While the petals of the witch-hazel appear very delicate, they are not easily harmed by freezing temperatures. Instead, they roll up their petals like a coil for protection and on warm days they unfurl their petals just like a party blower.

*Actual size of unfurled petal is about ¾ inch

Illustrations by Sheryl L. White

While witch-hazel is a fascinating name, its origin has nothing to do with the characters who ride on brooms. It probably comes from the old English word wych, meaning “to bend.” Dowsers used witch hazel branches as a “witching stick” to supposedly uncover precious metal or underground water springs. They believed that the branches would bend towards the ground upon discovering these treasures.

Witch-hazel has also been used for medicinal purposes for centuries. Native Americans used the bark and twigs to treat anything from colds to insect bites. Since the 1850s several companies have specialized in producing witch-hazel extract, which you can find today in numerous lotions, toothpastes, and soaps.
At the Arnold Arboretum, we like to claim that you can find a tree or shrub in bloom here every month of the year. Most years this is true, thanks to our many witch-hazels.

The common witch-hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*, starts to bloom in October, just as the leaves begin to drop. In December, the last, pale yellow flowers begin to fade. *H. virginiana* is a native of the eastern United States. Vernal witch-hazel, *H. vernalis* is native to the Ozark highlands of Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. In December, and into the New Year, it shows off fragrant, small, yellow with reddish brown calyx cups.

In February comes an explosion of color. *Hamamelis mollis* (Chinese witch-hazel) is the least hardy of the species but also the showiest. It boasts bright yellow petals, red calyx-lobes, and a divine fragrance superior to the others. Depending on the individual specimen, the previous season’s leaves on *H. mollis* can persist, appearing dried out, brown, often obscuring the blooms even in late winter. It is native to the forests and thickets of central and eastern China.

At the southeast corner of the Hunnewell building you can see a glimmer of golden promise. *Hamamelis × intermedia* ‘Arnold Promise’ has flowers with bright yellow inflorescences and reddish calyx cups. With the sun on them, they are open and fragrant. This cultivar was introduced here at the Arnold Arboretum. This hybrid plant is a cross between Japanese witch hazel (*H. japonica*) and Chinese witch hazel (*H. mollis*). On the other side of the building, close to the fence, the orange flowers of *H. × intermedia* ‘Jelena’ emit a spicy fragrance.

Can you find these five different witch-hazels marked on the map along Meadow Road?

1. *Hamamelis × intermedia* ‘Arnold Promise’
2. *Hamamelis × intermedia* ‘Jelena’
3. *Hamamelis mollis*
4. *Hamamelis vernalis*
5. *Hamamelis virginiana*