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# Home for a Hedgehog

*Sheltering an adorable little friend.*

*By Mari Zipes Wallace*



*nuffle, grunt, puff, squeak.*

That's the sound of a British hedgehog eating food at night. I know because my husband puts out special hedgehog goodies—that he bought at the local pet shop—right below our bedroom window. If we're patient, we can hear appreciative noises as the little animal guzzles away.

Born and raised in the U.S., I didn't know about hedgehogs until I moved to England. Although the delightful creatures were immortalized by Beatrix Potter in *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle*, I always thought hedgehogs were the product of her vivid imagination. I never dreamed they were *real*.

They are. The hedgehog is a small creature, only about ten inches long and weighing a little over four pounds. It reminds me of the American porcupine (to which, surprisingly, it is not related) in that it has pointed quills that erect when it's threatened. The hedgehog's peculiar name dates back to around 1450 and comes from its traditional habitat of hedgerows.

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bed of leaves.*

Sadly, hedgerows are in decline in the UK, and so are hedgehog numbers. Nocturnal creatures, hedgehogs are also often hit by cars whizzing down country lanes at night. In the 1950s, there were some 36 million in the United Kingdom; now there are fewer

than a million. Hedgehog sanctuaries have sprung up all over the British Isles as people have become more aware of the delightful little creatures. For us gardeners, they are a real godsend: Their favorite food is slugs.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY P. SAVAGE



ow that I've introduced you to the hedgehog, I shall get on with my story.

Back in my youth, we had a huge magnolia tree that I loved. In late March, its large, waxy petals would transform the tree into a welcome herald of Spring. When my English husband and I moved to our present house in Liphook, Hampshire, I was delighted to inherit a stately saucer magnolia (*Magnolia soulangeana*, to be precise)—beautiful in its own right, but also a reminder of home and my mother's well-tended garden.



Alan was not as thrilled with our magnolia as I was. This voluptuous tree effectively blocked outdoor light from our dining room. "Think of how light and airy our dining room would be without that tree," my husband reasoned. "If we chop it down, we could always buy another one."

My eyes flashed and I rose indignantly to my full five feet and one-half inch. "No way!" I proclaimed. "It takes at least 10 years for a magnolia to mature. We could be dead by then!"

Alan, six feet tall, laughed at my threatening body language. "OK! OK!" he conceded. "But you have got to let me have it trimmed." In the spirit of compromise, we hired a local tree surgeon, who did a beautiful job of opening up the precious magnolia.

In early October, leaves from the array of trees in our yard started to fall on our lawn and flowerbeds. The magnolia, in particular, shed an abundance of large, leathery fronds. We made several trips to the recycling center with bags of dead leaves.

Winter set in and my gardening days petered out. Then came February and the arrival of the snowdrops. This cheery sight prompted me to head out to inspect our yard. One thing was certain. The leaves which had continued to fall during the Winter months had to go. The flowerbeds needed to breathe.

A small mound of leaves was wedged between the magnolia's trunk and an adjacent evergreen shrub. Wearing waterproof gloves and using a garden kneeler, I knelt down to scoop up the wet, slimy leaves. As I gathered them up, I felt something move!

Recoiling, I dropped the bundle. Then chastising myself for being such a wimp, I took a closer look. There, curled up tightly in a ball, was a hibernating hedgehog, slightly aroused by my disturbance. "I'm so sorry!" I whispered, quickly returning him to his cozy bed of leaves. "Please go back to sleep and wake up whenever you're ready!" Fortunately, no one was there to hear this one-sided conversation.

When Alan came home that evening, I regaled him with my Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle tale. "I guess the magnolia has earned a permanent place in our garden," he said. "To tell the truth, I rather like the idea of our garden being a B&B for hedgehogs." The next morning, Alan went off to the pet store to lay in a fresh supply of, yes, hedgehog food.

The magnolia we saved had provided the hedgehog with a bed. We provide it with breakfast. And it provides us with charm and entertainment.

I couldn't think of a better arrangement. ❖