

Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*)

Common Names: Hamamelis, winterbloom.

Location: Witch hazel is a leathery-leafed shrub native to the Atlantic seaboard of the United States.

Description: The upward-facing surface of its leaves are shiny green, but the bottoms of the leaves are dull gray. Witch hazel trees stand out in the forest in the autumn because as other trees are losing their leaves, the witch hazel is covered with golden-yellow, threadlike flowers, thus making it appealing to landscapers as a desirable ornamental plant.

Properties: Both the bark and the leaves of the plant are used medicinally.

Uses: Native Americans introduced witch hazel to early European settlers. The Native Americans applied a strained decoction of the leaves and twigs to small wounds, insect bites, sore muscles, and joints. They also sipped witch hazel tea to treat bleeding, inflammation, and hemorrhoids. In the nineteenth century, an alcoholic extract of witch hazel was one of the most popular herbs in the United States. Witch hazel is a valuable cooling topical astringent for various ailments, including varicose veins, hemorrhoids, abrasions, bruises, and other skin irritations. It is also good for clearing up the redness produced by eczema and for smoothing wrinkles. Witch hazel is used in pads to help soothe discomfort from rectal and vaginal surgery and stitches. The bark decoction also is useful as a gargle in relieving sore throat. Benefits of witch hazel for specific health conditions include treatment of the following: burns, cold sores, cuts and scrapes, insect bites and stings, diarrhea, eczema, hemorrhoids varicose veins, and periodontal disease.

Doses: Witch hazel is available as creams, teas, and tinctures; it can also be made into poultices. Do not use the commonly available witch hazel water.

Warnings: While witch hazel water has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), its healing benefits derive from the alcohol rather than the witch hazel itself. Witch hazel bark teas are intended for treatment of acute rather than chronic diarrhea. If diarrhea persists longer than three days, consult a physician. Always be sure to replace fluids lost during diarrhea by drinking adequate amounts of water. Witch hazel may cause stomach upset, nausea, vomiting, or constipation, and in rare cases the bark may cause liver damage if too much is absorbed. The volatile oil contains a known carcinogen (safrole), but in small amounts it is unlikely to pose any risk. Due to its high tannin content, witch hazel should not be used over long periods of time. Do not use the commercially prepared witch hazel water internally.