

Love Hedgehogs

Hedgehogs are famous for their prickly spines, which they have everywhere except on their face, legs and bellies. These cute creatures depend on their spines for defence, both while they sleep and when they face enemies. By curling into a tight ball and tucking in their heads, tail and legs, they protect vulnerable parts of their body.



The body of an adult hedgehog ranges from 14 to 30 centimetres long, and their tail can add another 1 to 6 centimetres. When they are born, their spines are soft and short. But soon after birth, their spines harden, becoming stiffer, sharper and longer. Babies stay in the nest until they are about three weeks old. By that time, their eyes are open, their spines are effective and they can safely follow their mother outside the nest as she looks for food.

Top on a hedgehog's menu are insects, followed by small mice, snails, lizards, frogs, eggs and even snakes. Mostly nocturnal creatures, they head out at night in search of food – but they are sometimes active during the day, too, particularly after it rains.

Hedgehogs have a trick up their sleeve to give themselves extra protection – “self anointing.” These amazing animals are immune to certain poisonous plants, which they eat before making frothy saliva in their mouth. The hedgehogs then lick their spines, spreading the saliva with the plant's poison all over the spikes. Scientists believe this may help hedgehogs hide their scent from predators or give them a nasty shock should they attack!

There are 15 different species of hedgehog, found across Europe, Asia and Africa. Whilst these cool creatures mainly stay on the ground, they are quite good swimmers and can climb trees, too!

Six things you must do to make your garden hedgehogs friendly:

1. Create an Hedgehog Highway

The first thing is hedgehog holes! By this, I mean making sure there are gaps in your fence or hedge so hedgehogs can travel from one garden to another. Hedgehogs travel up to one mile every night so they need to be able to roam freely. They tend to stick to the edges, but they'll amble around foraging for food and nesting materials. The males will go further than that often up to two miles especially in the breeding season.

The best way to ensure hedgehogs have travel rights is to team up with your neighbours and extend the highway within your community. Visit www.hedgehogstreet.org for more information.

2. Add a hedgehog house

Hedgehog houses provide shelter and food for these lovely animals but they can also look stylish in your garden and act as a design feature. You can buy one, or you can build your own house or create a more makeshift option using a pile of logs. Simply pile the logs in an unordered fashion and pad out the gaps with leaves. Log piles are really great, not only do they provide shelter, but they also provide food as they attract bugs and insects.



3. Leave out water

Leaving clean water in small dishes around the garden is good for lots of wildlife if they pass through, especially in very cold months where most water is frozen at night. Leave a dish close to your hedgehog house.

4. Make a feeding station

You can leave out dedicated hedgehog or cat/dog food overnight. If you want to make sure the snacks are not eaten by other animals, cut a hedgehog-size hole in the end of a Tupperware, turn it upside down and secure it to the ground with a weight or tent pegs. Put the food underneath the Tupperware and only hedgehogs should be able to reach it.



5. Optimise your pond

If you have a pond, install a small ramp or sloping mound at the side to give hedgehogs safe access in and out of it. They can swim but can find it difficult getting over steep walls.

Ponds are really good for all wildlife so they are always recommended, just make sure there's easy access. Without help, the hedgehog can become exhausted trying to get out of the water.



6. Leave them alone during hibernation

It's sometimes hard to know if you have a hedgehog hibernating in your garden – this happens between November and March – but, if you do, make sure you leave it alone.

THINGS YOU SHOULD NOT DO

1. Don't use slug pellets or other chemicals in your garden. These are toxic to most animals, including hedgehogs. It's a much better and more environmentally-friendly option to attract as much wildlife into your garden as possible, including slugs and other 'pests'. This will create a rich eco-system and the food chain will look after itself, also, hedgehogs do eat slugs! So attracting them into your garden is a great natural method of slug control.
2. Don't use netting on the ground. Lots of people like to use garden netting to support their plants but, if you must, make sure it is high enough off the ground so that hedgehogs can't become trapped in it and can freely walk under it. This includes football, tennis and cricket nets - try to store them away when not in use.
3. Don't mow or trim your lawn without checking. Hedgehogs are no match for garden machinery so make sure you check and leafy, mounded areas of your lawn before giving it a haircut.
4. Don't make or light a bonfire without checking Piles of logs and leaves are perfect habitats for hedgehogs so make sure you check any potential fire mounds before lighting them for any life inside them.