



HABITAT - the arrangement of food, water, cover, and space -IS THE KEY. This newsletter is a place to share ideas, information, and help answer some of your habitat and wildlife gardening concerns.

We want to hear from you! Letters, e-mail, photos, drawings. Let us know how successful you are as you create wildlife habitat on your property. Complete the online [Habichat Reader's Survey](#).

Write to Me!

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Native Plant Profile... American Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana* L)



A unique shrub that blooms and releases its seed in the fall and winter.

Description:

- A shrub or small tree that averages 8 to 15 feet.
- Stem is crooked, and the forked branches were used for "divining rods" to locate water in earlier times.
- Bark is brown and smooth; bark can become scaly as plant ages.
- The leaves are alternate, oval 4" to 6" long, somewhat rounded.
- Veins in the leaves are very prominent.
- This species is unique in the fact that its thread-like yellow flowers do not generally appear until late in autumn or in winter after the leaves have dropped.
- The seed capsule is a pod that contains two shiny black seeds that ripens in October-November of the year following fertilization at the same time as the blossom appears.
- Ripe pods burst open throwing the seed several feet. A popping sound can be heard as the seed pod opens.



Habitat: Witch Hazel prefers well drained loamy soils. Can tolerate full sun to shade, which makes it a good choice for a shady backyard. In the wild Witch Hazel is found in low damp woods, moist rocky locations, brushy fields moist or dry, and stream borders.

Landscaping Notes: This is an easily grown shrub. There are over 100 cultivars of both the native and non-native shrub. Plant in the spring or fall. Pruning should be done after flowering, but before summer so the flower buds for fall can form. Plant does best at a soil pH of 5.5-6.5. *H. vernalis* is native to the Ozarks and blooms in the very late winter to early spring, with red musky smelling flowers. All species produce leaves that turn shades of yellow to red in the fall.

Native Witch hazel provides food for: Wild Turkey and Ruffed Grouse consume the seeds, rabbits and squirrels eat the bark, leaves and seeds. White-tailed Deer eat twigs, buds and leaves. Note: Native Americans also consumed the seeds.

Commercial use of the plant: The leaves, twigs, and bark are collected in the autumn. These plant parts contain oil which is distilled for witch-hazel extract which is used in medicine, and cosmetics. This industry is found in New England.

Additional notes of interest:

- Brookside Gardens in Wheaton, Maryland (phone 301-949-8230) has native Witch Hazel in their garden collection.
- The name "witch" has nothing to do with witches but comes from the old English word "wych" which means pliable branches.
- The early British settlers selected this plant for their dowsing (seeking water) work.
- The plant is not a hazel, but does look similar to the American hazelnut, *Corylus Americana*.

Maryland Wildlife: "Wood Mouse" or White-footed Mouse
(*Peromyscus leucopus*)



Description: This rodent is found throughout Maryland and in a variety of habitats. Its physical description varies with its habitat.

- The body is brown although it can be reddish or grayish.
- The belly is white.
- The young are gray above with white bellies.
- Tail is bicolor - dark on top, white below.
- The tail is nearly half the total length of the mouse.
- Rodent has large ears.
- Length of adult is 5"- 8".
- Tail is 2 1/2" to 3 7/8" in length.
- Adult mice weigh about 1/2 to 1 1/2 ounces.

Similar mice: Deer Mouse, *Peromyscus maniculatus*, looks very similar and it can be a challenge to tell a woodland form of a Deer Mouse from a White-footed or Wood Mouse. The Deer mouse is larger with a longer tail and long hind feet.

Breeding: There are two peak times for breeding, fall and spring. Females gives birth 22 days after fertilization, producing litters of 3-5 young.

Habitat: Woods, brushy areas. Will also use habitat next to a woods such as farm lands.

Signs: The Wood Mouse stores seeds such as black cherry pits (one of its favorite foods) and acorns under logs and in trees. Nests are constructed out of grass, leaves, hair, moss, and bark in a hidden location in its habitat. The Wood Mouse will also use an abandoned bird nest.

Behavior: This mouse is a typical rodent in being nocturnal and active throughout the year.

- A Wood Mouse spends a good amount of its time in trees and shrubs, so it is a good climber.
- This mouse uses its tail for balance when climbing trees.
- It is an omnivore, eating seeds, berries, nuts, and insects, especially beetles.
- Wood Mice like to store up their seeds - "cache" - near a nest or building.
- When attempting to warn other mice of danger it will drum its front feet.
- This mouse also makes very high pitched vocalizations, sounding like a bird trilling.

This species of mouse is very adaptable, abundant and an important source of food for a variety of bird and mammal predators in the food chain.



Enjoying Nature in Winter With Your Children

It is winter. There maybe winter precipitation, snow, sleet, or bright sunny days. Regardless of the weather, it is a great time to take the family, especially the children, outdoors and enjoy nature - even if it is only a few minutes a day in your backyard habitat or local nature center grounds.



Have the children look for berries that are in the trees and shrubs. Make a list as to what color the berries are. Make a guess list of which animal will eat the fruit. Have the family watch the shrub to see who actually comes to eat them. Are they birds? Mammals? Or both? How many times does a wild animal come to the plant to eat the berries? If you don't see the berries actually being eaten, but they are gone, have the children look for tracks in the snow or dirt. Where do the tracks go? Do they go to a hole? Is the hole in the ground or a tree?

Put a bird bath out.

Make sure it has clean ice free water each day. Like the observations with the berries, count how many birds come to the water. Do mammals come too? Will different species of birds drink water together? Which animals will not share the bird bath? Do some birds just take a drink, or do they take a bath too? Will domestic animals show up at the water? What does the

wildlife do when this happens? On really cold days, have the family time how long it takes the water to freeze up (if it is not a heated bath or aerated).

Before a snow, make a home-made snow gauge.

It can be a plain wooden stick with painted inches or centimeters or both marked on it. Make several and place them in different parts of the yard, under a tree, out in the open, under the roof, south side of the property, north side. Compare how much snow each one receives. Is it the same or different?

Layer Clothing to Stay Warm.

When taking the family outdoors be sure to layer the clothing, along with gloves and hats to stay warm. Have the children think about how the down in vests or coats are like the feathers that keep birds warm.

Track animals in the snow, or dirt. Compare track sizes from immediately after a snowfall to after a day or two of freezing and thawing. How does this change the tracks? Are they bigger? Do they get distorted?

Start a winter journal.

Write a few lines each day about what has been observed outside. Describe:

- What you have seen
- What sounds you have heard
- What odors you smelled (animals, plants , fresh snow)
- What it feel like (windy, hot, cold, wet)



By doing all of these activities, or choosing a few from this list, you'll spend family time with the children and everyone will enjoy wildlife in the winter.

The Benefits of Snow



**Snow has many benefits for the backyard habitat!
How can that be?**

Most people think of snow as an inconvenience or for sports, but actually ...

A good snow cover serves as an insulator of the soil.

Very cold temperatures without snow cover can freeze the soil deeper. This can lead to trees and shrubs having root damage. Snow insulation protects your ground covers and perennials from the freezing and thawing that causes soil heaving, which dries out plant parts and causes root breakage.

Snow helps conserve water!

A slow snow melt means a steady supply of water to underground water reserves. The water seeps into the soil, as compared to the surface run off of a thunderstorm.

Snow acts a fertilizer for your soil.

Snow takes nitrogen from the air, and as it melts slowly releases this element. Old time farmers knew if they had abundant snow fall, they needed to apply less manure on the fields.

Snow provides shelter.

Small animals such as voles, rabbits and other small mammals are now protected from predators. This insures an abundant source of food for the predators in the spring when they are raising their young.

Snow enhances the beauty of your landscape plantings.

Trees and shrubs with ornamental bark, such as native river birches and red twig dogwood look more brilliant. The evergreens you have planted for food and shelter may look much greener, especially with a bright male cardinal in them.

... Snow is Part of the World of Nature.

If you enjoyed this issue of Habichat, you might want to check out our online back issues and clickable listing of Habichat articles.
<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/wildlife/wildacres.asp#habichat>

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- Photograph of American Witch Hazel in flower, Elaine Haug @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database, photograph by Elaine Haug courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.
 - Witch Hazel Collage Photos:
 (left): Ted Bodner @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Miller, J.H. and K.V. Miller. 2005. *Forest plants of the southeast and their wildlife uses*. University of Georgia Press, Athens.
 (right, top): James H. Miller @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Miller, J.H. and K.V. Miller. 2005. *Forest plants of the southeast and their wildlife uses*. University of Georgia Press, Athens.
 (right, middle): R.A. Howard @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database, photograph from the Richard A. Howard Photograph Collection, Smithsonian Institution.
 (right, bottom): W.L. Wagner @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database, photograph by W.L. Wagner courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.
 - Photograph of Wood Mouse, courtesy of John White.
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Here is a listing of phone numbers, web sites and organizations that you might find helpful or interesting in your search for ideas to manage your wild acres. **DNR Online**... Inspired by nature! www.dnr.maryland.gov

Project FeederWatch is a winter-long survey of birds that visit feeders at backyards, nature centers, community areas, and other locales in North America. FeederWatchers periodically count the highest numbers of each species they see at their feeders from November through early April. FeederWatch helps scientists track broadscale movements of winter bird populations and long-term trends in bird distribution and abundance. Project FeederWatch is operated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in partnership with the National Audubon Society, Bird Studies Canada, and Canadian Nature Federation. <http://birds.cornell.edu/pfw>

National Wildlife Federation - Details on their backyard habitat program www.nwf.org or call them at 1-800-822-9919.

Native plants - **The Maryland Native Plant Society** offers information dedicated to protecting, conserving and restoring Maryland's native plants and habitats, visit them at www.mdflora.org.

Maryland Cooperative Extension offers home and garden information, tips publications, plant problems, Bay issues, and other links at www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/index.cfm Their **Home and Garden Information** number is statewide and can be reached at 1-800-342-2507, and from outside Maryland at 1-410-531-1757.

Bioimages, a project of Vanderbilt University, provides educational information to the public on biologically related topics, as well as a source of biological images for personal and non-commercial use. <http://bioimages.cas.vanderbilt.edu/>

Maryland's "**Becoming an Outdoors - Woman Program**" - One of the topics covered in the three-day workshops is Backyard Wildlife. For more information on this program contact Karina Blizzard at 410-260-8559 or send e-mail to: kblizzard@dnr.state.md.us.

For a free wildlife & native plant newsletter, visit the **WindStar Wildlife Institute** at www.windstar.org and subscribe to the WindStar Wildlife Garden Weekly e-newsletter. You can also visit this website to learn how you can become a certified wildlife habitat naturalist.

For more information on butterflies - visit the **North American Butterfly Association** at www.naba.org

Warm season grasses and wild meadows for upland nesting birds visit **Pheasants Forever** at www.pheasantsforever.org or e-mail: pf@pheasantsforever.org

In an effort to continue to provide quality backyard habitat information we are asking our readers to tell us what you think. Please take a few minutes to answer our survey. This will help us to improve our site so we can continue to deliver the information you want.

[Habichat Reader's Survey](#)

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