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HOW DID WITCH-HAZEL GET ITS NAME? WHAT IS IT USED FOR?

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The witch-hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana* (Figs. 1-4), is a bush native to the eastern United States that has the lore and appeal of a folk tale. It is a bush that is easily identified by its unique, spicy-smelling flowers that bloom in the fall with four petals that resemble thin, wavy, yellow ribbons (Fig. 3). It also has a long history of use by Americans as a home remedy to many ailments, along with a mysterious name.



Fig 1. A witch-hazel shrub can grow to 5 m. This one from the Roddy-Caputo Science Courtyard of Millersville University, Fall 2011. [This and other images are in color on the Web version of this article.]

The name “witch-hazel” is centuries old and so it is not surprising that its origin and meaning is a bit uncertain. It is known, however, that *Hamamelis virginiana* was labeled by early English settlers in colonial America as “wych hazel” (or “wiche hazel”, “wicke hazel”, and various alternative spellings). “Wych” derives from the Middle English words “wych” and “wyche”, which come from the Old English “wic” and “wice” meaning “lively” or to “bend”. “Wych” was applied historically in Britain to several woody plants known for their pliable branches that were used for bows, and then to a subset of these plants whose pliable branches were later used for the subsequently evolved,



Fig 2. The large (5-15 cm) leaves of witch-hazel are broadly obovate with many rounded teeth. Note the yellow color that is common for this plant in the fall season.

Medieval “magic” practice of divining (also called “dowsing”). Divining was the superstitious practice of using a forked, pliable branch as a “divining rod” to locate underground drinking water or precious metals for mining. The “dowser”, or the special person performing the divining, would use the branch, held at the fork, to find the underground source: when the branch bent or seemed to be “lively”, the source was found. The branches of the Scotch elm, *Ulmus glabra*, for example, were commonly used in Medieval Britain to make both divining rods and bows, and it was and still is referred to by many in Britain as the “wych elm”, “wich hazel” or “witch hazel”. When British settlers arrived in colonial America, they found that *Hamamelis virginiana* had especially pliable branches that the Native Americans used in making their bows. The pliable branches of the witch-hazel bush were then adapted for use in divining as a common practice by the settlers and this practice apparently was taken up by American Indians too, but probably only after learning of it from the British. According to this theory, “witch” does not signify or relate to our word for a practitioner of witchcraft, but derives as such only by linguistic corruption of the word “wych” due only to the similarity of the two words.

An alternative, though less supported, theory for the word “witch” in witch-hazel as applied to *H. virginiana* lies in the observations by early English settlers of the Native Americans using an extract of the shrub, referred to by some tribes as “magic water”, for many medicinal applications. The branches were cut and boiled in water to make an extract used to relieve many different ailments, from cuts and bruises to tumors, hemorrhoids and sore muscles, as well as in the form of poultices for swollen or infected eyes. Thus, according to this explanation, the seemingly magical capacity of this extract to heal is linked to the magic of witchcraft.

Regardless of the origin of the name witch-hazel for *Hamamelis virginiana*, the craft of divining has since (largely) been abandoned, yet the use of witch-hazel extract in home and even doctor-prescribed remedies has flourished. Theron T. Pond of Utica, New York was perhaps



Fig 3. Witch-hazel flowers have characteristically yellow, ribbon-like petals.



Fig 4. Two black seeds are ejected or blown out of witch-hazel’s brown, woody capsules.

the first to commercially market witch-hazel in 1848, in partnership with the Oneida Indians who taught him how to make and use witch-hazel. Their product was called "Golden Treasure" and was essentially a tea made by boiling witch-hazel parts (presumably stems and leaves) in water. This business later relocated from upstate New York to Chester, Connecticut in 1875 and the extractive process was changed to steam distillation, which results in a colorless distillate, much like the ones sold in the store today. It was Thomas N. Dickinson, Sr. of Essex, Connecticut who began the first large-scale production and marketing of a steam distillate extract in the late 1860's or early 1870's, which continues to this day under the name of Dickinson Brands, Inc. of East Hampton, Connecticut. Although other companies are involved in the commercial production of witch-hazel extract, Dickinson Brands is the most well known.

It is now known that the essential oils and other compounds in *Hamamelis virginiana* plants are astringent and provide the "magic" behind the healing uses. Today, the production process involves distillation and the distillate is typically combined with ethyl alcohol to about 14% alcohol for retail as "witch hazel", though the distillate is also a component in many skin tonics, creams, aftershave lotions, and hemorrhoid medicines.

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Parksia is published periodically by the James C. Parks Herbarium of The Department of Biology, Millersville University of Pennsylvania. It is dedicated to publishing short encyclopedic articles and essays containing useful information about plants. *Parksia* is available for free, on the Web at <http://herbarium.millersville.edu>. The street mailing address for the Herbarium is James C. Parks Herbarium, Department of Biology, Millersville University of Pennsylvania, 288 Roddy Science Building, 50 E Frederick St, Millersville, Pennsylvania, 17551, United States of America.

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