WITCH-HAZEL seems, almost consciously, to fill a gap in the seasons. Just at the time when every other shrub is shedding all foliage and leaving nothing but bare twigs for the winter months, witch-hazel suddenly produces a large number of spidery yellow flowers which in November and December are really the only blossoms to be found in the Virginia woods. It is hard to see quite what the plant gains by this winter blooming, for no growth takes place in the ovary until the following spring, and so the ripening period is not advanced at all. Last year’s nuts are maturing while this year’s flowers are blooming (and this year’s leaves are falling). The seeds are finally ejected from their woody pods with an explosive force which may carry them several yards away from the parent plant; one source says as much as 45 feet. This is a nice way to aid in the species’ dispersal. The generic name of witch-hazel, Hamamelis, refers to the property of fruits and flowers being on the plant at the same time. Hama is the Greek word for “together” and melas means “fruit.”

The Hamamelidaceae or witch-hazel family is a small one containing only three genera in this part of the world, Witch-alder or Fothergilla, Sweet Gum or Liquidambar and Hamamelis itself. Hamamelis virginiana is a coarse shrub or small tree up to 15 feet high. The bark is sepia or dark brown, blotched with lighter markings which were responsible for the shrub’s name of Spotted Stick among the Onondaga Indians of New York. The leaves are alternately arranged and are a deep olive green, oval-shaped and coarsely toothed round the edges. They turn a spotted dull gold in the fall.

The clustered flowers are bright yellow, with four fertile stamens alternating with the four long, narrow petals, the latter curled and twisted. In between the fertile stamens are four more stamens which are infertile and scale like. The flower clusters appear in what would have been the axils of the leaves, only since the leaves have usually been shed by this time there is just a leaf scar under each cluster.

Witch-hazel is common in rich woods throughout the northeastern part of America and as far south as Georgia and northern Florida. It is easy to spot in the woods simply because it is the only thing flowering in the very late fall and winter.

The wood of witch-hazel is rather tough but pliable. The word “witch” here has nothing to do with sorceries but comes from the Saxon word “wych” which means “bending” or “hanging down” (as also in “witch-alder” and “wych-elm”). Forked witch-hazel sticks are used as water-divining rods, and slender branches can be used to tie up fence rails, although the wood has no real commercial value.

An extract of the bark has been used medicinally for years. It is a demulcent and has a variety of applications for minor irritations which require some kind of skin soothing. As a child, I used to suffer quite badly from insect bites and urticaria, and my father incorporated witch-hazel into the lotion he produced for my relief. My mother and father were English country doctors who dispensed their own medicines for the first 20 years that they were in practice. Every bottle was scrupulously labeled with contents and dose, wrapped in white paper, sealed with sealing wax and relabeled (I loved to help with the details of this procedure). My own bottle was spared the wrapping paper but it was carefully labeled with the red “For External Use Only” sticker, and under this was written, in my father’s careful longhand: “Liquor hamamelidis and Calamine—Bite Lotion for Biz” (my pet name). Witch-hazel lotion is also known as Pond’s Extract since all the rights to its manufacture were procured in the late nineteenth century by the Pond’s Extract Company of London and New York.

One of the rather effusive older flower books to which I sometimes refer talks about the profusion of witch-hazel’s showy yellow blossoms as “giving to November the counterfeited appearance of spring.” I think this is going a bit far! The flowers are not all that showy, and if they appeared when there were lots of other things blooming, they would scarcely be noticed. But they do not, and I am grateful to the little yellow spiders just for that.