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Photography by Rob Cardillo

Witch Hazels

The most notable of winter-flowering woody plants, witch hazels bloom in the dead of winter.



Hamamelis mollis 'Princeton Gold', at the Morris Arboretum in Philadelphia, shines against the gray backdrop of the winter landscape.

This photo: Like all winter-blooming witch hazels, this stunning cultivar, *Hamamelis* × *intermedia* 'Orange Beauty', will lure even the most thin-blooded gardeners out into the cold. Its bright flowers demand closer inspection, and it is also deliciously fragrant.

DURING THE COLD WINTER MONTHS, when gardens in temperate climates seem as inviting as the tundra, witch hazels (*Hamamelis* spp.) provide a burst of bloom and fragrance that is a welcome harbinger of things to come. In some ways, it is fortunate that these large hardy shrubs bloom in the off-season, as their small flowers, like tiny strips of crimped confetti, might easily be lost amid the profusion of color in the garden's blowsier times. But unlike confetti, which is thrown down on a parade and then swept into

the trash the next morning, these tender-looking flowers are no wilting Willies. They can last up to a month, and they quickly bounce back from any weather Old Man Winter throws at them.

Most witch hazels found in gardens are crosses between the Japanese and Chinese species (*H. japonica* and *H. mollis*), which have larger, showier flowers than either of the two species native to North America. These cultivars, known as *H.* × *intermedia*, bloom between January and March in a range of colors from rusty red to sulphur

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Plant at a glance Witch Hazel

Latin name: *Hamamelis* spp.
Classification: The genus includes four main species, two native to North America (winter-blooming *H. vernalis* and fall blooming *H. virginiana*) and two from Japan and China (winter-bloomers *H. japonica* and *H. mollis*). Crosses between the two Asian species (called *H. × intermedia*) have resulted in showy plants for winter interest.

Conditions: While witch hazels tolerate partial shade, the more sun they receive, the fuller the plants and the better they'll bloom. Otherwise they are very adaptable.

Height: Witch hazels are large shrubs which, depending on the variety, can reach from 6–12 feet wide and 10–20 feet high or more.

Care: Pruning (just after flowering) can help keep these rangy plants in check. Because cultivars are often grafted onto the more vigorous rootstock of the native witch hazels, any growth emerging from below the graft should be removed.

Flowers: Bloom sizes range from ½ inch across on in *H. vernalis* to 1½ inches on the other species and cultivars. Colors run from reds to oranges to yellows, with some flowers bicolored. In general, yellow colors show up better than reds in the winter landscape.

Fragrance: Some varieties have no fragrance; others are intensely fragrant, especially on warmer, sunnier winter days. Branches cut in winter before flowering can be brought indoors, where the blooms will open and perfume the entire house.

Foliage: Because foliage color varies among the species and varieties, consider shopping for witch hazels in the fall, when any coloration will be apparent in nursery specimens.

Hardiness: All witch hazels are hardy in Zones 5–8; *H. vernalis* is the most cold-hardy, to Zone 4.



H. vernalis 'Lansing': faint scent, yellow fall foliage



H. mollis 'Princeton Gold': nicely scented, yellow fall foliage



H. × intermedia 'Luna': lightly scented, yellow to orange fall foliage



H. × intermedia 'Sunburst': large flowers, no scent, no fall color



H. × intermedia 'Harry': excellent floral display, faint scent, no fall color



H. × intermedia 'Georges': unusual flower color, no scent, excellent fall color



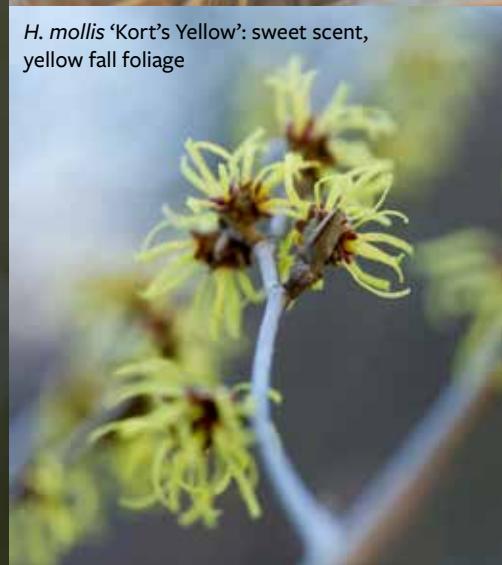
H. × intermedia 'Gimborn's Perfume': strong scent, yellow autumn foliage



H. × intermedia 'Rubin': faint scent, yellow-orange fall foliage



H. mollis 'Kort's Yellow': sweet scent, yellow fall foliage

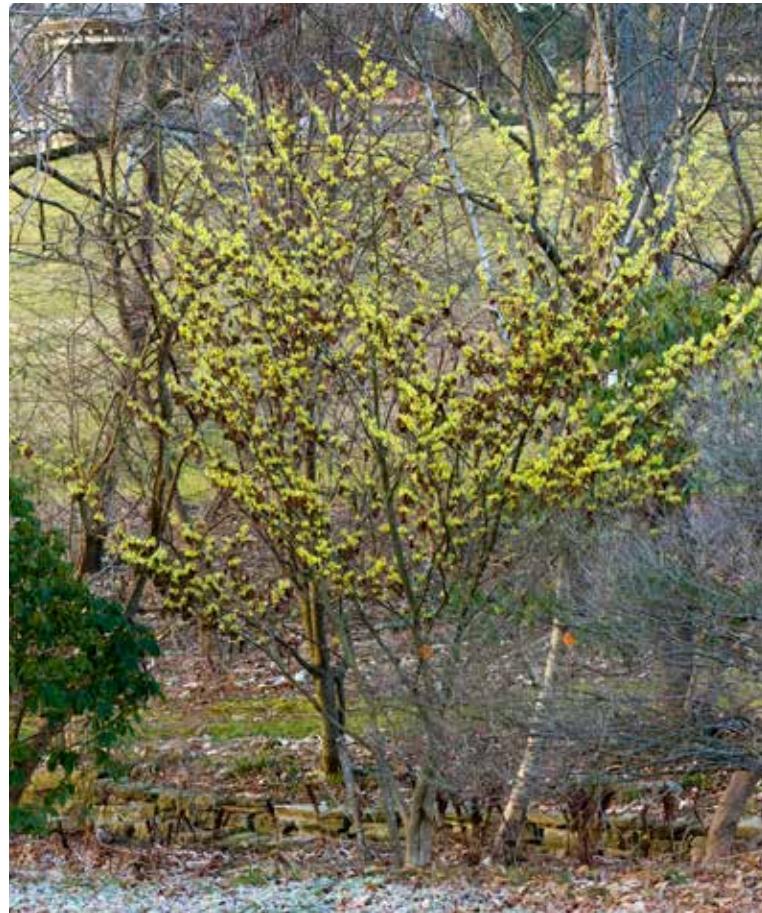


H. × intermedia 'Vezna': one of the best yellow-oranges, strong scent, colorful fall foliage



H. × intermedia 'Jelena': unusual flower color, no scent, multicolor fall foliage





Above left: *H. × intermedia* ‘Luna’, beautifully backlit by the morning sun. Above right: *H. × intermedia* ‘Sunburst’, one of the best cultivars for cut flower arrangements and floral displays.

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yellow. Some varieties have little to no fragrance, while others have spicy or citrusy scents, especially evident on sunny winter days when the temperature warms a bit above freezing.

Tony Aiello, director of horticulture at the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia (where the photographs for this story were taken) suggests sniffing witch hazel flowers with your mouth open to catch all the complexities of the scent—advice that also works when smelling any flower. Besides the flowers and scents, some varieties also have good fall color, providing another season of interest and another reason to try these plants.

The natives, while less showy, are still worthy garden specimens. The winter-blooming Ozark witch hazel (*H. vernalis*) has the smallest flowers in the genus, but they are intensely fragrant, and the plant has beautiful fall foliage. Its native

range is centered on the Ozark Mountains in the southeastern United States, and several named selections are available.

American witch hazel (*H. virginiana*) is the most commonly found in the wild, ranging across most of eastern North America and into Mexico. This large plant has fragrant yellow flowers in late fall, but because the foliage begins to color at the same time the flowers open, much of the floral impact is lost. This species is the source of witch hazel extract, first distilled by Native Americans and still used to treat a variety of ailments, including cuts and bruises, swelling, and sore eyes. Because it looked like English hazel—the European plant of choice for water witches, those folks who use divining rods to search for underground water sources—early settlers in the American colonies used forked twigs of *H. virginiana* for this purpose, giving the genus its common name.

For more information, see Resources on page 108.



This photo: The bicolor flowers of *H. × intermedia* ‘Strawberries and Cream’ are, like many witch hazel cultivars, unscented.