Supplementary Feeding of Red Squirrels

Updated: September 2026

Like all animals, red squirrels instinctively know what they need to maintain a healthy and balanced diet. In most cases, if you have red squirrels in your area then there must be a ready supply of natural food nearby!

However, many people like to give red squirrels a helping hand, and they are always a joy to watch in our gardens!

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1. Should you 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 supplementary source of food and nutrients, particularly when wild food is hard to come by. What's more, watching red squirrels feeding can be a very rewarding and often amusing experience!

There are risks to feeding any wildlife in your garden. Over-feeding can create an unhealthy reliance on the food, which is an issue if the food supply suddenly stops, or is not providing all the nutrients needed. We recommend only putting out a small amount of food, or only at certain times of year.

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.

Hazelnuts in their shells, beech nuts, sweet chestnuts and **pine nuts** are excellent as they most closely mimic the foods red squirrels would come across naturally.

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.

Peanuts are very commonly used in garden feeders and are widely available in shops with other bird food seed mixes and fat balls. Red squirrels will eat these, but studies have shown that diets made up mostly of peanuts can lead to calcium deficiency and weakening jaws. Therefore, **we would advise not putting out peanuts for squirrels**, or making sure there is a variety of other foods available if you do have peanuts in your feeders. We would also recommend you avoid seed mixes designed for birds, including sunflower seeds, as these will not offer squirrels all the nutrients they need. See Section 5 for how to safely feed birds in your garden.

Alternative calcium sources include a **cuttlefish bone** or **antler** placed near to the feeder. This is especially valuable during summer for juvenile and female squirrels.

A source of **clean water**, such as a pond, is a great addition to your garden for all wildlife, and having red squirrels visit for a drink is just as special as stopping by for a snack!

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3. How should I feed them?

Squirrel feeder boxes with flip-top lids 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. A good rule of thumb is to fill no more than one third of the feeder box with food. This means there won't be leftover food going mouldy, and some red squirrels like to sit inside the box while they eat!

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**. The RSPB recommends cleaning bird feeders once a week, and regular scrubbing with detergent and changing any leftover feed before it goes mouldy will help keep all wildlife feeding stations as hygienic as possible. You should clean them with a disinfectant suitable to kill micro-bacteria, such as by Safe4, before refilling with food.

If you live in an area with high risk of squirrelpox (see Section 6), use a disinfectant suitable to kill micro-bacteria, such as by Safe4. Scrape old or **mouldy food into a bin** rather than tipping it onto the ground – squirrels are susceptible to Adenovirus, which can be brought on by mouldy food.

We would advise people **not to hand-feed squirrels** or any wildlife, due to the risk of spreading diseases and parasites. It is also important to recognise and respect wild animals are not pets and should not be tamed.

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. 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. Squirrel feeding and bird feeding

The RSPB has issued **new guidance on bird feeding**, which advises no peanuts or seeds to be put out for birds between 1 May and 31 October. We support this guidance, and would urge you not to have peanuts or seeds available in your gardens for birds during this period, and recommend that **only flip top feeders** (which limit access by birds to nuts and seeds provided for squirrels) are used if you are putting out food for squirrels.

6. Grey squirrels and squirrelpox

If you live in an area where red squirrels are present, and grey squirrels begin visiting your garden, it is advised that you **stop feeding immediately**.

If grey squirrels start appearing in your garden, please report your sighting(s) online at **scottishsquirrels.org.uk/squirrel-sightings/**

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 a disinfectant suitable to kill micro-bacteria, such as by Safe4.** DEFRA approved Safe4 products are available online.