

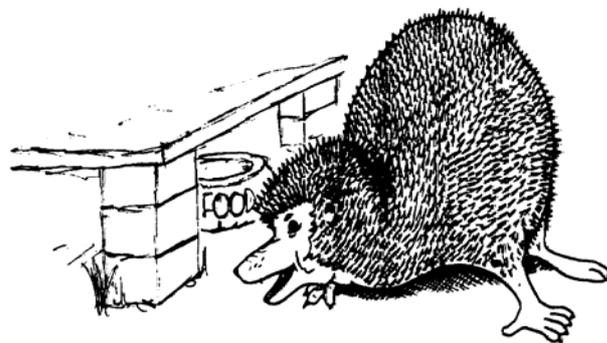
Hedgehogs in your garden

Hedgehogs are nocturnal and may visit many gardens in one night, foraging for caterpillars, worms, beetles, slugs, snails and any other edible bits and pieces they can find. They may travel several miles in one night searching for food or perhaps a mate. As dawn approaches they should return to their individual nests to sleep until it is dark again. The nest will consist of garden debris, grass, leaves, bits of paper etc. It will be quite a large construction, over a foot long, and is often made under a hedge, shed, pile of rubbish or brambles. In winter when nights get colder and their food is not so easily found, they will hibernate in their nests until conditions improve. If they are slightly frightened or unsure, they will raise their spines to give them some protection. Sometimes they may run away, as they have quite long legs! But if very frightened they will curl into a tight impenetrable ball. The spines are specialised hairs and when raised are quite sharp.

You can encourage hedgehogs to visit your garden more often by putting out food for them, particularly when the ground is hard (eg in droughts and in hard frosts), but it is important that if you do this you try to make your garden safe for them first. If there are no hedgehogs in your area, there may be a reason for this, eg a nearby badger sett, there may not be sufficient food or nest building materials, it may be too damp or too high an altitude. If you do not see hedgehogs it is advisable not to introduce them to your area as whatever discouraged or killed the wild hedgehogs may do the same to the ones you release. Never take a healthy hedgehog from the wild - it may be a mother with a litter of babies waiting for her return. Without their mother the hoglets will die. Sometimes people move a hedgehog from their front to their back garden, where it is thought to be safer, but again this could mean that any hoglets may starve. By being aware of some of the dangers hedgehogs may face in your garden, you can try to minimise those dangers by taking a few simple precautions.

- ✦ **Bonfires** - check piles of rubbish just before setting light to them.
- ✦ **Pampas grass** - a favourite spot for them to make their nests. Some gardeners burn or strim their pampas grass. Please check carefully to be absolutely sure there is no hedgehog asleep inside.
- ✦ **Netting** - keep netting about 9-12 inches above the ground. The hedgehog can then go under the net and not push its way through and become entangled.
- ✦ **Ponds** - ensure there is an escape route for anything falling into the pond. A sloping ramp or green plastic coated wire netting going down into the water will do. Try to keep the pond topped up so these escape routes can be reached and any thirsty hedgehogs are less likely to topple in. In wet weather anything which collects water can become dangerous, eg children's paddling pools, sandpits, buckets and flower pots.
- ✦ **Holes** - cover any drain holes and provide escape routes from deep holes, like bean trenches, car inspection pits, newly dug but still empty ponds, fence post holes, foundation holes etc.
- ✦ **Tidying** - check there are no hedgehogs under piles of rubbish you are clearing, sheds you are moving, grass you are strimming (we see horrific injuries) and inside open bags of compost, peat etc., before you start work. Check compost heaps before you push a fork into them. Check sheds, garages, greenhouses etc. normally left open at night, before you permanently close their doors (eg to go on holiday).
- ✦ **Rubbish** - keep bags of rubbish out of reach, so a hedgehog does not get into it and perhaps get put out for the bin men! Make sure your rubbish is disposed of safely; hedgehogs get caught in twine, four ring can holders, plastic yogurt cartons and even narrow necked bottles.
- ✦ **Chemicals** - Take care when using and storing any chemicals and slug pellets, that you do not poison any hedgehogs or indeed any other wildlife, pets or children. See if you can find a safer alternative.

Once you feel you have a relatively safe environment for a hedgehog, you can encourage them to visit more often. Make a hedgehog box or provide piles of leaves or hay under bushes, sheds, in pampas grass etc. for them to nest in. Put out food in dry weather and in autumn when they are trying to put on enough fat to survive hibernation. Hedgehogs will eat almost anything from dog or cat food to household scraps. Chicken cat food is usually well liked, but as well as this try small helpings of cake, biscuits, pastry, sultanas, bananas and other fruits, cooked potato and other cooked vegetables, baked beans, fish fingers, raw liver or mince, rice, pasta, mealworms or dried cat food. Both tinned and dried food especially for hedgehogs is available, e.g., (Spike's Dinner). The crunchy cat biscuits or puppy complete food will also be of benefit to the hedgehog's teeth.



NEVER give them milk because it may cause stomach upsets. If you have a rat problem putting out food is not advisable. If cats try to eat the food, try putting the dish under a shed or low object so that cats cannot gain access to it. Some hedgehogs will put their noses under the rims of saucers and flip them over, so where possible use a straight sided dish. When you are putting out food, try not to use a torch; if they associate torch light with food, they might also associate motorbike or car headlights with food – not a good idea!

If you disturb a nest with an adult hedgehog in it, replace the nesting material. The hedgehog can then either repair the nest or build another elsewhere. If the disturbed hedgehog is hibernating and wakes up, a dish of dog or cat food and some water each night until it starts hibernating again would be helpful. If there are babies in the nest, again replace the nesting material, handling the nest as little as possible so as not to leave your smell on it. Keep an eye on the nest to see if mum returns. If there is no sign of her by the next morning ring your local wildlife hospital for advice. Do not allow friends or children to uncover the nest for a peep. If the mother has returned, she may abandon or even eat her young if she is further disturbed. Sometimes the hoglets will leave the nest just for a nose around. If one snuffles about looking for food etc and then returns to the nest there is probably nothing to worry about. However if it is crying or its eyes are still closed or it is wobbly, feels cold or is attracting the attention of flies, SEEK ADVICE. It is helpful if before ringing you check to see if there is a nest nearby. Sometimes if a nest is at the top of a slope, it is possible that a hoglet may roll out of the nest by accident - but do not disturb the nest until you have sought advice. Also in the same situation, check to see if the hoglet's eyes are open and if possible weigh it (both will give us an idea of its age). Before handling the hoglet, put on a pair of gloves, this will stop your smell being transferred onto the hoglet, and is more hygienic for you. Always wash your hands after handling any wild animal.

If you see an adult hedgehog out in the day it could mean that it is in trouble. If it appears to be searching for food or collecting nesting material and behaving normally it may well be OK to leave it alone. If it wobbles, appears to be injured, is attracting flies or is just lying in an exposed position SEEK ADVICE. If you are in any doubt always SEEK ADVICE. If the hedgehog does need help, it should be put into a high sided box (they are very good climbers - even when ill or injured). Put plenty of newspaper in the bottom and cover the hedgehog with some bedding eg a towel, sweatshirt or similar. Check it for injuries, fly eggs and maggots (these will need to be removed) and SEEK ADVICE as soon as possible. Some female hedgehogs have late litters and the young from these litters need a little extra help to survive. They need to weigh around 600gms (22oz) before they can survive hibernation. If you find one under this weight wandering around in the late autumn SEEK ADVICE. Sometimes just providing a little extra food is all that is necessary but if the youngster is very small it may need to be hospitalised. It is helpful if you can weigh the youngster before ringing for advice rather than give a guess to its weight.

There are many designs which can be used to make a hedgehog nest box. For example - a plastic pot with its bottom removed tied onto a large plastic bin bag OR some breeze blocks with a paving slab on top OR a plastic swing bin on its side OR an upside down pet basket OR an upside down toy box with the hand holds cut away. If you are a handyman/woman, you may wish to make your own wooden hedgehog box based on this plan. Commercially made hedgehog boxes are also available. Siting the house depends on the garden and from which direction the weather comes. For example in the hot weather the box should be sited where it is shaded. In the winter it should be protected from the prevailing winds. If a hedgehog has previously nested in your garden this may help you decide where to site the box. Filling the nest with dry leaves and/or hay will mean the hedgehog has less work to do in building its nest. Do not keep looking to see if a hedgehog is in residence. You could however put a small object at the entrance to see if it gets pushed away; this may indicate that an animal of some sort is using the nest. Hedgehogs have made use of all these ideas, but just because you go to the trouble to make or buy a box for the hedgehog does not mean he will use it. If you have a shed raised off the ground or pampas grass, it is possible that these will be preferred.

