

Autumn is here. The days are getting shorter, the leaves are carpeting our paths, and the heating has already triggered the thermostat and come on. Every season brings its own little wonders but also challenges, and in Autumn one challenge is not for us as humans but our smaller more prickly friends, hedgehogs.

Hedgehogs carry a bewildering array of stereotypes and legends throughout the world. In Lithuanian and Latvian legend the hedgehog helped God create the size of the Earth and in the Balkans it is believed that they saved the world's inhabitants from starvation. Belarusian folklore has it that the wise hedgehog is able to find a magic plant that leads to treasure whereas German fairy tales describe how the hedgehog uses its cunning to outrace a hare.

Since Roman times UK folk believed hedgehogs were hard-working nonsense animals, only losing favour when some English villagers accused them of sucking milk out of cows' udders. In reality hedgehogs are lactose-intolerant.

It was great to invite Queen's Brian May and the Amazing Grace team to Ditton Infants to give a talk about the hedgehog. He spoke about the importance of protecting our wild hedgehogs and the many reasons why it is beneficial for us all to do so. Sadly, their population has declined from 30 million in the 1970s to around 1 million now - at that rate they could be extinct by 2025! Which is why we all have to do our bit to save them and the infants are the ones we are saving them from.

So please check your leaf piles, bonfires and under sheds as they prepare for hibernation. Please don't use slug pellets or feed them bread and milk. They won't hurt your pets and are good in general for our garden's eco-systems. It only takes a moment to look up what you can do to save the hedgehog but that minute will last a lifetime.