

# American Hazelnut shrub produces top-notch treats

By Susan Yost, Ph.D.

Delaware State University

Growing quietly in Delaware's northern forests is a shrub, the American hazelnut (*Corylus americana*).

I had overlooked this species until it was pointed out to me last year in Brandywine Creek State Park. The leaves look like birch leaves, and this makes sense since hazelnut is in the birch family (*Betulaceae*), along with birch, alder, hornbeam and hop-hornbeam. Hazelnut has small flowers, with the male flowers in catkins, and edible nuts enclosed in distinctive leafy bracts.

American hazelnut grows up to 4 to 10 feet tall, does well in sun or shade, and may produce suckers to form a clump. It can be planted

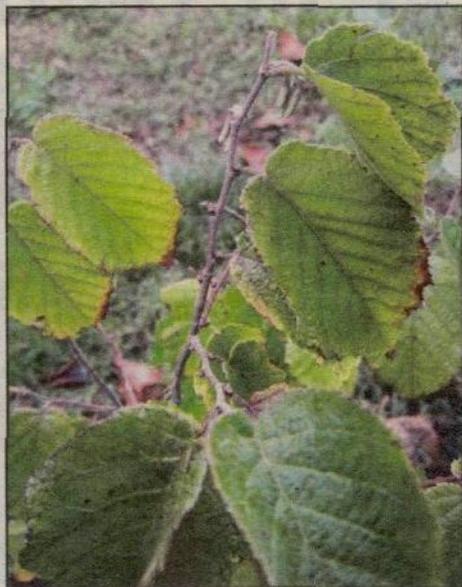
to provide wildlife food for squirrels, chipmunks, grouse, rabbit and deer; and these hazelnuts are also tasty and nutritious for humans. A good website for local nurseries that sell native plants is <http://dda.delaware.gov/plantind/index.shtml>.

One other species of *Corylus* is native in Delaware, the beaked hazelnut (*Corylus cornuta*), which is listed as "Conservation Concern" (McAvoy and Bennett, 2001); with only one known occurrence or population in Delaware.

Hazelnut was considered to have special powers in ancient times. It was thought to be useful against lightning and witches in Europe. Today, hazelnut wood is still used for divining rods (also called dowsing rods) which are used to find ground water. I have seen these rods used twice, once years ago in Vermont, and once recently in Delaware; however, apparently there is no scientific evidence that these work any better than chance.

The hazelnut fruit is a true nut, defined by botanists as a relatively large, single-seeded dry fruit, with a woody shell, that remains closed at maturity. Other true nuts are chestnuts and acorns. Some things

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**The American hazelnut (*Corylus americana*) is a Delaware native shrub that can be grown for its delicious and nutritious nuts, eaten by both humans and wildlife. Note catkins of male flowers near top of stem.**

that we commonly call nuts are not true botanical nuts; for example, to a botanist, peanuts are really legumes, and almonds are drupes.

Hazelnuts are especially popular in Europe, where they are eaten whole, or ground into a paste in chocolates, cakes, ice cream, pralines (nut and sugar confections), and Nutella (that great hazelnut-chocolate spread). The hazelnuts that we purchase in the U.S. are mostly from the European hazelnut, or filbert, *Corylus avellana*, which is cultivated commercially mainly in Turkey, Italy, and in the U.S. in Oregon and Washington.

Some hazels are used as ornamentals, including the wonderfully twisted Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta').

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One additional note about "hazels" — the hazelnut (*Corylus*) of this article should not be confused with witch-hazel (*Hamamelis*), shrubs in a different family (*Hamamelidaceae*). One witch-hazel species (*Hamamelis virginiana*) is native to Delaware, and has the unusual habit of blooming in the fall, with delicate yellow flowers. The name witch-hazel is familiar for the astringent that is produced from its bark and leaves.

We planted a very small American hazelnut (*Corylus americana*) on the Delaware State University campus last May, and it already produced a grand total of two nuts. Unfortunately, squirrels beat us to eating these nuts, leaving the remains of their treat under the shrub. I plan to be more vigilant next year and get a sample also!

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.