

Hedgehog Ecology

During the summer months a hedgehog needs to travel over a mile a night. They can have as many as five different nests in a distance that is about the size of a golf course, hence the need to be able to travel between gardens successfully. In order for hedgehog populations to do well these are some of the things they need:

- Long meadow grass
- Covered bushy areas
- Hedges
- Log piles with gaps underneath so that they can create a successful nest
- Large leaf piles
- Connectivity between gardens (a 13cm square gap in your garden fence)
- Access to fresh water – this can be provided in something low. Hedgehog can swim but often they drown because they cannot get out of deep pools or ponds.



Long, tussocky grass, provides an excellent nesting place for hedgehogs in the summer months.

A large leaf pile with a hedgehog nest beneath makes a cosy place for a hedgehog.



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During the winter months a hedgehog needs are very specialised and they can often find it very difficult to create nests.

When the temperature drops hedgehogs don't have much fur to keep them warm so they slow down. There is also very little natural food available to them as the weather gets colder. When autumn arrives the hedgehog will be slowing down and looking for a place to make a really good winter nest. Their needs are highly specialised:

- They need thorny, dense and low lying bushes
- They also need medium sized deciduous leaves that do not rot easily, such as oak and hornbeam.

It is in the thorny bushes that they build their hibernaculums. These are waterproof and warm if they have been built properly and protect the hedgehog from predators such as rats.

If you disturb a hibernating hedgehog during the winter months do not put it back unless it is awake. The hedgehog can take several days to awake from hibernation and often it will not be able to re-make the nest to the same quality as before.



Hibernation Fact File

Heart rate slows to about 20-30 beats per minute.

Body temperature drops to about ten degrees.

Hibernating hedgehogs breathe about every two or three minutes.

A hedgehog that is hibernating is curled and if disturbed will tuck its head in further and the spines will react to touch.

It takes a huge amount of brown fat energy to wake up and if the hedgehog does not have enough brown fat reserves it might not wake.



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Food

Hedgehogs have different dietary needs throughout the year.

Their primary diet consists of:

- Caterpillars
- Beetles
- Leather jackets
- Worms
- Wire worms
- Millipedes
- Woodlice
- Earwigs

The more things you can put in your garden to encourage these insects the better. One of the biggest problems to hedgehogs currently is the lack of natural food. If you are not able to attract more insects with your planting then you can supplementary feed.

It is a good idea to create a feeding station to put your food in as hedgehogs like to have something against their backs, they feel safer. A 13cm square hole in a plastic box turned upside down is good but remember to put out fresh food daily.

If you find you have a regular visitor, you may find that they visit at a certain time each evening as they can tell the time!!



DO FEED:

Meat based cat or dog food.
Kitten biscuits that do not contain lactose.
Meal worms
Sunflower hearts, crushed unsalted peanuts.

DO NOT FEED:

Milk – they are lactose intolerant, at best it will give them belly ache at worst it can kill them.
Bread – It swells in their tummies.
Fish – Hedgehogs do not like fish based products and it can make them ill.



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What can you do to help?

- Create some large log piles that have space underneath for hedgehogs to create a nest.
- Leave a large leaf pile in a corner of your garden.
- Create a 13cmx13cm hole in your fence so a hedgehog can get easy access.
- Leave a small area of your garden to grow wild with some long grass and meadow flowers to encourage insects and to provide appropriate nesting material
- Plant some hedges



Major Gardening Hazards for hedgehogs:

Bonfires – please put the things you are going to burn in a different place than the place where you will burn them. Do not just set fire to the pile. Hedgehogs love making their nests in these piles.

Do not use slug pellets they are extremely poisonous to hedgehogs and if they eat the slugs that have been killed by them they will also die.

Please check in long grass and under hedges before using a strimmer.

If you have a pond please make sure there is either a ramp or low sides so that a hedgehog can climb out if they fall in.



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