

## Supplementary feeding of red squirrels

Red squirrels may visit your garden to look for nesting materials or to drink from your garden pond, but the biggest attraction is food!



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### 1. Why provide food red squirrels?

Competition from grey squirrels, disease, road casualties and habitat loss have all contributed to the decline of red squirrels in Scotland. 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 feeding can be a very rewarding and often amusing experience!

### 2. What should I feed them?

It's best to feed a variety of different foods, similar to what the squirrel might encounter in the wild.

The most suitable foods for red squirrels are **hazelnuts** in their shells, **unsalted peanuts** and **sunflower seeds**. A suitable mix is 4 parts peanuts, 1 part sunflower seeds.

**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 provide a source of calcium. However, avoid sweet dried foods such as raisins and sultanas as these can cause calcium deficiency.

### 3. How should I feed them?

Squirrels will often feed from bird feeders and tables, or you could install a squirrel feeder box. These are available to buy from some wildlife food suppliers, or you can build your own. Some local community groups with woodworking facilities, such as the Men's Sheds, may also be able to help.



Cats account for a high number of fatalities in gardens visited by squirrels. Make sure that **food 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. A sheltered area with tree cover will also prevent squirrels being predated by birds of prey.

If you live on or near a busy road, please consider whether your feeders are encouraging squirrels to cross over, increasing the risk of road fatalities. You may help more by not feeding at all!

To keep squirrels and other garden wildlife healthy, make sure your **feeders are kept as clean as possible**. Regular (e.g. monthly) scrubbing 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. If you live in an area with high risk of squirrelpox (see Section 5), use an anti-viral disinfectant such as Virkon™ S.

### 4. How often?

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 provide a helping hand when natural food is less abundant, but you will not encourage them into bad habits.

In the wild, red squirrels feed on shoots and flowers in spring, and nuts, fruits and seeds from cones in autumn and winter. The critical period to feed them is therefore during the **summer months** before nuts, fruits and conifer seeds 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.

## 5. Grey squirrels and squirrelpox

If grey squirrels start appearing in your garden for the first time, please report your sighting(s) online at [scottishsquirrels.org.uk](http://scottishsquirrels.org.uk).

You should not feed grey squirrels, so you may need to stop feeding wildlife altogether.

If you live in a part of the country where both red and grey squirrels are present, particularly in the south of Scotland (Dumfries & Galloway and the Scottish Borders), there is a higher risk of squirrelpox infection. Squirrelpox is a virus that is carried by grey squirrels without causing them harm, but is deadly to red squirrels. A squirrelpox outbreak can wipe out a local red squirrel population within a matter of weeks. Feeders increase the risk of squirrelpox infections because they can bring both species into closer contact with one another.

As squirrelpox is a viral infection, standard or anti-bacterial detergents will not prevent the spread of the disease. Instead you can help prevent the spread of squirrelpox by using an anti-viral disinfectant such as Virkon™ S, which is available to purchase online in tablet and powder form. Always read the safety instructions carefully before using.

*Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels - Developing Community Action is a project to implement a sustainable programme of red squirrel protection capable of securing the long-term survival of core red squirrel populations across Scotland. It is a five-year project to recruit and equip communities to take on a vital role in the long-term protection of red squirrels in key areas across the country. It is a partnership project between Scottish Wildlife Trust, Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland, RSPB Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates and Red Squirrel Survival Trust.*

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