

Age-old remedy: Witch hazel harvest underway in R.I. woods

By Tom Mooney

Journal Staff Writer

Posted Nov 29, 2015 at 11:15 PM

FOSTER – They are the few and crusty, perhaps a dozen woodsmen in all, hustling now through the forests of Rhode Island and Connecticut as they do each November.

The possibility that a nation of sore-bottom sufferers and acne-pocked teenagers are depending on them “is probably true to a certain extent,” says 75-year-old Curtis Strong, chuckling, “though, I never felt that responsible.”

They call themselves “brush cutters.” Starting in late fall and running through winter, they practice the age-old custom of harvesting witch hazel, a wild plant used for hundreds of years to sooth everything from skin abrasions to hemorrhoids, and to cleanse and tighten those sagging jowls.

Few people know that this region is the center of the witch hazel universe, says Strong, a fourth-generation brush cutter from Sterling, Connecticut, who has passed on much of his autumn side work to his sons.

Not only are sections of woods here — and extending north into Vermont — thick with the plant, but the country’s biggest supplier of witch hazel products, Dickinson’s, has been headquartered in East Hampton, Connecticut, since 1866.

The unfamiliarity of their work favors the cutters, says Strong, by cutting down on competition.

“If you are a hard, hard worker — I mean a hard worker — and you have a nice area, you can make a nice day’s pay,” he says.

Witch hazel grows in clumps of what resemble tree saplings. Trunks reach 20 feet tall and a few inches in diameter. The gray thin bark is smooth and blotchy in color. One of the plant’s peculiarities is it flowers this time of year. Each quarter-sized yellow blossom looks like a miniature bunch of squiggly bananas.

In his glory days, Strong would cut through a witch hazel trunk with a single axe blow, then deliver a second swipe on the other side to weaken the stump. “That way if you ran it over, it would split and it wouldn’t pop a tire.”

Today, cutters use chainsaws. They pile the brush and then haul each stack out of the woods with an ATV or lumber skidder. The brush is put through a chipper and trucked to Dickinson’s partnering company, American Distilling, in East Hampton, Connecticut, the world’s largest source of distilled witch hazel.

The chips are steamed in water. The distillate is filtered and then grain alcohol is added. The result is a clear, mild astringent used as the key ingredient in dozens of medicinal and cosmetic products around the world.

Brush cutters spend much of their time hunting for witch hazel to cut. To make it worth harvesting, they seek out property that has a ton or more of witch hazel per acre. Cutters pay harvesting rights to property owners.

Dickinson’s requires all of its witch hazel to be organically grown. And so, years ago, Strong took on the role of inspector for American Distilling, checking harvest areas before cutting to ensure the brush isn’t growing by a dump or in

areas that have been sprayed recently for gypsy moth control.

Because of his inspector's role, he knows virtually every brush cutter out there.

“The oldest of our cutters is Bert Congdon. He's 83 and lives in Sterling [Connecticut], but he's been cutting in Rhode Island for a long time. He has the Scituate Reservoir [property] pretty much all to himself. If you want to reach him you got to call pretty early — like 4:30 in the morning.”

The Providence Water Supply Board, which manages the land around the Scituate Reservoir, says brush cutters harvest on average up to 20 tons of witch hazel each year. The practice has been ongoing for 53 years.

Witch hazel is a renewable resource. The stumps cut this month will have three-foot shoots growing from them next summer and will be ready to harvest again in 7 to 10 years.

Walter May, of Foster, doesn't cut witch hazel himself but supervises its cutting on town property as a trustee for the town's Land Trust.

The land trust owns just over 1,000 acres in town. Over the last seven years, cutters have harvested witch hazel on several hundred acres of that property, paying the town a percentage of their proceeds as a harvest fee.

“It's been good for us,” says May. “It keeps the woods clean and lowers the chance of fire, and we get a little money from it, which we use to keep the property maintained.”

Curtis Strong says being outside in November has always been one attraction to cutting witch hazel.

“You’re in the woods, with nature, and it’s just kind of a nice place to be — and you’re making money while you’re doing it. Most kids today wouldn’t even try it.”

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