

# TREE OF THE MONTH

American Witch Hazel • *Hamamelis virginiana*

OTHER COMMON NAMES: WINTERBLOOM, SNAPPING HAZEL

**DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS** American Witch Hazel is a small, spreading tree or shrub growing 10-25 feet. The bark of an adult plant is ridged or plated as well as thin and smooth. The leaves are alternately arranged, oval, 2-6 inches long, broad with a smooth or wavy margin, and there is one leaf per node along the stem.

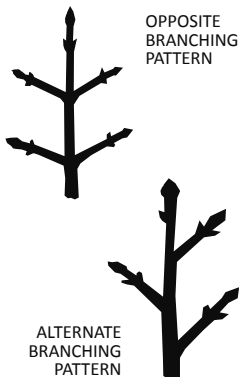
**ENVIRONMENT** Witch Hazel can be found in floodplains, forests, swamps, and rocky slopes. They generally prefer rich, moist soils, as well as partly shaded areas.

## MEDICINAL POWERS

Witch hazel leaves and bark can be used to make an astringent decoction as a cooling agent for various medicinal uses, as well as cosmetic skincare. Witch hazel water can be produced by macerating and distilling the leaves. The decoction was originally used by Native American tribes, and can now be found in pharmacies as witch hazel water, ointments, creams, and gels. Common uses include diaper rash in infants as well as razor burn and any minor skin irritation. Witch hazel can be used to treat topically eczema, psoriasis, insect bites, poison ivy, cracked or blistered skin, as well as to soothe postpartum women.

## AUTUMN BLOOMERS

The crinkly flowers bloom in the fall, each flower has four slender, strap-shaped petals that range from pale to dark yellow, orange or red. The clusters of flowers begin to expand in the autumn, just before the leaves fall, and continue through winter.



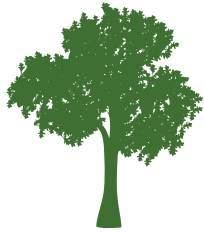
## ETYMOLOGY

“Witch” comes from Middle English “wiche” and the Old English “wice,” meaning pliant or bendable, and has nothing to do with witches who practice magic. “Witch Hazel” was used in England as a synonym for Wych Elm, *Ulmus glabra*.



**EXPLOSIVE FRUIT** The genus name, *Hamamelis*, means “together with fruit” and refers to the simultaneous flowering and previous year's fruit maturing. Each fruit is a two part capsule, with each part containing a glossy black seed. In the fall, about eight months after flowering, the capsule splits open, hurling seeds as far as 30 feet from the mother tree. This ejection gives witch hazel its alternative name “Snapping Hazel.”

Tree of the Month is a collaboration between BEAT, the City of Pittsfield and Pittsfield Tree Watch. The Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT) works to protect the environment for wildlife and in support of the natural systems that sustain us all. Find out more at [thebeatnews.org](http://thebeatnews.org).



# TREE OF THE MONTH

American Witch Hazel • *Hamamelis virginiana*

OTHER COMMON NAMES: WINTERBLOOM, SNAPPING HAZEL

**HISTORY** Native American tribes used witch hazel's forked limbs as dowsing or divining rods, leading them to underground water sources. Witch Hazel water can be made by boiling the stems of the shrub, producing the decoction. This often-used practice by Native Americans was adopted by Puritans settlers and continues today. A missionary, Dr. Charles Hawes, determined that production through distillation, most likely steam distillation of the plants' twigs, was even more effective, thus producing "Hawes Extract" to be sold in drug stores. Thomas Newton Dickinson Sr. further refined the process, and is credited with the first commercial production of witch hazel extract. Witch hazel water, when consumed, is potentially toxic due to its high tannin content.



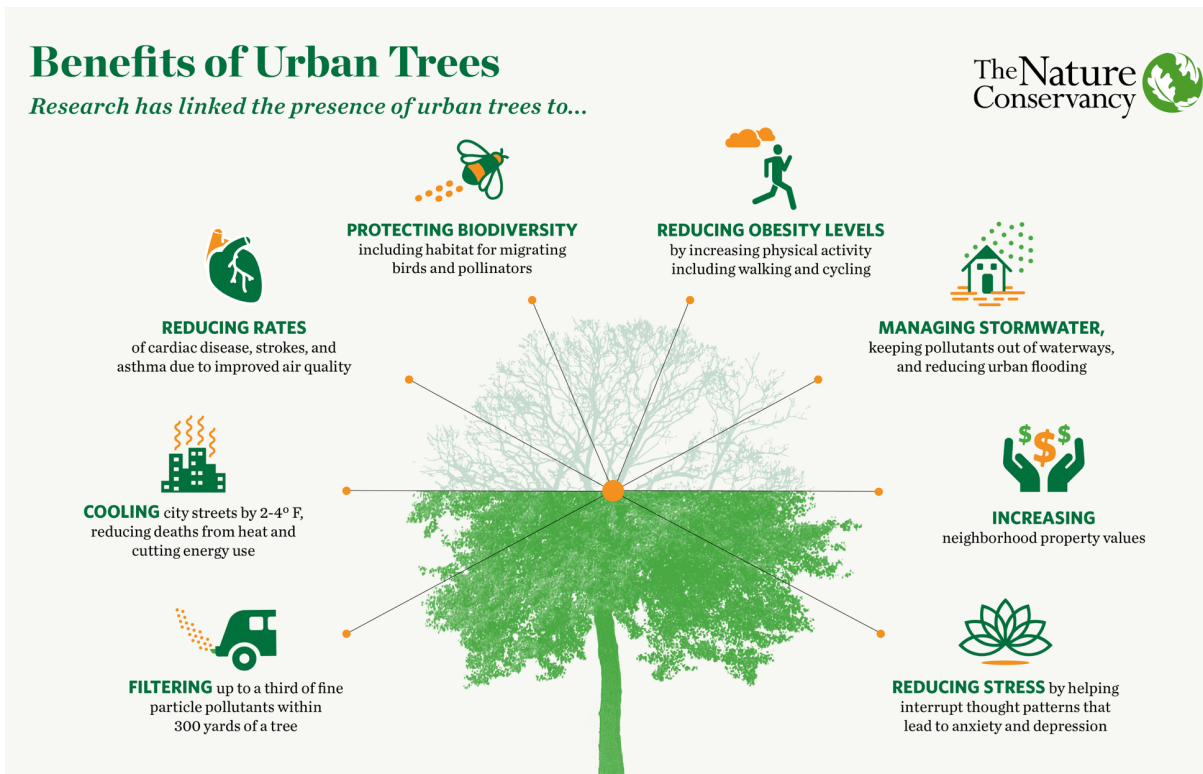
winter-blooming flowers



new leaves in spring



fairly smooth bark



Tree of the Month is a collaboration between BEAT, the City of Pittsfield and Pittsfield Tree Watch. The Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT) works to protect the environment for wildlife and in support of the natural systems that sustain us all. Find out more at [thebeatnews.org](http://thebeatnews.org).

