



*'Their spidery flowers are fully frost hardy... on mild days the wonderful scent is wafted delightfully around the garden'*

Cut stems of *Hamamelis* collected at Witch Hazel Nursery, Kent. The flowers of many selections have a delightful fragrance and will last well in water for a few days.

# Witches ON TRIAL

Perhaps the most beguiling of winter-flowering shrubs, witch hazels are loved for their often deliciously perfumed blooms in a range of fiery hues; the increasing range of selections is highlighted by a recent RHS Plant Trial

Author: **Chris Lane**, member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee and owner of Witch Hazel Nursery in Kent. Photography: **Tim Sandall**

**W**itch hazels are a harbinger of spring; for many gardeners these shrubs eclipse all others during the short, cold days of winter; a sentiment I wholeheartedly share. Their spidery flowers, consisting of four strap-shaped petals, are fully frost hardy, a claim no other winter-flowering tree or shrub can make, and on mild days the wonderful scent is wafted delightfully around the garden.

Plants most commonly seen in gardens are selections of the hybrid *Hamamelis x intermedia*, a cross between Chinese *H. mollis* and Japanese *H. japonica*. Offspring inherit good characteristics from both parents: handiness, large flower size, often delicious fragrance and a colour range from pale yellow to deep red (and all shades in between) but, most of all, profuse flowering. Plants can be in flower from three to five weeks depending on how cold winter is.

## Reliable performers

The RHS conducted a Plant Trial of *Hamamelis* at Witch Hazel Nursery in Kent, which holds a Plant Heritage National Plant Collection, where selections are planted in rows for easy assessment and comparison. These were assessed by a Trials Forum over three years from 2014 to 2016. The plants, between 10 and 20 years old, are well established. Judges were looking at flower quality, both in colour, size and shape (some have curled flowers, others are more open and flat with straighter petals, giving a more impressive appearance), amount of flower and length of flowering season. The overall growth habit of the plants was also taken into account.

In all, 126 named cultivars were assessed and a further

## HAMAMELIS TRIAL AT A GLANCE

- 3** years and 13 meetings to assess trial plants
- 17** RHS Award of Garden Merit given or reconfirmed as a result of the RHS Plant Trial
- 138** cultivars assessed in the trial itself



12 un-named plants considered for the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM). About 36 were cultivars of *H. japonica* and *H. vernalis* and, while appealing to some on the forum, they could not compare to the beauty of the others. As a result some 90 different cultivars of *H. mollis* and *H. x intermedia* were given serious consideration. The judging forum met four times in 2014 and 2015 and five times in 2016 so as to cover the flowering period of

different plants from January through to March.

The following selections of witch hazel were agreed to be the finest of all and earned AGMs or had their existing AGMs reconfirmed as a result of the 2014–16 trial.

The RHS Plant Trial of *Hamamelis* took place at Witch Hazel Nursery in Kent (above), where well-established plants of many different selections are grown in rows, allowing easy comparison.





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## Hamamelis growing advice

- ✦ **Overview:** hardy, deciduous, winter-flowering shrubs to small trees, usually vase-shaped, some with good autumn colour.
- ✦ **RHS hardiness rating:** H5 (-15 to -10°C/5 to 14°F).
- ✦ **Water requirements:** which hazels like plenty of water in summer, keep moist at this time, particularly for the first couple of years to ensure they establish well. In winter, however, good drainage is important.
- ✦ **Siting/garden position:** in the wild these are woodland-edge, understorey plants, so they will grow happily in light shade in the garden, perhaps in a woodland border. In more open positions, however, they are free flowering and remain more compact.
- ✦ **Soil:** which hazels grow happily in all well-drained soil types except poor, shallow, dry soils overlying chalk and limestone.
- ✦ **Garden care:** pruning is not vital (simply cut out any dead wood) but it is possible to keep which hazels compact with annual pruning. Immediately after flowering cut back all shoots of the previous year's growth to two buds. This will encourage short spur growth which will bud up well for a more densely flowered plant. A good annual mulch of organic matter such as garden compost or well-rotted manure will be of great benefit.
- ✦ **Pests and diseases:** plants seldom suffer from pests or diseases, although root rots can occur, usually as a result of poor drainage.

## Award-winning Hamamelis

- ✦ **Hamamelis x intermedia 'Advent'** A plant of bushy habit, flowering early (usually in January) but not before Christmas as the name suggests. The bright yellow flowers are prolifically produced and family tinted red at the base, with somewhat curled petals.
- ✦ **H. x intermedia 'Angelica'** This late-flowering (February) selection forms a compact bush: it has good-sized citron-yellow flowers producing a wonderful fragrance. AGM reconfirmed.
- ✦ **H. x intermedia 'Anne'** Developing a fairly upright habit, this plant flowers late in the season with pure, light sulphur-yellow flowers. The individual petals are held out quite straight, which gives the impression of a large individual flower.
- ✦ **H. x intermedia 'Aphrodite'** Flowering late in the season on a rather spreading plant, the individual blooms of this cultivar are large and striking burnt copper in colour. AGM reconfirmed.
- ✦ **H. x intermedia 'Arnold Promise'** A popular and late-flowering cultivar, similar to *H. japonica* in growth habit and flower shape. It flowers prolifically with highly scented lemon-yellow flowers featuring slightly curled petals. Unusually for a yellow-flowered cultivar, it develops quite good orange-red autumn foliage colour. AGM reconfirmed.
- ✦ **H. x intermedia 'Aurora'** A plant that develops a vase-shaped growth habit, with impressive flowers that are graded by the largest petals of any hybrid trialled, up to 32mm (1¼in) long. These are pale yellow at the tip, light red at the base and exquisitely scented. The plant is floriferous, late-flowering and develops good autumn foliage tints. AGM reconfirmed.
- ✦ **H. x intermedia 'Barnstedt Gold'** A vigorous plant developing upright to bushy growth, this is one of the most reliable of all cultivars for floriferousness, the blooms being of good flower size golden-yellow in colour, and appearing from mid to late winter (January–February). AGM reconfirmed.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Brimstone'** While the true *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Pallida' forms a spreading plant there is a similar selection in cultivation known informally as 'Pallida' (upright form) that has been in my collection for 15 years. The Trials Forum were able to make close comparisons between these cultivars. The flowers of the upright plant are slightly later, a shade paler in colour with a distinct but equally good fragrance. This plant's origin is not known, but it will am sure become popular as its habit makes it adaptable to smaller gardens. It performed so well in the trial that it earned an AGM, so a new name was needed for the plant. The forum came up with 'Brimstone', as the colour of the plant's flowers are similar to that of a brimstone butterfly.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Burning Desire'** Distinct in appearance from other cultivars, this late-flowering selection is a striking bicolor with flowers of orange and yellow, held profusely on a vase-shaped plant. It has a pleasant scent.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Chris'** Forming a medium-sized shrub, this mid- to late-flowering selection has golden-yellow to orange-yellow flowers, borne in great profusion with an appealing scent.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Gingerbread'** This fine cultivar bears deep burnt-orange flowers with curled petals, producing some scent, appearing late in the season, prolifically on a spreading bush. Young growth is also attractively purple-flushed.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Yelena'** A well-known selection with lovely copper-orange flowers that glow on a sunny cold day in winter, as if you could warm your hands against them. The plant has a spreading habit and is early flowering. No scent. AGM reconfirmed.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Mauntic Foster'** A late-flowering selection with deep acid-yellow flowers on an upright plant with nice fragrance.

✦ **Hamamelis x intermedia 'Pallida'** The most well-known cultivar of which hazel and deservedly so: the original plant still grows on Battleson Hill at RHS Garden Wisley. Early to mid-season flowering with lovely sulphur-yellow flowers having an exquisite citrusy scent on a spreading bush. If you only have room for

The Trials Forum (above left) examining flowers of *Hamamelis* on trial. Some which hazels, such as *H. x intermedia* 'Arnold Promise' (above), develop superb fiery autumn foliage colour, extending their season of interest.



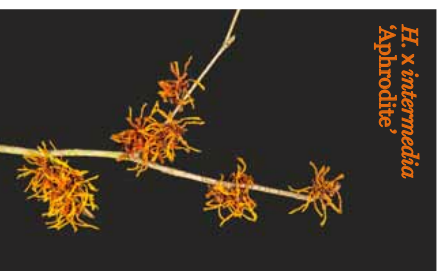
*Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Advent'



*H. x intermedia* 'Alexander'



*H. x intermedia* 'Angelica'



*H. x intermedia* 'Aphrodite'



*H. x intermedia* 'Arnold Promise'



*H. x intermedia* 'Barnstedt Gold'



*H. x intermedia* 'Burning Desire'



*H. x intermedia* 'Chris'



## Witch hazel trial

one which hazel, this is it, as it is so reliable and profuse in its flowering. AGM reconfirmed.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Ruth'** The only red cultivar that earned an AGM in the trial forms a bushy plant with twiggy growth. It is floriferous with good red blooms; plant it where winter sun can shine through the branches, not against a dark background where the flowers are lost. Mid to late season; little scent. AGM reconfirmed.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Vesna'** With an upright habit and well-scented yellow-orange flowers appearing early to mid season. One of the best selections of H. x intermedia for autumn foliage colour. AGM reconfirmed.

✦ **H. mollis 'Wisley Supreme'** A selection with lovely clear light yellow flowers, sweetly scented on a moderately vigorous plant with a bushy growth habit. Early flowering; AGM reconfirmed.

### Other selections to consider

Although the following plants did not earn an AGM after the trial, they are well worth planting in gardens, particularly those with distinctive and desirable characteristics.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Alexander'** This is one of the best selections for a small garden because of its upright yet compact, twiggy growth habit. It is also floriferous, producing blooms of a good orange colour that appear mid season but sadly they have little scent.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Harry'** This cultivar has pale orange flowers with petals up to 3mm (1/8in) wide providing a large flower that stands out well in the landscape; flowers midwinter but produces little scent.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Ostergold'** A late cultivar with golden-yellow flowers, blooming over a long period, with the bonus of attractive, purple-flashed young foliage in spring. The flowers have no scent.

✦ **H. x intermedia 'Robert'** This selection is one of my favourite of all witch hazels, with well-scented, copper-orange flowers early in the season. It has a bushy habit and good autumn foliage colour.

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### Yellow-flowered

**Hamamelis x intermedia 'Pallida'** (above) remains a superlative selection, here with purple **Rhododendron dauricum** 'Mid-winter'.

### Dazzling autumn foliage

Cultivars of *H. japonica* and *H. vernalis* cultivars do not produce flowers that compare in size and presence with those of *H. mollis* and in particular, *H. x intermedia*. However *H. vernalis* selections have a range of flower colours from yellow through to purple-red, delicious spiky scent and importantly many also display fine autumn foliage colours; indeed some *H. vernalis* hybrids (often with *H. x intermedia*) can reliably produce autumn colour to rival that of any *Acer*, *Fothergilla*, *Cornus* or other tree or shrub cultivated for this quality.

✦ **Hamamelis 'Dishi'** The word 'dishi' (dished) is Slovenian for fragrant, and this selection is certainly in the top rank for that quality. The plant's flowers are small, copper-orange

and appear mid-season, but in autumn this plant also excels with brilliant orange-yellow foliage colours finally turning to vivid scarlet.

✦ **H. Philippe'** This selection has yellow-orange flowers with good spiky fragrance, but above all it provides great autumn colour: the foliage starts off dark purple, gradually turning to crimson until the bush looks as if it is on fire.

The 10 *Hamamelis* cultivars that had AGMs reconfirmed after the trial are all widely cultivated, well-known selections that are freely available and have long proved themselves excellent choices for gardens. The seven exciting cultivars to earn new AGMs (four subject to availability) may not be completely new but are certainly less well-known, and their distinctive characteristics

broaden diversity among these first-rate selections. As they become more widely available in the future, these plants will, I am sure, become equally popular in bringing their delightful qualities to our winter gardens. ●

### FURTHER INFORMATION

Many of the witch hazels in this article are available from nurseries listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2016*.  
 ✦ **5 Feb, 10am-4pm** Chris Lane's National Plant Collection of *Hamamelis* open day, other times by appointment, Witch Hazel Nursery (wholesale only), Callaways Lane, Newington, Kent ME3 7LU; 01795 843098; www.witchhazelnursery.com

**More from the RHS** Read about Graham Rice's 10 favourite winter-flowering AGM plants with good fragrance at [www.rhs.org.uk/agm-winter-scent](http://www.rhs.org.uk/agm-winter-scent)

The spidery blooms of **Hamamelis x intermedia 'Jetera'** (above left), 'Orange **H. x intermedia 'Vesna'** (above) with red **H. x intermedia 'Blanc'**, an old but still popular red-flowered selection.



**Hamamelis x intermedia 'Gingerbread'**



**H. x intermedia 'Harry'**



**H. x intermedia 'Ostergold'**



**H. x intermedia 'Pallida'**



**H. x intermedia 'Robert'**



**H. x intermedia 'Rubin'**



**H. x intermedia 'Vesna'**



**Hamamelis mollis 'Wisley Supreme'**