

# Hamamelis

Witch hazel has little to do with witchcraft but these stunning shrubs providing fiery colour through the cold winter months add a magical zest to any garden

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND

**In brief**  
**What** Genus of five species of deciduous shrubs.  
**Common name** Witch hazel.  
**Origins** North America, Japan and China.  
**Season** Winter.  
**Size** Up to 5m tall.  
**Conditions** Full sun or part shade in well-drained soil.

**HAMAMELIS X INTERMEDIA 'ROBERT'**  
Introduced in 2000, this is an outstanding cultivar with very sweetly perfumed flowers. The individual petals fade from red to copper, which gives a warm and glowing effect to the whole plant. 3.5m. AGM\*. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b†.



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**R**ight now, the vitality and hullabaloo of April is a long way off but there are stirrings, clear indications that the lifelessness of the past two months is over. February stands as a buffer between the barrenness of winter and the fertility of spring, when the few tenacious flowering plants that have been struggling through spiteful weather and dark days begin to burgeon and flourish.

Among these are hamamelis, which, having been flowering stoically throughout the winter, are now reaching their peak, revitalised by the slight lengthening of daylight and the slight rise in temperature. You can almost hear them exhale as buds slowly unfurl and flowers begin to send out their perfume. By the end of the month the plant has gathered such momentum that it is covered in blossom and the garden is filled with its citrus scent, and, because most flower before any leaves appear, the effect is dramatic.

The individual blooms unscrunch their spidery flowers from brown suede buds, never losing that initial crumpled look. The petals resemble the peel left behind by an orange zester and, although fragile-looking, the flowers are hardy and long-lasting. I have seen flowers of *H. mollis* that have been encased in ice in the morning, which, later in the day, after the thaw, are still sparkling and fresh, rather than the brown mush that so many other flowers would have become. While hamamelis are mainly grown for their flowers, many forms also have luminous autumn foliage that provides dramatic contrasts with the shrub's glossy black seed.

In the wild, the genus is found in North America, China and Japan. *H. virginiana* grows along the east coast of America. Its yellow flowers are often hidden by the dense foliage and it has the distinction of flowering in the autumn rather than in late winter. Its relative from central North America, *H. vernalis*, is a similar shrub but with winter flowering. In 2006 a third American

\*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.  
†Hardiness ratings given where available.

▷ species was described, localised in a creek in Mississippi. Named *H. ovalis* it has large leaves and wine-red flowers and, reportedly, vibrant autumn foliage.

*H. virginiana* was the first of the group to be grown in Europe, introduced to Britain in the 1740s by Peter Collinson, a wealthy cloth merchant and gardener who had the plant sent to him from America. Often overlooked, Collinson was a prime mover in the development of British gardens, importing seeds and plants from the New World and distributing them to gardeners, scientists and nurseries.

You would now be hard pressed to find a specimen of *H. virginiana* for sale in a British nursery as, around the turn of last century, two new species were introduced that were considered by nurserymen to be superior garden plants. The first, *H. japonica*, has much larger flowers and more vibrant autumn foliage than either of its US cousins and caused a sensation among the gardening cognoscenti.

A Chinese species, *H. mollis*, was collected in the late 19th century by Charles Maries, who was working for Veitch & Sons in London, and first sold in 1902. Although its flowers are smaller than those of *H. japonica*, it has a much stronger scent and became even more popular. Plant breeders immediately saw the benefits of combining the best attributes of the two species and began work on developing hybrids that resulted in *H. x intermedia*.

Cultivars of *H. x intermedia* were bred throughout the early part of the last century to achieve flowers ranging from pale lemon to deep burgundy, all with the hardiness and scent of their parents. It is these cultivars that are most interesting for gardeners. Planted in groups on carpets of snowdrops, hellebores and winter aconites, they have become an indispensable element of winter gardens. Isolated specimens, too, can look impressive: I know a garden with a single specimen of *H. x intermedia* 'Arnold Promise' that is planted so that its sulphur-yellow flowers are seen against the rising sun. On some dull February mornings it is so dazzling that it seems brighter than the sun itself, as if urging it on and reminding us that we are on our way – just a few more weeks and we will be out of the dark days and into spring.

• John's recommendations for hamamelis continue over the next six pages.

## Yellow-flowered forms



### *H. mollis* 'WISLEY SUPREME'

The clear, yellow flowers are sweetly scented and begin to appear as early as November. The autumn foliage is bright yellow. The shrub spreads with age, eventually becoming 3m wide. 3m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-8b.



### *H. mollis*

The best of the species, with strongly perfumed flowers. In autumn the pale green foliage melts to a soft, buttery yellow. Slow growing, it will take 20 years to reach full height. 4m. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.



### *H. x intermedia* 'PALLIDA'

Popular for both for its penetrating perfume and the masses of pale-yellow flowers that have a ghostly glow at twilight, this is perhaps the most widely available hamamelis. 3m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-8b.



### *H. mollis* 'IMPERIALIS'

Its strongly scented flowers are perhaps the largest of the genus. They're pale yellow with a red tint at the base of the petals. Young plants have sparse flowers, increasing as the plant matures. 3m. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.



### *HAMAMELIS X INTERMEDIA* 'ARNOLD PROMISE'

Forms a much denser shrub than other hamamelis and so appears to be a thicket of flowers, which have a very strong, sweet scent. Eventually forms a vase-shaped shrub.

3m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARIANNE MAJERUS, MARK BOLTON / GAP PHOTOS, MARCUS HARPUR / GAP PHOTOS, HEATHER EDWARDS / GAP PHOTOS

SHARON PEARSON / GAP PHOTOS



**H. X INTERMEDIA 'APHRODITE'**  
A spreading shrub that will eventually grow to 4m wide and about 3m tall. The burnt-orange flowers represented an important colour break for breeders when the plant appeared during the 1980s. 3m. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.

CAROLE DRAKE / GAP PHOTOS

## Orange-flowered forms



**H. X INTERMEDIA 'ORANGE PEEL'**  
Its sweetly scented flowers have wider petals than most, giving the impression of a small pom-pom. Autumn foliage is as spectacular as the flowers, encompassing tones of red, orange and yellow. 3m. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.



**H. X INTERMEDIA 'JELENA'**  
Named in the 1950s by plant breeder Robert de Belder for his wife, this is one of the most widely grown hamamelis. Although it has little scent, the warm brass-coloured flowers are enchanting. 4m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.



**H. JAPONICA 'RUBRA'**  
A tough and vigorous clone that forms a rounded shrub. It was selected by a French nursery a century ago for its red flowers and has been used extensively in breeding new cultivars. 3m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-9a.



**H. VIRGINIANA**  
Fast growing, it quickly reaches 3m tall. The flowers start to appear during autumn and are at their peak in midwinter. Not a showy plant but the flowers can be a beautiful adjunct to autumn foliage. 3m. RHS H7, USDA 3a-9b.

## Cultivation

Hamamelis are easy shrubs to grow and should do well in most gardens except those that are on shallow, chalk soil. The ideal is an acid to neutral soil (a pH of between 4.5 and 6.5) although I know gardens with a higher pH that have magnificent specimens of *Hamamelis mollis*. If they become chlorotic because of a high pH, treat them with chelated iron. (Chlorosis is a condition where the plant produces insufficient chlorophyll, resulting in yellow leaves.)

For a rounded, compact shrub, grow in an open sunny situation. Hamamelis will grow in shade but develop long shoots that make for a gangly-looking plant. Although the flowers are tough, the young foliage can be burned by strong winds, so plant somewhere sheltered.

Whatever the soil, dig in lots of organic matter: this will feed the plant and retain moisture. Although mature plants will tolerate periods of drought, young plants should be kept well watered during hot summers.

In small gardens, consider growing hamamelis in pots, which will severely restrict the size they will reach. Choose a pot at least 50cm in diameter and use a John Innes or other soil-based ericaceous compost. Keep the pot well watered during the summer and stand on pot feet so that water can drain away during the winter.

Most hamamelis cultivars are grafted on to a vigorous rootstock that will produce suckers if planted too deeply. Try not to bury the graft joint (the swollen part of the stem near the base of the plant).

## Pruning

If you have the space to let hamamelis grow to their full size they need little pruning other than to take out dead wood. When you need to keep the shrub to a manageable size, prune it after flowering by cutting back that season's growth to a leaf bud. You can distinguish between leaf and flower buds by the longer, narrow shape of the leaf buds, while flower buds are round and fat.

## Witch hazel

The common name, witch hazel, has no connection to sorceresses or she-devils. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* witch, or wych, refers to any tree or shrub that has pliant branches, such as the wych elm, from which bows were made. The first record of it being used to describe *hamamelis* wasn't until 1760, when British emigrants to North America applied it to the indigenous shrub.

Early settlers to North America used a decoction of *hamamelis*, made from mashing and boiling the twigs of the plant, to treat cuts, bruises and sores, and Native Americans still use it to treat swelling and inflammation. Witch hazel remains an ingredient of creams that treat insect bites and of skin lotions used to ease eczema and acne.

## Collections

### • Sir Harold Hillier Gardens

Jermyns Lane, Romsey, Hampshire SO51 0QA. Tel 01794 369317/318, hants.gov.uk/hilliergardens

### • Witch Hazel Nursery

The Granary, Cranbrook Farm, Callaways Lane, Newington, Sittingbourne, Kent ME9 7LU. Tel 01795 843098, witchhazelnursery.com

## Suppliers

### • Bluebell Arboretum and Nursery

Annwell Lane, Smisby, nr Ashby de la Zouch, Derbyshire LE65 2TA. Tel 01530 413700, bluebellnursery.com

### • Junker's Nursery

Higher Cobhay, Milverton, Somerset TA4 1NJ. Tel 01823 400075, junker.co.uk

## Further reading

There is a very detailed monograph about the genus published by Timber Press. Called *Witch Hazels*, it is written by Chris Lane and is a Plant Collector Guide from the RHS.

## Red-flowered forms



### *H. x INTERMEDIA* 'RUBIN'

A rounded plant with flowers that have little scent but are produced profusely from December to the end of February. Its leaves become a fiery orange in autumn. 4m. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.



### *H. x INTERMEDIA* 'FEUERZAUBER'

A vigorous hybrid that grows quickly and has a 3m-wide spread. The coppery-orange flowers are produced in abundance but have very little perfume. Sometimes sold as *H. x intermedia* 'Firecracker'. 3.5m. RHS H7, USDA 6a-9b.



### *H. x INTERMEDIA* 'LIVIA'

Bred only 20 years ago this cultivar must have the most intensely red flowers of the genus. The flowers have a spicy perfume and grow in profusion from December through to March. 3.5m. RHS H7, USDA 5b.



### *H. VERNALIS* 'LOMBARTS' 'WEEPING'

An unusual cultivar with small flowers and spreading habit with pendulous branches. It will only reach 2m tall but as much as 4m wide. The flowers, which continue into March, have a strong spicy scent. 2m. RHS H7, USDA 4a.



### *H. x INTERMEDIA* 'DIANE'

Named after his daughter, by prolific *hamamelis* breeder Robert de Belder who believed this to be the best of the red-flowered forms. In the autumn the foliage turns through maroon and crimson to flaming orange. 2.5m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ELKE BORKOWSKI / GAP PHOTOS; LEIGH CLAPP / GAP PHOTOS; JOSHUA MCCULLOUGH / GARDEN WORLD IMAGES; STEFFEN HAUSER / BOTANIKFOTO / ALAMY

MARG COUSENS / GAP PHOTOS