Messor barbarus

Harvester Ant | Care Sheet

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KEEPING LEVEL	ORIGIN	NEST TEMPERATURE	NEST HUMIDITY	WORKERS BEFORE NEST
Beginner	Spain & Portugal	20–26°C	65–75%	10+

🐜 At a glance

Origin	🇪🇸 Southern Europe (Spain and Portugal)
Keeping level	Beginner — one of the very best species to start with. No sting (but majors have strong mandibles and can pinch)
Queen	15–18mm, black — a giant; queens live around 20 years
Workers	3–14mm in three sizes: minors, majors and supermajors with massive mandibles
Colony form	Single queen (monogyne)
Nest temperature	20–26°C
Nest humidity	65–75%, with a dry area for the seed store
Workers before moving into a nest	10+
Winter	No hibernation needed — see below

🐜 Just got your queen? Start with our first ant colony guide, what to do from the day she arrives.

📖 About this species

The harvester ant is spectacular to keep: a giant queen, workers in three sizes including supermajors, and non-stop foraging once the colony is established. Messor barbarus live mainly on seeds, which they store in dry chambers and mill into “ant bread”. From a founding queen, expect about a year to reach a queen with around 30 workers — then growth accelerates fast.

📦 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).
- Do not remove the black divider inside the test tube (between the two cotton stoppers) — it keeps the ants safe in transit. It has a hole, and the queen and all workers pass through it without any issue.
- 👑 A queen on her own: keep her test tube wrapped in its tin foil, undisturbed, and feed her once a week — a tiny drop of protein jelly, about half a grain of rice, on a small flat piece of tin foil placed inside the tube next to the dry cotton stopper. In our experience a fed queen is stronger and her brood develops about 30% faster.

🏠 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. A queen bought on her own, with no workers yet, needs a little longer: she stays in her test tube until she has 15+ workers.
- 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

- 🌾 Seeds are the main diet: use our mite-free harvester seed mix. About 15 seeds per fortnight is right for a colony of around 30 ants — no more, no less. Place seeds in the outworld on a dry surface or tin foil tray, never on the substrate: damp seeds germinate, and sprouted seeds are harmful to the colony.
- 🥩 Protein Jelly once a week — for example every Monday. Keep it in the fridge at all times once opened.
- 🍯 Organic ant honey once a week — for example every Thursday. Our honey is lab-tested at 81% carbohydrate; Best Ants UK Ant Nectar (90% dextrose) is an even richer alternative. Never sugar water.
- Feed in the outworld only, and remove leftovers after 2 days.
- 💧 Harvester ants must never have open water — use a watering test tube (test tube station), not a water dispenser.

💧 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, heating and winter

- Normal room temperature of 20–22°C suits Messor barbarus over winter; at around 24°C development slows only slightly and they keep thriving.
- Harvester ants do not need hibernation. Never let them drop below 15°C — in our experience colder spells can cost the queen her fertility and her life. We keep ours at 17°C or above at all times.
- 🔥 A heat mat is optional — winter only, and only if the room falls below 15°C (17°C to be safe). From the end of September onward, use the Advanced Heating System Small 4W warming no more than a quarter of the nest, on the side opposite the water inlet, so the ants can choose their temperature.
- Our oldest Messor barbarus queen was collected in Spain in 2007 and turned 19 in 2026 — she has lived at office room temperature all year round her whole life, never machine-hibernated.

⭐ 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.

🛒 Recommended for this species

- Messor barbarus colonies
- Angie Ant Farm Starter Kit
- Harvester Seed Mix
- Protein Jelly
- Organic Honey
- Advanced Heating System 4W

📚 These care notes cover the essentials only. Please read the full ant farm setup guide and our Messor barbarus 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.