Formica rufa

Red Wood Ant | Care Sheet

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KEEPING LEVEL	ORIGIN	NEST TEMPERATURE	NEST HUMIDITY	WORKERS BEFORE NEST
Advanced	UK & Europe	22–25°C	50–60%	10+

🐜 At a glance

Origin	🇬🇧 UK native woodland ant; found across Europe and Russia
Keeping level	Advanced — fast, bold and hungry; best for keepers with some experience. No sting, but they bite and spray formic acid
Queen	10–12mm, reddish-brown with a black head and abdomen; lives around 10–15 years
Workers	4–10mm, very polymorphic
Founding	Social parasite — the queen needs host workers of another Formica species
Colony form	Starts with one queen; wild colonies can hold dozens of queens and hundreds of thousands of workers
Nest temperature	22–25°C (outworld up to 28°C by day, about 18°C at night)
Nest humidity	50–60% — never higher, or the setup goes mouldy
Workers before moving into a nest	10+
Winter	Natural winter rest — see below

📖 About this species

The famous wood ant that builds the big needle mounds in British woodland. Red wood ants are fast, fearless and always on the move, and a growing colony has a huge appetite. We recommend a natural, well-ventilated setup, tall enough for them, as these ants spray formic acid. In captivity a suitable setup can house up to around 1,000 workers for a few years. 🌿 In our natural eco ant farm no connection is needed: remove the cotton stopper and place the test tube inside, then water the substrate sparingly with distilled or purified water, 1 to 3ml at a time, waiting at least a day in between.

📦 When your ants arrive

- ⚠️ **MOST IMPORTANT:** leave the parcel completely unopened, exactly as it arrived, at room temperature for **5 hours**. The ants must adjust to your home’s temperature gradually — abrupt temperature changes make ants seriously unwell.
- After the 5 hours, check the queen is safe and sound, then leave the colony in its original packaging (test tube still in its tin foil and wrapping) in a quiet spot — in daylight, never direct sunlight — away from vibration and daily household activity.
- 😴 Give the colony **4 to 5 days** of complete rest. The ants were fed before dispatch and need nothing from you during this time. Assemble and water the nest while you wait.
- Still workers or a motionless queen after delivery are almost always delivery stress. Check the antennae: moving antennae means she is fine. Almost all recover within 4 to 5 days (a little longer for bigger queens).
- 👑 A queen on her own cannot start a colony alone: in nature she takes over a nest of another Formica species (such as *Formica fusca*) and the host workers raise her first brood. Choose a colony that already has workers.

🏠 Moving into the ant farm

- Keep the colony in its test tube until it has **at least 10 workers**. Moved earlier, the workers often abandon the queen in the larger space, which can lead to colony failure.
- Connect the test tube to the nest with the delivery tin foil still on and leave it for 14 days. Then slide the foil back about 1mm every day until the tube is fully exposed to daylight.
- If the ants have not moved in 2 days after the tube is fully exposed, wrap the foil back on, wait another fortnight and repeat the whole process — patience is the key. Moving in happens on the ants' own time: anywhere from a couple of days to 6 months.
- The red filter and black cover stay on the nest at all times — it is pitch dark inside. The black cover can come off once a day for 2 to 3 minutes (ideally at night); the red filter once a week for 2 to 3 minutes.
- ☀️ Place the ant farm in normal daylight, never direct sunlight (the sun can overheat a nest within minutes). Avoid windows, radiators and heaters, vibrating surfaces, speakers and TVs, strong smells such as the kitchen, and busy walkways. Keep a steady room temperature.

🍯 Feeding

- 🍯 Sugars for worker energy: our organic ant honey (lab-tested at 81% carbohydrate) or Best Ants UK Ant Nectar (90% dextrose, an even richer energy source) — never sugar water or home-made mixes.
- 🥩 Protein for the queen and brood: Best Ants UK Protein Jelly or NextSwarm Cricket Mash. Keep protein jelly in the fridge at all times once opened. Wood ants are big hunters and growing colonies need plenty of protein.
- Feed twice a week, small amounts, in the outworld only. Remove leftovers after 2 days to prevent mould.
- 🦗 Live food (mealworms, crickets, locusts) is only for established colonies, never small ones. All bought live food carries tiny mites that can destroy a colony, so always scald it first: hold it with tweezers in just-boiled water (no longer bubbling) for 10 to 15 seconds, then chop it in half and serve on a small tin foil tray.

💧 Watering the nest

- 💧 Use **distilled or purified water only** — never tap, rainwater or bottled mineral water, even boiled. They carry minerals and microbes that turn a nest green with mould. A litre of distilled water costs a few pounds and lasts over a year.
- Water the nest with the pipette provided: pour slowly, a few drops at a time, through the watering hole, and stop as soon as 1 or 2 drops appear inside the nest — that is how you know it is done correctly. More than that is too much.
- Once a week is usually right — slightly more in summer, less in winter. Never water the outworld.

🌡️ Temperature and winter

- Hibernation is NOT a must in captivity. At room temperature (17–26°C) the colony simply slows down naturally over winter — development continues at roughly half the summer rate at 20–26°C, and roughly a third at around 15°C. The biological clock cannot be tricked.
- ❄️ Full hibernation (development stops completely) happens at a steady 10°C from roughly 1 December to the end of March, with fresh water only and no food. A steady 10°C is only possible in a specialised hibernation unit or a wine cooler with precise temperature control. If you cannot keep that, do not hibernate — leave the colony at room temperature. Never use a fridge, shed or garage.
- Never hibernate a first-year queen, and always cool down and warm up gradually.

🤩 Did you know?

- A single wild mound can be home to hundreds of thousands of workers, and neighbouring mounds can link up into huge networks.
- Some birds, such as jays, sit on wood ant nests and let the ants spray formic acid through their feathers — a behaviour called "anting", thought to help clean off parasites.

⭐ Golden rules | Never break these

- 🚫 Never put ants in a fridge, and never expose them to abrupt temperature changes. Cold does not kill a colony instantly — the ants get sick and die over the following days.
- 🚫 Never use gel ant farms, Ytong or concrete nests, or DIY nests.
- 🚫 Never use tap, rain or mineral water, even boiled.
- 🚫 Never move a colony into a nest too early, and never tip or shake ants out of their tube.
- 🚫 Never disturb the colony with tapping or handling — vibration stresses the queen and she can stop laying or eat her eggs.
- ☀️ Never keep the farm in the dark: ants need daylight for their circadian rhythm. Daylight yes — direct sunlight never.
- 💨 Formica workers spray formic acid when disturbed. Harmless to you, but in a stuffy, sealed setup it builds up and can harm the colony — keep the setup well ventilated and never block the air holes.

🛒 Recommended for this species

- Formica rufa colonies
- Natural Eco Ant Farm
- Natural Eco Ant Farm Large
- PTFE Escape Barrier
- Protein Jelly
- Cricket Mash
- Organic Honey
- Ant Nectar

📚 These care notes cover the essentials only. Please read the full ant farm setup guide and our Formica rufa care guide from A to Z. Questions? Message us through our contact form and we will be happy to help. 💚

Written and reviewed by the Best Ants UK team, keeping ants since 1997.