

On Water and Witches

The current Smithsonian magazine has a brief article by Sarah Zielinski on the shrinking Colorado River with intriguing photos by Peter McBride whose book, “The Colorado River: Flowing Through Conflict” will be published this month. The data has been around for decades but with little discernible impact so it is good to find attention given to the demise of an iconic river. We are not alone with this concern. Slowly, after first seeing that photograph taken from space of our blue planet, we have come to realize that we are inextricably tied into this one world. There is not an ‘out there’ that is of no concern to us.

Whether it is shrinking glaciers in the Andes or Manhattan Island sized chunks falling off Greenland, we know water scarcity is becoming as great a problem as energy and we look around our own properties and wonder how to make them independent of high water requirements. Going totally zeric is not an option as desert plants will not survive our winter rains. We need plants with deep roots that can find moisture those weeks when the surface is dried out.

You can find the right perennials by checking your own and your neighbor’s unpampered plots. You’ll see several sedums, chrysanthemums, and dianthus as well as grasses. But for a fuller landscape you’ll need shrubs. As winter approaches with its promise of bare branches, witch hazels come to mind as they begin flowering in winter.

Actually they flower more or less continually as they have the distinction of being the last shrub or small tree to bloom in fall. These deciduous native shrubs, Hamamelis, grow easily in woodlands or at the edges of the woods as well as on stream banks. The spidery yellow flowers appear long before the leaves and often are fragrant. The shrub is sufficiently well-shaped to be grown as a specimen but a group can be dazzling. Some cultivars have tawny or wine-red flowers and most have leaves that color brilliantly before they fall.

The common name, shared with the long ago astringent aftershave, begs for explanation. The astringent is made from branches distilled and mixed with alcohol. *H. virginiana* is the source and it has a lot of names; Virginian witch hazel, common witch hazel, pistachio, tobacco-wood and winter bloom. An interesting feature of *H. virginiana* is the noisy bursting of the seed capsule. It has been known to expel a seed 36’. So if you add the pods to a table arrangement, be prepared.

Why witch? Why hazel? I don’t know but I did find that it arrived in England from the colonies in 1736, it will tolerate fairly dry, sandy soil, even alkaline and clay soils. It is shade tolerant as well as deer resistant.

After planting, witch hazels can be pruned the first two years to prevent overlapping branches or excess shoots. Opening the center of the shrub increases flowering. The seeds are slow to germinate, a clue that these shrubs do not abound in nurseries although splendid varieties are available from catalogs. Forest Farm lists a baker’s dozen in an outdated catalog but you can obtain an update at www.forestfarm.com.

Different species have differing flowering seasons as well as different colors. *H. vernalis* is the native that blooms very early, well before spring.

Another plant with a similar name is winterhazel, *Corylopsis*, native to the Far East. They are less hardy than witch hazels but do well in our zone 7. They have soft yellow bell shaped flowers that grow in pendant racemes and bloom in mid-April with the daffodils. The Fairweather Gardens catalog has a *Corylopsis spicata* ‘Gold Spring’ with golden leaves that stay gold and light green all summer – to quote the catalog- “only a prelude to the astonishingly beautiful shades they acquire in fall.”

This nursery (www.fairweathergardens.com) also has a fascinating new dwarf witch hazel perfect for a small garden, *H. vernalis* ‘Quasimodo’. It grows about three feet high with spicy orange flowers in winter. Their catalog has pages of elegant witch hazels. Sometimes we read catalogs to learn and admire while we postpone any purchase until our garden requires such an investment!