



## Advice Sheet

# Hedgehogs in the garden

The hedgehog, scientific name, *Erinaceus europaeus*, is our most easily recognised garden mammal. The spines are specially adapted hairs, and an adult hedgehog has about 5,000 of them. Strong muscles beneath the skin enable the hedgehog to curl up at any hint of danger, the face and soft underside being completely covered by sharp spines.

Their natural habitat is woodland edges and hedgerows, but find the shrubberies and borders of our gardens a very good substitute. Hedgehogs are almost entirely nocturnal so they can be difficult to see, but can often be heard as they rustle in the undergrowth, occasionally snorting. Hedgehogs can cover up to 2 miles every night foraging for food, so each hog can visit many gardens. They are good climbers, so can scramble up fences and low walls. Hedgehogs have poor eyesight but an excellent sense of smell, and very good hearing.



Hedgehogs come out of hibernation in spring, about April but this varies with the weather. Soon after this the breeding season commences, the males seeking out females. Before mating the pair will circle each other for hours in a kind of courtship dance. Eventually the female will lower her spines to allow mating. The male takes no further part in raising the young.

The babies are born after 30 days, sometime between May and July. There are usually 4 or 5 in a litter. At birth the young hedgehogs have no spines, but very shortly soft white spines appear through the skin.



**Surviving Winter**

Hedgehogs hibernate through the winter, they do this because there is very little food available for them in winter. Before hibernating they eat as much as they can, to accumulate a reserve of body fat to see them through the winter. A hedgehog can lose a third of its body-weight during hibernation. Hibernation starts sometime between October and December. Each hedgehog finds a dry frost-free place to build its over-winter nest. During hibernation the heart rate reduces from 190 to 20 beats per minute, and the body temperature drops to 4 degrees C. In this state they get through their fat reserves very slowly. Hedgehogs can wake up several times during the winter, and may even move to a new nest.



## Encouraging hedgehogs in gardens

Anything that mimics their natural habitat of woodland edge and hedgerow bottoms is ideal. An uncultivated patch overgrown with brambles, creating a dense mass of vegetation, provides plenty of feeding and nesting opportunities.

Dense shrub borders also give plenty of cover, and are a good place to put a hedgehog house.

A bog garden can be home to many invertebrates and so be good foraging grounds.

Avoid using slug pellets or other pesticides, as these can poison hedgehogs.

## Making Homes for Hogs

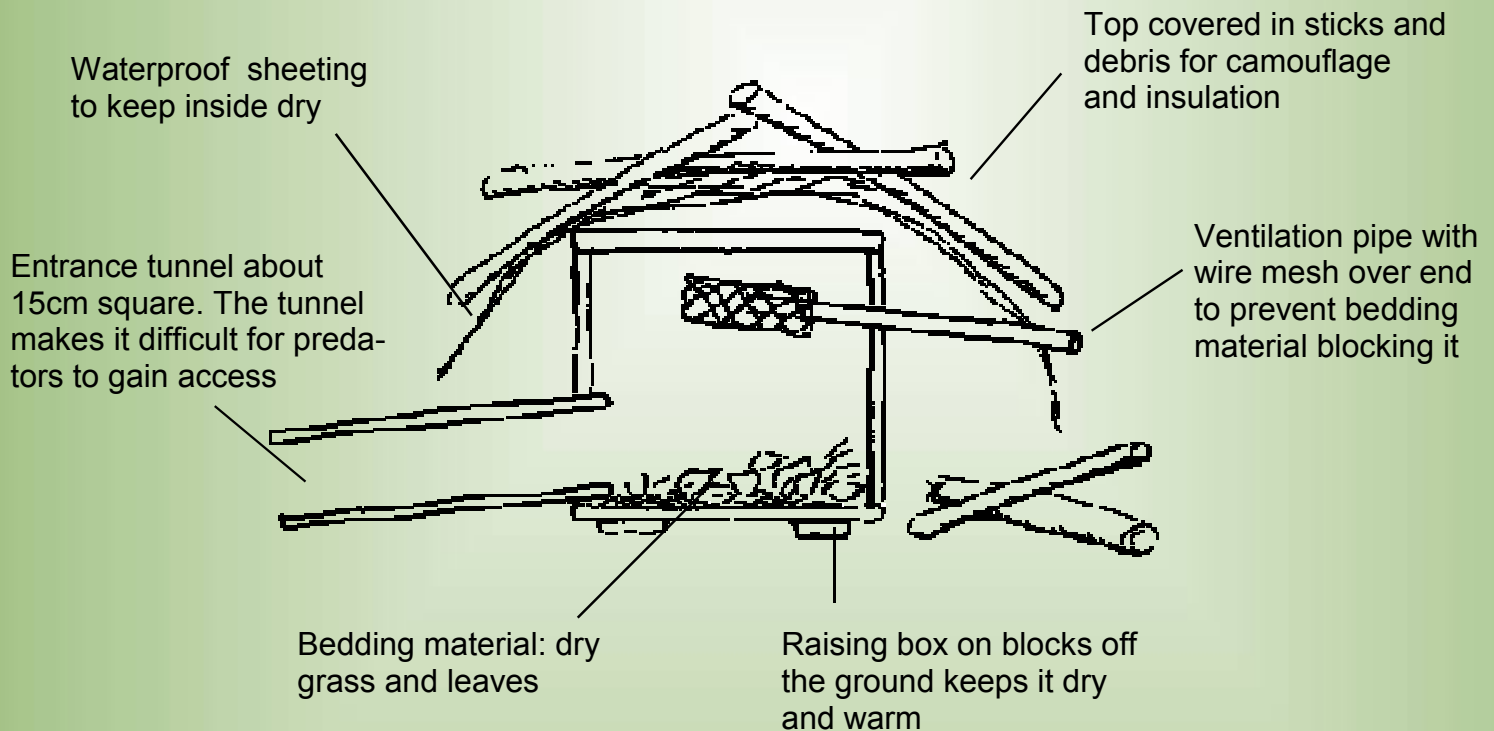
It is easy to build a secure shelter for hedgehogs to nest in. For a simple shelter create a tepee of logs and cover with a plastic sheet to keep the rain out, leaving a clear entrance.

If you are more ambitious, try building a wooden box about 35cm wide x 40cm long x 30 cm high. Make an entrance tunnel about 35 cm long with an opening at least 15cm x 15cm. Waterproof the top and drill drainage holes in the sides and bottom, and hide the box under logs and debris. Do not use wood preservatives.

In either case, put in some dry grass and leaves as bedding.

Resist the temptation to look inside your house between May and September – if there is a mother inside she may abandon her young.

### Hedgehog nest box



### Hedgehogs in Trouble

If you find a hedgehog out in the open during the day it may be in trouble. If it is busy and active it is probably OK, but if it is lethargic, not moving, or walking unsteadily it is sick or injured and needs help.

In the short term put the hog in a cardboard box, keep in a warm dark place, and offer water and cat or dog food. In the long term hedgehogs need expert care: contact the RSPCA or a Wildlife Hospital.



## Feeding Hogs

Hedgehogs like a varied diet. They are loved by gardeners for eating slugs, but they will also eat snails, earthworms, beetles, spiders, caterpillars, millipedes and woodlice. Occasionally they will eat birds eggs and carrion.

If you put out food regularly hedgehogs will learn when to come and feed. They will tolerate low-levels of lighting at the feeding area, so you can see your hogs.

Suitable foods for hedgehogs are canned dog or cat food, minced meat or scrambled egg. You can also buy special hedgehog food. Don't put out too much food – you want your hedgehog to have room left for a few slugs!

Don't give feed hedgehogs bread and milk, they cannot digest cows milk and it will give them a nasty stomach upset.

## Risks to Hedgehogs

Hedgehogs face many hazards in the modern world, some of which can easily be avoided.

- Cattle grids: although hedgehogs are good climbers they cannot scale the smooth vertical sides of the pit under a cattle grid. A ramp of wood or rock in one corner will enable them to escape.
- Ponds and swimming pools: hedgehogs can fall in and drown when trying to drink from garden ponds with steep sides all round. Gently sloping sides around part of the perimeter allow them to climb out. A shallow beach will let hedgehogs, as well as other animals and birds, drink easily.
- Slug pellets: as well as removing a food source they may be toxic to the hedgehog. If you must use pellets put them under a slate or flat stone, so animals and birds cannot get at the pellets or dead slugs.
- Cars: rolling into a spiky ball is no defence against car tyres. Keep your eyes open when driving at night.
- Strimmers: can cause horrific injuries. Check undergrowth carefully before strimming.
- Garden netting: hedgehogs can get tangled in netting, and if not found and released will starve.
- Rubbish: hedgehogs have been found caught up in tin cans and the plastic used to hold beer cans together. Dispose of all rubbish responsibly.
- Bonfires: every year hedgehogs get roasted when they decide a bonfire heap is an ideal nesting site. Check the base of your fire before lighting, or build the fire on a clear base just before lighting.



## Where can I get a hedgehog from?

Every year we get enquiries from conservation minded gardeners who would love to see hedgehogs in their garden. Unfortunately we cannot supply hedgehogs, and moving wild animals around rarely benefits the animal. If there are hedgehogs in your area, and your garden is hog-friendly, they will discover it for themselves sooner or later. Remember that hedgehogs are nocturnal and leave few signs – you may have already been visited without knowing it.

For more information contact Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Bickley hall Farm, Bickley, Malpas, SY14 8EF  
Phone 01948 820728  
Or visit our web site [www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/cheshire](http://www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/cheshire)