

Wild Garden Ecology: Gardening for Wildlife

Give a Hog a Home: Helping your local hedgehog

By Kayla Potter-Jones

Hedgehogs (*Erinaceus europaeus*) is an iconic species and is the UK's only spikey mammal. These noisy eaters are the friend of every gardener, eating slugs, snails, and other insects as they navigate through the night. However, the humble hedgehog is experiencing a significant population decline due to habitat loss and damage towards hedgerows and woodlands. But they are also threatened by the many impenetrable boundaries our gardens and our increasing urban development.



Wildlife camera capturing the hedgehog in my garden!

I found a nest in my front garden and only noticed it because the fatsia leaves had been neatly tidied and piled up in the corner between the fence and the wall. I often place my camera trap in the garden to keep an eye on its comings and goings. Classed as vulnerable to extinction, this small mammal is in desperate need of your help. This article will provide you with information on what you can do for your local hedgehog.



What you can do to help!

Gardening for Hedgehogs

Hedgehogs prefer an overgrown garden as they provide plenty of cover and foraging opportunities, let your garden grow wild! To support your hedgehog's natural food source, include plants that support invertebrates and other insects, like moth and butterfly larva for your hedgehog to eat.

Garden hedges are also valuable for hogs. They not only present a place to forage for food but, when the leaves descend, they provide shelter and nesting material for hibernation and raising young! Hedges are fantastic food sources as they support beetles, caterpillars, snails, and many other tasty treats for your hedgehog. Some beneficial hedge plants include hawthorn, elder, and blackthorn.

Constructing a log pile in your garden (view my previous article on how to create a log pile) will support animals such as beetles for your hedgehog to crunch on, and depending on the size of your log pile, it could be used as a nesting spot.

If you have raised beds or steps in your garden, placing shallower steps or a ramp will allow your hedgehog to access areas of your garden more freely.

Don't use slug pellets in your garden as these can harm your hedgehog!

Hedgehog Highway!

Hedgehogs will travel about a mile a night in their quest to find food, nesting sites, and a mate. But with all our garden fences and walls, life is difficult for a hedgehog. But by providing holes and access points in your garden, you can help a hedgehog to navigate its way around the urban environment.

Creating a hedgehog highway is easy. By making a small hole in or under your fence or wall, your local hedgehog will be very happy. The gap only needs to be 13cm x 13cm, which should be big enough for any hedgehog. Once you have made a hole, make sure to smooth out any rough or sharp edges to prevent injury to passing hedgehogs.

Get your neighbours involved and make your street a hedgehog highway! You can make your highway pledge and record your hedgehog sightings at Hedgehog Street.



Supplementary food and water

Supplementary feeding can begin as soon as hedgehogs emerge from hibernation in the spring until they hibernate in autumn. Specialised hedgehog food is available to purchase your spiny friend, but you can place tinned or dried dog, or cat food (but NOT fish-based food) in your garden. You can also use a feeding station that will prevent foxes and cats from snacking on your hedgehog's food.



Pond beached area for easy access in and out of the pond.

Hedgehog House

Make your very own hedgehog house! There are plenty of tips on how to make your hedgehog house, for example, the RSPB provides detailed instructions on how to make an exceptional hog house. But if you are short of free time you can always buy one. Once you have your hedgehog house, it needs to be placed in a quiet space that is sheltered from the wind and out of direct sunlight. The ideal spot would be in the corner of your garden under thick vegetation.



Feeding station made by Craig Knowles

Ensure fresh water is also available for your spiny little visitor. This could be a small dish, or if you have a pond, make sure your hedgehog can climb out safely should they fall in, for example, has a shallow beached area.

Make sure to clean your feeding and drinking dishes regularly!



What to do if you find an ill or injured hedgehog

Signs your hedgehog may be unwell:

If you see a hedgehog during the day over winter it may need help as sick hedgehogs can be susceptible to hypothermia. Visible signs of hypothermia include staggering when they walk and sunbathing, where they will actively lie in the sun to warm themselves.

If you witness this behaviour bring the hedgehog indoors, put it in a box, and place a wrapped hot water bottle filled with hot tap water NOT boiling water beneath them. The hot water bottle should sit at a comfortable heat in your hand. Do not allow the water bottle to get cold, as this will do more harm. Then call your local wildlife rescue center or the British Hedgehog Preservation Society (01584 890801) for advice on how to care for your hedgehog and what to do next.

Hedgehog signs in your garden

If you do not own a camera trap, you can always look for hedgehog signs by keeping an eye out for droppings and tracks. Hedgehog feet have five digits with long claws. The forefeet are broader and more splayed out than the hind feet. Droppings usually found on garden lawns they are dark grey/black, cylindrical, and between 1.5-5cm long x 1cm wide and can often see the shiny remains of insects.



Thank you to everyone who shared their photos with me!