



Seeing the Sourlands Witchhazel

I decided to leave the marked trail and follow a little stream that meandered into the woods. It was not as easy as walking the trail—the ground was uneven, huge boulders were often in the way, fallen trees or tree limbs blocked my route—but it was unexplored territory for me and I was happy to see new ground. I was not sure exactly where the stream goes but I knew that it was a tributary to the Stony Brook, so I assumed that the water I saw would reach that stream, then follow the Stony Brook into the Millstone River, which in turn would run into the Raritan River. So, I figured that the water I saw was about four days from being in the Atlantic Ocean; a thought that gave my Sourland walk context.

The forest around me was healthy-looking. Unlike so much of the Sourland forest that has been scoured by deer, there was an understory of mostly Spicebush around me. There were hickory, oak, ash and maple seedlings everywhere. Ferns were dense; mostly it was Christmas fern but there were some wood ferns, patches of New York fern and—almost hidden in a nook—a Broad Beach fern. The canopy was filled with wonderful, mature trees except here and were sun-filled openings caused when Sandy, almost two years before my walk, came through and blew down the vulnerable trees.

My mind was focused on navigating through a tangle of downed trees when I suddenly noticed that I was in the middle of a stand of Witchhazel, a shrub that is native to the Sourlands but is infrequently seen. In front of me was a Witchhazel that characteristically had nine or ten shoots, each about fifteen feet long and arching out from the clump's center like a fountain. A limb from a nearby White Ash had fallen on the Witchhazel, pinning three of its branches to the forest floor. Although irregularity is what makes the forest so beguiling I always feel compelled to come to the rescue of plants that I particularly like, so I tugged the limb off of the Witchhazel and felt satisfied when the pinned shoots lifted from the forest floor.

The Witchhazel was filled with buds, some of them just beginning to open into the amazing flowers that bedeck this shrub in late autumn (see photo above). In fact, if you have no other reason to walk in the woods in late October or early November, finding a Witchhazel in flower is reward enough for your effort.

Witchhazel is not used much anymore for medical purposes. Well into the twentieth century the leaves and bark were used by Native Americans and subsequently by European settlers to make an astringent that soothed cuts, bruises and swelling of the skin. Its name has nothing to do with witches; it is derived from the Middle English word *wiche*, which means pliant.