



Supplementary feeding of red squirrels

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Squirrels may visit your garden for a number of reasons: to look for materials such as moss for nest lining or to drink from your garden pond— but the biggest attraction is food!



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1. Why provide supplementary feeding for red squirrels?

Starvation, competition from grey squirrels, disease, road casualties and habitat loss have all contributed to making the red squirrel a vulnerable species. Feeding red squirrels in your garden may provide them with a vital source of food and nutrients, particularly in the summer when wild food is hard to come by. What's more, watching red squirrels feed is an entertaining, satisfying and often amusing sight!

2. What should I feed them?

Squirrels will quite happily pillage the nuts and seeds from your garden. It is best to feed a variety of different foods, similar to those that the squirrel might encounter in the wild, with a few added extras in small amounts.

The most suitable foods for red squirrels are **hazelnuts** in their shells, **wheat, unsalted peanuts** and **sunflower seeds**. A suitable mix is:

- 4 parts peanuts
- 1 part sunflower seeds
- 1 part whole maize

Beech nuts, sweet chestnuts and **pine nuts** are also excellent if you can afford them.

Red squirrels may suffer from calcium deficiency if eating a diet rich in peanuts or sunflower seed, so try to provide an alternative calcium source such as **'Collo-Cal D'** added to a dish of drinking water, **bone meal** added to the dry feed mix, or a **cuttlefish bone** or **antler** placed near to the feeder. This is especially valuable during summer for juvenile and female squirrels.

Apples and **carrots** can also reduce the chances of calcium deficiency occurring, and are an important part of the food you provide.

3. How often should I feed squirrels?

Sometimes red squirrels can become dependent on supplementary food. Try to avoid feeding them in such amounts that they don't need to look elsewhere! It's best to feed **small amounts every 3 or 4 days**. This way, you can provide enough to help keep the squirrels alive until autumn, but you will not encourage them into bad habits.

In the wild, red squirrels feed on shoots and flowers in spring, and nuts, seeds from cones and fruits in autumn and winter. The critical period to feed them is therefore during the summer months before fruits, conifer seed and nuts are ripe, when their natural food is in short supply. In autumn when plenty of natural food is available, the squirrels may stop coming to your garden, but they will probably return in the winter. Continued feeding throughout the winter will also provide an additional boost to the squirrels in your area.

4. Things to watch out for

- Avoid sweet, dried foods such as raisins and sultanas, as these can cause calcium deficiency.
- Cats account for a high number of fatalities in gardens visited by squirrels. Make sure that food isn't scattered on the ground but is placed as high as possible – a good feeder location is against a wall or tree so that the squirrel doesn't have to cross open ground, and can escape easily.
- Make sure that the feeder and food are kept as clean as possible. Monthly scrubbing of feeders with detergent and changing any leftover feed before it goes mouldy can help to achieve this. Spray with a pet-safe or bird-safe disinfectant (obtainable from pet supplies or the RSPB) before refilling with food.
- Provide a source of water if this is not readily available.

5. What should I do if grey squirrels come to my garden?

If grey squirrels start appearing in your garden for the first time, please contact your local squirrel group and/or report your sighting as scottishsquirrels.org.uk.

You should not feed grey squirrels, so you may need to stop feeding altogether. Special feeders that provide food for red squirrels but prevent access to grey squirrels can help to tip the balance in favour of red squirrels. Make sure that food spillage is not feeding grey squirrels inadvertently.

If you have wild birds which rely on your food supply and can't stop feeding them, try to avoid laying feed down in the same place every day, and clean feeders regularly to minimise the risk of spreading disease.

6. Suppliers

Most suitable foods are available from online suppliers, garden centres, farm suppliers, supermarkets and health food shops. Pet food shops may also supply mixtures containing some or all of the recommended foods, sold for pets such as chipmunks.

About Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels is supporting local communities to take action to ensure red squirrels continue to be a part of Scotland's special native wildlife. Together we are working to protect Scotland's core red squirrel populations threatened by the spread of the non-native grey squirrel. The project is led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland, RSPB Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates and Red Squirrel Survival Trust.

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For more information visit scottishsquirrels.org.uk.

