# DERMASCOPE

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# Witch Hazel

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Most people are quite familiar with witch hazel, the water-like extract that is often used in skin care products for its healing, astringent properties. The benefits, uses, and appeal of this amazing botanical go far beyond what is commonly known. The most common species of witch hazel is Hamamelis virginiana (H. virginiana), sometimes known as American witch hazel. The name witch hazel is believed to have come from the Middle English word, wicke, which means lively. Other species in North America include H. mexicana, H. ovalis, and H. vernalis.

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Hamamelis virginiana's multifaceted extract comes from a small, deciduous, shrub-like tree with light brown bark and flowers that are yellowish in color and sometimes dark orange. Researchers believe the reason for witch hazel's late flowering period is so that it does not have great competition with other botanicals when it comes to pollination. The late flowering period insures that insects will pay special attention to its unique blossom. The leaves of H. virginiana are somewhat crinkly and wire-like in appearance, grow in clusters, and flower in the fall. It grows mostly in the eastern portion of the United States and parts of the mid-west. This amazing healing plant is quite fragrant and is pollinated by moths. Initially, this species of witch hazel was commonly used by Native Americans for its medicinal properties.

The genus name, Hamamelis, comes from Latin and means service tree or tree that bears fruit. The species name, virginiana, comes from its place of origin. Both genus and species are taxonomic categories – the science of defining groups of biological organisms based on its shared characteristics).

Witch hazel is produced by boiling the stems of the shrub and condensing the steam to produce a distillate. Natural witch hazel contains a small amount of alcohol. Alcohol is a natural byproduct of the distillation process; it is not added in afterwards, contrary to popular belief. The alcohol that is naturally contained within the extract helps to provide astringent properties. Some manufactures, however, strip the natural alcohol from their witch hazel product with the goal of producing a less drying product. Other manufactures add alcohol to their product to create an even more astringent effect. When considering that most essential oils naturally contain a small percentage of alcohol, which adds to their healing capabilities, it is understood that a low percentage of alcohol contained naturally within witch hazel extract can actually be considered an extra healing benefit when used in products made for acneic skin. Especially when other healing, soothing and hydrating ingredients are added along with it to help balance the entire formula.

## HYDROSOLS

Witch hazel is a hydrosol. Hydrosols are like essential oils, but in lower concentration. Hydrosols are created because certain essential oils infuse into the water due to their partial water-loving molecular structure. The extract that has not separated from the water is a hydrosol or floral water. It is a byproduct of steam distillation.

When producing witch hazel, this process is used strictly to produce a hydrosol (floral water) only. The chemical components of hydrosols are mostly acids. The pH of witch hazel usually ranges from about 3.5 to 4.5, which is slightly acidic,

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and can vary due to the plant itself and the distillation process. The slightly acidic pH makes it beneficial for the skin as it does not significantly alter the skin's natural pH and gives it antibacterial properties. When looking for a product that is pH balanced, it is a good idea to test the product with a pH pencil to ascertain its pH prior to using it on the skin.

## INGREDIENT BENEFITS

The innate properties and characteristics of witch hazel are what make this herb so valuable and a popular healing extract. Some of the main constituents of witch hazel are tannins, such as hamamelitannin, and saponins; the main properties of these molecules are astringent. The astringent properties help to decrease oil in the skin which, in turn, helps to decrease follicle size. It also acts as a germicide and is a beneficial ingredient in cleansers, toners, and masks. Witch hazel also contains a compound called gallate esters and is considered to be polyphenolic. This compound is why witch hazel is a great antioxidant and is incredibly antibacterial and anti-inflammatory. Antioxidants help

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### IN-TREATMENT USES

- Use alcohol-free witch hazel on cotton eye pads in place of plain water during a treatment to help soothe the delicate eye area.
- Mix a small amount into a clay powder to create a healing and follicle-constricting mask. Leave it on for five to 10 minutes after a skin extraction treatment.
- After a bikini wax, take cotton compresses and leave them in the freezer for a few minutes. Then, apply a small amount of witch hazel to the compresses and press it onto the freshly waxed skin for several minutes.
- Use witch hazel in place of a toner when in a pinch!
- Sanitize countertops and wipe down product containers with witch hazel. Then ingredient can even be used as a gentle hand sanitizer. In this case, witch hazel with a small amount of alcohol is beneficial.
- After skin extractions, create cool compresses and leave them on a pimple or sebaceous cyst to bring down swelling.

to battle free radicals. When free radicals are in abundance, they can cause a great deal of molecular damage, ultimately leading to cellular damage and inflammation. Many different skin issues including dermatitis, premature aging as a result of degradation of collagen/elastin, and skin cancer from free radical damage in the tissue. Additionally, witch hazel is one of the most popular natural acne treatments worldwide and is used in dozens of over-the-counter treatment gels, washes, and lotions.

Witch hazel has been used as a healing ingredient in skin care and body care products for centuries. It has been used as a base ingredient whereby other ingredients are added to it to help create a synergy effect. It has also been used as a standalone treatment thanks to the many healing components it possesses. Witch hazel is used as an active ingredient in products and can help dry and heal breakouts due to its astringent properties; soothe and reduce edema, especially post-waxing; reduce itching as a result of its antipuritic effects; contract blood vessels, reducing edema when used in undereye products; reduce the chance of folliculitis by soothing the skin; prevent razor burn and bumps; and calm the effects of varicose veins.

Witch hazel can be found in cleansers and astringents for its toning and cleaning properties; in masks and mois-

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turizers for its healing, soothing, and antioxidant properties; and in other body products, such as soothing pads, to help reduce inflammation caused by hemorrhoids. Though there have been articles written on how to mix and use witch hazel as a mouth wash, gargle, or treatment for the gums, it is best to leave those remedies to the naturopath physicians; it is not safe to use products that contain isopropyl alcohol orally.

Although there are no known serious side effects to using witch hazel topically, there will always be some who will have an allergic reaction. For those who have had an allergic reaction in the past, it is best not to use it again.

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