

## How To: Improve your garden for hedgehogs and other small mammals



Hedgehogs have been in sharp decline in recent years, down by over half in rural areas and a third in urban areas since 2000. We can help them by creating shelter, protecting their food sources, and making passageways between gardens so populations stay connected. Other small mammals such as mice and voles are important links in the food chain, as they are prey for owls and kestrels, so it's important to care for them in your garden too.



Hedgehog Photo: Andy Hartley



Wood mouse Photo: Andy Hartley



Shrew Photo: Soricida, via Wikimedia Commons

### Target species:

The hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus* and other small terrestrial garden mammals which include mice, voles and shrews. We cover bats in a separate [How to guide](#). Coincidentally rodent burrows create nesting sites for bumblebees and sometimes even for coal tits and can also be used by hibernating lizards and slow worms. Larger mammals such as rabbits, deer and badgers are best not encouraged into typical gardens, while foxes and squirrels will happily make use of gardens anyway whether you want them or not.

### How to do it

#### *Improving the habitat*

- Mice and voles benefit from wooded areas, uncut meadows and thick vegetation.
- All small mammals need cover to hide away during the day, and to screen them from owls, kestrels and other predators while foraging. A scrubby corner (you can call it a shrubbery) will be a great help, as will allowing some of your lawn to grow really long (cut once a year) so mice, voles and shrews can move through it under cover and which may also make space for them to make nests out of woven grass. See our [guide](#) on wildlife-friendly lawns.
- Hedgehogs hibernate from November to March buried under leaf piles often underneath bramble patches or logs. Create winter refuges for them around your garden by leaving autumn leaves in quiet corners and have stick piles with enough room for a hedgehog to crawl in underneath. You could also buy a hedgehog house and place it in a well sheltered area, but it's not really necessary unless your hedgehogs are being taken by foxes or badgers.
- It's important that hedgehogs can pass between gardens to search for food and mates. They have home ranges of up to 30 hectares, travelling up to 3km a night, and garden fences will stop them from accessing vital habitats. Discuss with your neighbours before creating openings (13cm

by 13cm is enough) at the bottom of the fence, or better still, remove fences and replace them with hedges. See our [How to guide](#) on hedges.

- Make sure any ponds or ground-level water features have a sloping edge or ramp so that any hedgehogs and other animals that fall in can climb out safely. Hedgehogs can easily become trapped in garden netting, so peg down edges tightly and remove it when you no longer need it. When using strimmers, walk over the area you intend to trim beforehand so any hedgehogs (or frogs) sheltering in the long grass or shrubby edges will be disturbed and can move out of harm's way.

### *Improving food availability*

- Hedgehogs are generally useful to the gardener, feeding on a variety of invertebrates, especially beetles, worms, caterpillars, slugs and millipedes. To encourage these creatures, consider creating log piles and areas of denser vegetation. See our guide on how to [build a log pile](#) here, and how to [encourage beetles](#) here.
- Despite the common belief that bread-and-milk should be put out for hedgehogs, cow's milk is too rich and bread is low in protein and both are hard to digest for them. Bread-and-milk will give them nasty diarrhoea. Only small amounts of supplementary food should be put out, in the form of dog or cat food, so that they don't become dependent on feeding.
- All small mammals benefit from seeds and other food dropped from bird feeders and bird tables, and of course squirrels are notorious for "stealing" food from bird feeders – but who can blame them?
- Garden fruits like apples, brambles and rose hips provide food for several mammal species. Planting fruiting trees and shrubs will be hugely beneficial for them as a food supply. Hazel, crab-apple, hawthorn, privet, guelder rose, wayfaring tree and spindle are all garden-worthy small to medium-size native shrubs or trees that provide flowers and fruit suited to small mammals, see our [hedge](#) and [tree](#) pages. [Ivy](#) is excellent as it provides good cover as well as late autumn and winter berries.
- Aim to have plants that fruit at different times throughout the year to ensure there is a steady supply of food. This is especially important for very small mammals, as even brief food shortages during periods of cold weather can be fatal.
- Shrews eat invertebrates such as worms, insects and larvae, snails, woodlice and spiders so providing habitat for these creatures in log-piles and leaf heaps will be helpful. Don't use insecticides!
- Bats eat flying insects, so grow flowering plants such as honeysuckle – and especially night-scented blooms such as stocks, evening primrose and nicotiana (tobacco plant) – to attract insects, which bats will feed on at night. Making a pond is a great way to increase the number of insects in your garden. Bats will drink from ponds too by skimming the surface. See our [guide](#) on improving your garden for bats for much more information.

### **How easy is it to do?**

Easy/moderate. It is all too easy to let some space in your garden turn 'wild' providing sheltered areas for hedgehogs and mammals. Creating a pond will be more of a challenge, so see our [How to guide](#) for more detail. Planting fruiting shrubs and trees is easy although it may require some careful choice.

### **How much will it cost?**

Gathering leaf litter and sticks to make shelter for hedgehogs can be done from materials already in your garden. Adding more plants to your garden to encourage insects should be relatively inexpensive - depending on the number and types of plants you choose. Shrubs for hedges such as hawthorn and privet can be bought as bare roots from suppliers for as little as £1 each. Avoiding insecticides is absolutely free! Hedgehog houses can be bought for anywhere around £20-£40 if you feel you need one.

### **How effective is it for the target species?**

Effective – a little effort to harbour more insects in your garden can make all the difference when it comes to providing a good food source for endangered mammals such as hedgehogs and bats. Having a diverse range of habitats in your garden will cater for a wide range of animals and help support a variety of different wildlife.

### **Golden rules – what the science tells us**

- Hedgehogs are at risk of getting poisoned by slug pellets from eating poisoned slugs, so make sure you don't use these in your garden.
- A well-connected habitat is important for the hedgehog's survival – make sure they can cross between neighbouring gardens through gaps in fences.
- Don't use insecticides in your garden, as this will eliminate a vital food source for many mammal species – instead let the animals do the work for you.

### **What to look for?**

- No small mammals (except squirrels) are obvious in your garden because they are both shy and nocturnal.
- Finger-sized shiny black droppings on your lawn, often containing glistening beetle parts, means there is a hedgehog present in your garden or neighbourhood.
- You are likely to hear hedgehogs grunting and snuffling and if you're lucky you might also see them roaming your garden at dusk and dawn in search of food.
- Bats are easily seen at dusk, flying about to catch insects.

### **Things to be aware of**

- Anything you put out for hedgehogs or mice will also be much appreciated by rats. These rather impressive rodents can live quite comfortably in your garden without causing much problem (they are brilliant at turning over a compost heap), but many people (probably including your neighbours) really hate them.
- Be careful not to put out too much food for visiting mammals in your garden - it's important that they don't become heavily reliant on human feeding.
- Make sure any wood you use for log piles or bat boxes is completely free of chemical treatments.

### **Further information**

*Hedgehogs and their conservation:*

British Hedgehog Preservation Society [website](http://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk/) [www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk/](http://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk/)

Hedgehog Street [website](http://www.hedgehogstreet.org/) [www.hedgehogstreet.org/](http://www.hedgehogstreet.org/)

Wildlife Trusts [page](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/what-do-if-you-find-wild-animal/help-hedgehog) if you find a hedgehog [www.wildlifetrusts.org/what-do-if-you-find-wild-animal/help-hedgehog](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/what-do-if-you-find-wild-animal/help-hedgehog)

*On our website*

Insectivores [page](http://www.wlgf.org/insectivores.html) [www.wlgf.org/insectivores.html](http://www.wlgf.org/insectivores.html)

Rodents [page](http://www.wlgf.org/insectivores.html) [www.wlgf.org/insectivores.html](http://www.wlgf.org/insectivores.html)

Bats [page](http://www.wlgf.org/mammals_bats.html) [www.wlgf.org/mammals\\_bats.html](http://www.wlgf.org/mammals_bats.html)

Natural England's [booklet](http://www.wlgf.org/ne24mammals.pdf) on gardening for mammals <http://www.wlgf.org/ne24mammals.pdf>

How to: Improve your garden for [bats](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_bats.pdf) [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_bats.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_bats.pdf)

How to: [Plan](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plan_garden.pdf) a wildlife friendly garden [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_plan\\_garden.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plan_garden.pdf)

How to: Create and maintain a [pond](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_ponds.pdf) for wildlife [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_ponds.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_ponds.pdf)

How to: Create and maintain [hedges](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_hedges.pdf) [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_hedges.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_hedges.pdf)

How to: Create [habitat piles](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_habitat_piles.pdf) [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_habitat\\_piles.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_habitat_piles.pdf)

How to: Improve your garden for [beetles](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_beetles.pdf) [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_beetles.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_beetles.pdf)

How to: Create a wildlife-friendly [lawn](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_improve_lawn.pdf) [http://www.wlgf.org/ht\\_improve\\_lawn.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_improve_lawn.pdf)

Plants for [hedges](http://www.wlgf.org/hedge_plants.html) [www.wlgf.org/hedge\\_plants.html](http://www.wlgf.org/hedge_plants.html)

Native [trees](http://www.wlgf.org/trees_shrubs.html) for gardens [www.wlgf.org/trees\\_shrubs.html](http://www.wlgf.org/trees_shrubs.html)

Our page on [ivy](http://www.wlgf.org/ivy.html) [www.wlgf.org/ivy.html](http://www.wlgf.org/ivy.html)