Formica cunicularia

Tunnel Ant | Care Sheet

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KEEPING LEVEL	ORIGIN	NEST TEMPERATURE	NEST HUMIDITY	WORKERS BEFORE NEST
🎓 Intermediate	🌍 UK & Europe	🌡️ 22–25°C	💧 60–70%	🏠 10+

🐜 At a glance

Origin	🇬🇧 UK native; found across Europe and parts of Africa and Asia
Keeping level	Intermediate — lively and bold. No sting; they bite (rarely) and spray formic acid
Queen	9–10mm; lives around 10 years
Workers	4–7mm (minors 4–5.5mm, majors 6–7mm)
Founding	Claustral — no food needed until the first workers, though a tiny drop of protein jelly once a week helps
Colony form	Single queen at founding; colonies of 3,000 to 5,000 in nature
Nest temperature	22–25°C (outworld 22–28°C)
Nest humidity	60–70% in the nest; outworld 40–60%
Workers before moving into a nest	10+
Winter	Natural winter rest — see below

📖 About this species

A handsome, active Formica that builds small earth mounds in sunny, open places. Workers hunt live and dead prey and farm aphids for their sweet honeydew. Because they are so often raided by Formica sanguinea and Formica rufa in the wild, they have become notably feisty. They spray formic acid, so a natural, well-ventilated ant farm is recommended. 🌿 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).
- 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

- 🍯 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.
- 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. Sudden cold, or long spells near freezing, can damage the sperm the queen stores from her nuptial flight.

🤩 Did you know?

- Its name comes from the Latin for "burrow": in the wild it runs narrow tunnels deep into the soil to reach moisture, and uses the sun-warmed top of the nest to speed up brood development.
- It is a favourite target of slave-maker ants — Formica sanguinea raids its nests for pupae.

⭐ 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 — and prolonged cold near freezing damages the sperm a queen stores from her nuptial flight, so she may never lay fertile eggs again.
- 🚫 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 cunicularia colonies | **Natural Eco Ant Farm** | **A7 Plus Ant Farm Kit**

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 British ant species guide from A to Z — we recommend printing both for a successful ant-keeping experience. Questions? Message us through our contact form — we are always happy to help. 💚

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