gnats,


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wasps, and flies, are able to carry pollen between witch hazel blooms at a time when bees and butterflies are unavailable. Although pollination occurs in the fall, fertilization is delayed until spring. As a result, the seed develops over the spring and summer, and is dispersed in the fall as new blooms appear. The seed will not germinate for two years, requiring the passage of two winters before it is properly conditioned.

Skin-Crawling Concoctions

Witch hazel is popularly known as the main ingredient in commercial concoctions traditionally used to treat various skin conditions. The leaves, twigs, and bark contain high levels of tannin, a plant substance that acts as an astringent. Astringents tighten the skin, giving a tingling sensation. Even before the plant was commercially utilized, eastern Indians (including the Cherokee) were aware of this property and used the plant as a remedy for many skin afflictions. Despite its wide use, modern medicine finds it to be only mildly effective, at best.

Many claims have been made concerning witch hazel's "witching" abilities. One folk belief states that if a person scouts an area with a properly-cut, Y-shaped limb, it will bend toward the ground at the spot where it encounters a large accumulation of ground water. The same assertion is made regarding other valuable substances as well: salt, coal, copper, gold, and silver. Even lost knives, pans, and tools supposedly can be found with a witch hazel limb.

Did the tree take its name from these folk beliefs, or did the folklore develop because people thought that a tree with "witch"

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in its name had special powers? Naturalist John Eastman notes that “witch is a corruption of the Anglo-Saxon word wych (related to the word wicker, meaning bending.)” Thus, the word may have originally referred to the tree’s twisted shape, or the bloom’s bent petals.

The origin of the tree’s name remains unclear, however, because its use as a divining rod could have preceded the name. The origin of the word “hazel,” in its name is ambiguous, too. Although its leaves somewhat resemble hazelnut foliage, *Hamamelis virginiana* is unrelated to *Corylus americana*, the true hazelnut plant.

Over the years, certain plants have become associated with certain holidays: poinsettias at Christmas, lilies at Easter, roses on Valentine’s Day, and clover on St. Patrick’s Day. Although no tree, shrub, or flower seems to be designated the Halloween plant, the weird characteristics of the witch hazel tree would make it an ideal candidate.

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