

# Squirrels

GWF267

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Squirrels are not generally a garden pest. However, in some gardens, especially near woodland, they can cause serious damage to trees, shrubs and bulbs.

**Q** Which squirrels turn up in gardens?

**A** Although grey squirrels are commonly found in gardens, red squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*) are very rare and have become restricted to just a few areas of Britain. This decline is partly due to the superior adaptability of the greys (*Sciurus carolinensis*). Red squirrels seldom do much harm, though they can damage trees. The usually charming grey squirrel can sometimes be troublesome in houses and gardens.

**Q** What damage do they do?

**A** In gardens, grey squirrels gnaw bark from trunks and boughs of trees. They can destroy so much bark that branches and even trunks are girdled and the tree or branch dies. Even if the tree is not killed, the damage can let wood-rotting fungi into the tree. Squirrels can also strip blossom buds from trees and shrubs in the spring. In autumn, they frequently eat newly planted bulbs. Fruit and nuts are taken too, especially strawberries, raspberries, walnuts and cobnuts. They are notorious raiders of bird-feeding equipment.

**Q** Are grey squirrels a serious pest?

**A** They are usually only seriously destructive where gardens are near parks or woods. However, where they do misbehave, the local damage can be very serious. Often they are attracted to gardens by free meals in the form of food on bird tables, dustbins or food put out especially for them.

More seriously, they move on from the garden to colonise loft spaces, where they nest in preference to their natural tree nests called dreys. Here they make lots of noise and often chew cables, timbers, roofing felt and pipes, with potentially disastrous consequences.

**Q** Tell me more about them.

**A** Grey squirrels were introduced into the UK from North America about 100 years ago and have largely displaced the native red squirrel, which is now only found in a few areas of coniferous woodland.

They feed mainly on vegetable foods, such as nuts, fruit and seeds, but they sometimes raid birds' nests. They are active only in daylight, living in areas where there are plenty of trees and open ground. They build nests high in

trees. Here they produce two litters a year, in spring and summer. Each litter consists of three or four young.

**Q** How do I stop squirrels stealing bird food?

**A** You'll need to use a squirrel-proof feeder that excludes them. You can make your own by enclosing a nut-filled feeder inside a pair of hanging baskets wired together. The mesh size should be less than 50mm.

**Q** What else can I do about them?

**A** You can try protecting plants from squirrels. If fruit is being attacked, enclosing the plants in a wire-netting fruit cage can protect them (plastic is unlikely to deter squirrels for long). Use 25mm square or hexagonal mesh, and bury the edges at least 15cm deep. Aim to net before the fruit is ripe. Fortunately, squirrels are not great burrowers, so you don't need to bury the edge of the wire very deeply. Wire netting can also be used to protect buried bulbs - a favourite meal of squirrels. Gorse clippings buried with the bulbs are said to deter squirrels from eating them. Protect tree stems with wire or spiral tree guards.

Once they have developed a taste for these forbidden fruits, however, squirrels tend not to give up until they have found a way through the netting. They are also likely to find their way through netting designed to keep them out of lofts. The only way to solve the problem is to remove them.

### Q How do I get rid of them?

**A** Shooting grey squirrels in gardens is potentially dangerous, and we don't advise it. Similarly, poisoning carries risk to wildlife and pets, and only qualified experts can do it. Look in your

Yellow Pages for a pest-control company for advice.

Trapping grey squirrels yourself is an option. You are obliged by law to kill any captured squirrels, and to do this humanely. Both trapping and humanely killing squirrels require considerable skill.

If you wish to do your own trapping and live in a rural area, contact the Forestry Commission for details of methods and traps. If you live in an urban area, advice can be obtained from your local Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) office.

### Forestry Commission GB and Scotland

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Edinburgh  
EH12 7AT

General enquiries: 0131 334 0303

**Defra Helpline 08459 33 55 77**

### Defra postal enquiries

Customer Contact Unit

Eastbury House

30-34 Albert Embankment

London SE1 7TL

### Defra Library Enquiry Desk

Lower Ground Floor, Ergon House

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