

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #30 answer: WITCH HAZEL (*Hamamelis virginiana*)

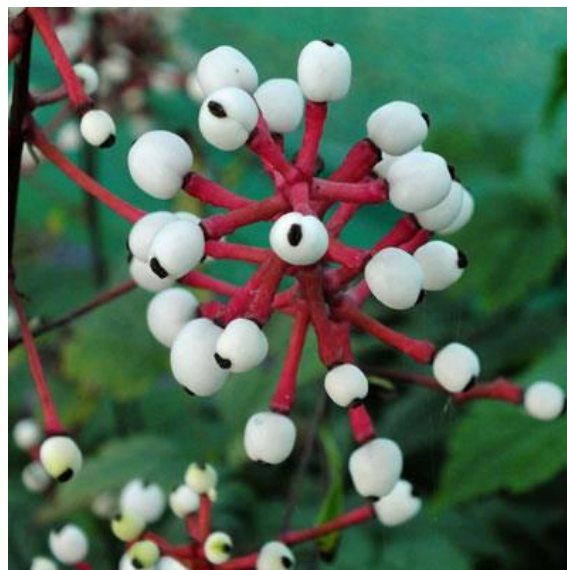
Witch hazel is the consummate late bloomer. In the fall, a pollen grain lands on a stigma, germinates, and sends sperm down its pollen tube to the ovary. There the sperm just waits until spring to fertilize the ovule. The fruit, a capsule, takes two winters to ripen after that. (The genus earns the name *Hamamelis* because last year's capsules ripen beside this year's flowers.) Finally, one end of the capsule dries out, forcing the smooth, shiny seeds out the other end. The seeds shoot up to 30 feet. You can hear the explosion!

Witch hazel flowers need not compete with other species for pollinators, but few insects are active in the cold. The primary pollinators are witch hazel dagger moths (*Aronicta hamamelis*) and their relatives. Raising their body heat as much as 50 degrees by shivering, they can fly on cold nights. These moths also feed on sap from wounded stems.

The genus is among many shared between North America and East Asia, reflecting millions of years of continental drift, migration, and extinction. In North America the first peoples used an extract of witch hazel leaves, bark, and twigs to relieve inflammation and itching. Maybe you have witch hazel in your medicine cabinet. European settlers, likening the tree to their own hazel, cut the forked boughs and used them to dowse for water. Some well-diggers still employ a dowser.

WILDFLOWER #31

Clues: In November, this plant's berries seem to stare back at you. Handle this member of the buttercup family with care.



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