Messor cephalotes

Giant African Harvester Ant | Care Sheet

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KEEPING LEVEL	ORIGIN	NEST TEMPERATURE	NEST HUMIDITY	WORKERS BEFORE NEST
Advanced	East Africa	24–28°C	60–70%	10+

🐜 At a glance

Origin	🌍 East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania)
Keeping level	Advanced — elevated food and climate needs. No sting (majors can pinch)
Queen	23–25mm, shiny reddish — one of the biggest harvester queens in the world; lives up to 25 years
Workers	5–18mm, shiny reddish, minors, medias and huge majors
Founding	Claustral — the queen raises her first workers alone
Colony form	Single queen (monogyne); up to 10,000 workers; colonies can live up to 27 years
Nest temperature	24–28°C (outworld 24–30°C)
Nest humidity	60–70% in the nest; outworld 40–50%
Workers before moving into a nest	10+
Winter	No hibernation — keep warm all year

📖 About this species

The Giant African Harvester Ant is a true showpiece, with elevated food and climate needs. It eats seeds of grasses and wild plants plus small insects, and it needs warmth all year round. Plan for a large ant farm as the colony grows, and never use a gel farm — they go mouldy and give no proper nutrition.

📦 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. Young colonies and founding queens lean more on protein and honey than on seeds. Keep protein jelly 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 — they can drown in it. 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

- 🌴 No hibernation — Messor cephalotes comes from East Africa, where there is no cold winter, so keep it warm all year round.
- Keep the nest at 24–28°C with 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. Above 28°C endangers the queen.
- Never expose the colony to abrupt temperature changes, and never use a fridge, shed or garage.

🤩 Did you know?

- Its queens are so large and sought-after that illegal collecting has become a real problem in Kenya — another reason to buy only from trusted, legal suppliers.
- A big major can be over three times the length of the smallest minor in the same colony.

⭐ 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.
- 🚫 Never release this species into the wild — a colony raised in an ant farm would not survive. If you can no longer keep it, visit our ants adoption page and ask us whether we can adopt it.

🛒 Recommended for this species

- Messor cephalotes colonies
- A4-2 Smart Meter Ant Farm
- A7 Plus Ant Farm 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 cephalotes 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.