

BEST ANTS UK

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Your First Year of Ant Keeping



The complete month-by-month checklist — from catching your queen to a thriving colony.

Honest, no-nonsense guidance from a keeper of 30 years.

★ **FREE DOWNLOAD** — no sign-up, no catch

Print me out and tick me off. Keep this by your colony for the whole first year.

🏆 Most Eco-Friendly Pet Products 2024 & 2025 · Best Ant Keeping Supplier 2025 · Insect Education Excellence Award 2025
As featured in the BBC, The Guardian & The Times · Carbon-neutral since 2017 · Fully recyclable farms & packaging

The first year is the making of your colony — quiet, then slow, then suddenly rewarding. Work through each stage, and remember the golden rule: **the hardest part is doing nothing**.

STEP ONE · YOU'VE CAUGHT (OR BOUGHT) YOUR QUEEN

Get her settled

- ✓ Make sure it's a queen: much bigger than a worker, bulky middle (thorax), maybe wings or wing stubs.
- ✓ Settle her in a test tube: one-third mineral/distilled/purified water, firm cotton plug, sealed behind a second cotton ball, wrapped in foil.
- ✓ Keep her dark, still and steady at 20–26°C — a drawer or cupboard is perfect.
- ✓ Do not feed a claustral queen (like *Lasius niger*). Do not open the tube.

→ **Full guide: How to find & catch a queen ant in the UK** bestantsuk.com/post/how-to-find-and-catch-a-queen-ant-in-the-uk

MONTHS 1–2 · FOUNDING

Leave her alone

- ✓ She lives off her own body reserves — no food needed yet.
- ✓ Check once a week at most: a quick glance, then back in the dark.
- ✓ First eggs within a week or two; first workers in roughly 6–8 weeks.
- ✓ If she looks worryingly still, gently tilt the tube — don't open it.

MONTHS 3–5 · FIRST WORKERS & FIRST FEEDS

The colony comes alive

- ✓ The first workers (nanitics) arrive — smaller and paler than later ones. Give a new worker a day to harden.
- ✓ Begin feeding: protein jelly + a tiny drop of organic honey, twice a week, in the outworld only.
- ✓ A rice-grain-sized amount is plenty. Remove leftovers after two days before mould sets in.
- ✓ Keep humidity 75–85% in the nest; mineral/distilled/purified water only, never tap or rain.

→ **Full care guide: Looking after a *Lasius niger* ant farm** bestantsuk.com/post/how-to-look-after-a-lasius-niger-black-garden-ant-farm-at-home

MONTHS 6–8 · MOVING DAY

Into a proper formicarium

- ✓ Wait for 10+ workers before moving — too early and the workers can abandon the queen.
- ✓ Connect the test tube to the nest; keep it foil-wrapped, then slide the foil back ~1mm a day.
- ✓ Run a strip of PTFE fluon around the top inner edge of the outworld so nobody escapes.
- ✓ Place the farm in daylight (never direct sun), away from windows, radiators, vibration, speakers and the kitchen.

→ **Step-by-step: Setting up your live queen ant farm** bestantsuk.com/post/how-to-set-up-your-live-queen-ant-farm

MONTHS 9–12 · THE FIRST WINTER REST

Let them slow down

- ✓ From around October the queen lays less and the colony rests. This is diapause — normal and healthy.
- ✓ Keep the water topped up, out of direct sun and away from heaters.
- ✓ Never use a fridge, and never below 10°C for UK species. We don't hibernate first-year queens at all.
- ✓ Come spring she lays again — and year two is where the colony really takes off.

→ **Keeping your ants safe during hibernation** bestantsuk.com/post/how-to-keep-your-ants-safe-during-hibernation-a-keeper-s-essential-guide

Care at a Glance

BLACK GARDEN ANT · LASIUS NIGER

Everything that matters for a beginner colony's first year, in one place. (Lasius niger — the UK's best starter species.)

Species to start with	Lasius niger (black garden ant) — hardy, native, forgiving. Messor barbarus is a lively second choice.
Temperature	A steady 20–26°C, out of direct sunlight.
Test tube size	16mm for Lasius; 17mm for harvesters (Messor) and Myrmica.
Nest humidity	75–85%, with a drier outworld.
Water	Mineral, distilled or purified only — never tap or rainwater (fungus risk).
Food	Protein jelly + a drop of organic honey, twice a week, outworld only. Leftovers out after 2 days.
First workers	Around 2–3 months after founding.
Moving day	At 10+ workers (3+ for Camponotus).
Winter	Slows from ~October, picks up late March/early April.
Winter floor	Never below 10°C for UK species — and never a fridge.
Queen lifespan	A black garden ant queen can live nearly 29 years.

Watering, done right

Using the pipette provided, add water a few drops at a time through the nest's watering hole. **Stop the moment one or two drops appear inside the nest** — that's your sign it's done; any more floods it. Once a week, a little more in summer, less in winter. Never water the outworld.

Feeding Quick Card

Sugars (energy)

- A tiny drop of organic honey on cotton wool so nobody drowns.
- Gives workers and the queen their energy.
- Never sugar water or shop nectar.

Protein (brood)

- Best Ants UK protein jelly — keep it in the fridge.
- Feeds the growing brood and the queen's egg-laying.
- Rice-grain amount for a small colony; twice a week.

⚠️ A word on live food: shop-bought insects carry tiny mites that can wipe out a colony in 7–10 days. If you ever use them, boil for 10–15 seconds and chop first. For most first-year keepers, protein jelly and honey are all you need.

Feed them right — from the shop that started it all

What ants actually eat (full guide): bestantsuk.com/post/from-sugar-to-insects-what-do-ants-eat

Shop ant food — jelly, honey & seed: bestantsuk.com/ant-food

Moving day — safe colony transfer: bestantsuk.com/post/how-to-reuse-your-ant-farm-expert-guide-to-safe-colony-transfer

The 5 Mistakes That Lose Colonies

AVOID THESE & YOU'RE MOST OF THE WAY THERE

- 1 Checking too often.** Every peek floods the tube with light and vibration, and a stressed queen will eat her own eggs. Once a week is the maximum.
- 2 Letting the nest dry out.** The biggest killer of all. The clearest warning sign is the whole colony packing back into the test tube — the damp cotton is their last moisture. Water slowly until 1–2 drops show inside.
- 3 Moving too soon, or into too much space.** Wait for 10+ workers. Ants should fill about a fifth of their space, or they lose track of what's nest and what's larder.
- 4 Starting with a demanding species.** Exotics need experience and tight conditions. Begin with *Lasius niger* or *Messor barbarus* and earn your stripes first.
- 5 Cutting corners on the setup.** Gel farms go mouldy within days, concrete and DIY nests gamble with your queen's life, and cheap plastic boxes warp and can't hold humidity. A purpose-built kit with proper humidity control is the best investment you'll make.

Why these designs work

Our farms come from nearly 30 years of trials — including casting abandoned wild nests to study chamber sizes, airflow and where the queen sits. Each is 3D-printed at 0.1mm layers and uses our own blend of seven different substrates bonded with nano-gel glue to hold the right moisture. Every farm and all packaging are fully recyclable.

Ready to start your colony the right way?

Our beginner kits come pre-sized, pre-sealed and ready to grow — no guesswork, no cheap-box heartbreak. Two favourites with a built-in digital humidity & temperature meter:

Lucas — complete *Lasius niger* starter kit, with a built-in digital humidity & temperature meter
bestantsuk.com/product-page/ant-farm-starter-kit-lucas-live-queen-ant-nest

Angie — complete *Messor* harvester starter kit, with a built-in digital humidity & temperature meter
bestantsuk.com/product-page/ant-farm-starter-kit-angie-live-queen-ant-nest

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Browse every starter kit at bestantsuk.com/ant-farm-kits-with-ants