




Myrm's Guide To Starting Your Own Ant Farm




(Updated 17 August 2007)

For the purpose of this guide I will use a *Starter Kit* from the German Company *Antstore*. You can find their website here: <http://www.antstore.net/shop/>

You do not have to use this style of container to house your ants in; you could use a fish tank, a Tupperware tub, in fact almost anything. It really depends on what you really want, and whether you want to be able to see inside the ant nest once it has been constructed. I find that the *Starter Kits* mentioned above really are ideal for most ant species, and they can in various sizes and costs, depending on your budget, and what you want.



The Antstore Starter Kit (clicking on the pictures will – should – take you to a larger version on my website).

	<p>This is the starter kit from Antstore which contains everything you need to start your own colony, without, of course, the ants; they have to be ordered separately. I would also like to add that the water reservoir (the red plastic thing on the bottom right of the board), does not come with the kit; it is something I ordered with it. When you order the starter kit, or any ant farm on Antstore, you will see that you can order multi-coloured sand. Personally I would avoid using this in the ant farm itself as when you add water, the dye seeps out of the sand and can obscure the glass thereby preventing you from seeing any tunnels and chambers. I have experienced this with one of my <i>Tetramorium</i> colonies.</p>
	<p>In this picture you can see the plastic tubing with 'widget' (the bit that allows you to attach the tube to the glass foraging tank), a small square feeding dish, two rubber bungs, a pair of metal tweezers, a water dropper, and a free sticker!</p>
	<p>Here you can see the bag of sand (left) and a bag of clay pebbles (right).</p>

	<p>The water reservoir you see here does not actually come with the starter kit, but it is something I would recommend you purchase if you order the kit that comes with the square foraging tank, as it is a good way of giving your ants water. Don't worry if you can't get one as there are many other ways to give your ants' water using items at home.</p>
	<p>This is the foraging tank which comes with a fine mesh grille in the top. The tank attaches to the nesting box via a length of clear plastic tubing.</p>
	<p>This is the nesting box, a traditional slim line ant farm, which comes with a snug fitting lid, which should prevent escapees of most species.</p>

How To Set Up The Starter Kit

Here I will explain how to set up the starter kit, but even if you are not using one of these, the instructions should give you some good guidance on how to set up your own ant farm.

	<p>The first thing to do is to pour in a thin layer of the clay pebbles into the bottom of the ant farm. Although these are not essential, I do like using them as it soaks up any excess water you may have put in when you later add the sand. It also collects condensation which will then soak up into the sand if it gets too dry.</p>
	<p>Next pour in the sand. I get many people asking me how much sand/soil they should put into their ant farm. The answer really depends on several factors including the size of the ant and whether you have any foraging arenas attached to your ant farm. If you just have a standalone slim ant farm, then I would recommend filling the farm $\frac{3}{4}$ full, this will allow the depositing of the sand as the ants tunnel in. If you have a separate foraging arena attached to the farm, then you can put more sand in, as I have done here, (to just below the holes in the side). The ants will deposit the sand in the top of the ant farm, and in the foraging arena. I would also recommend that you use something to compress the sand down a little as your pour it in. More compact sand will, in my opinion, help the ants to create more secure chambers and tunnels.</p>



Another question I get asked is how much water to put into the ant farm in order to dampen the sand. It is essential that the sand is dampened after it is placed into the ant farm, as the ants will not be able to successfully tunnel in dry sand, and any tunnels and chambers that they do manage to create in dry sand run a very high risk of collapsing and thereby trapping the ants within. It is difficult to say exactly how much water to put it, but I suggest using little by little, rather than pouring it in like a deluge. I tend to pour a little in at first, so that there is a layer of about ½ cm layer on top, and allow it to soak through. The picture on the left is not that clear, but if you click on it you should be directed to a larger version of it on my site, which will allow you to see how much water I have put it. The water can take several hours to fully soak to the bottom, so I generally put in two or three lots of water as it soaks through and then leave it overnight. If you find you have put too much water in, do not worry. Simply pour in a little dry sand to form a thin top layer, and this will help soak up the excess water. As I say, leave overnight, without the ant farm lid on, to allow the water to soak through. One more thing you will need to do to this part of the ant farm: If you look at the farm you will notice that on either side it has a stumpy metal tube sticking out of the side, which allow access into the farm for the ants. Take the thinnest rubber bung that came with the starter kit and place it securely into the thinner of the two metal tubes.



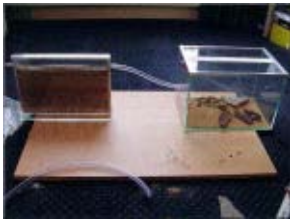
Now to attach the foraging tank to the ant farm. In this picture you can see the end of the plastic tubing, and a little 'widget'. Take the widget and push it through one of the holes in the side of the glass foraging arena, so that you are pushing it from inside the glass tank. The second picture should make you see what I mean. Make sure you push it all the way in.



Now 'decorate' the foraging tank with whatever you wish to make a nice foraging area for the ants. Personally I like to use a very thin layer (no more than 5mm) of dry sand in the bottom of the foraging arena. Do not dampen the sand as you do not want the ants to tunnel and nest in here. Decorate the tank with stones, pebbles, plants (real or fake), twigs, sticks, and anything else you wish to use. It is good to put a few things in as it aids the ants in navigating around the tank.



As I mentioned earlier, you do not have to use these water reservoirs if you do not wish, and they do not come with starter kit, but can be ordered separately if required. Place a layer of cotton wool in the base of the reservoir ensuring it fills not only the round part of the base, but also the little trough bit that sticks out, just as I have done in the picture. Next fill the water holder part of the reservoir until it reaches the little rim just below the square hole that is in the side. Then place the base of the reservoir onto the water tube, ensuring that the square hole in the clear part lines up with the trough in the base. Once it is securely on, turn it up the right way and allow the water to soak into the cotton wool. The cotton wool is not essential, you can use the water reservoir without it and simply allow the water to fill up the trough, but I prefer to use the cotton wool as it acts as a wick, and prevents the ants from falling into the water and drowning. The cotton wool wick works very well, and in fact, as I write this guide, my new ants are drinking from it right now. If you do not wish to use one of these water reservoirs, you can use almost anything, or you can use one of those spray mist bottles and spray a light mist of water onto a side of the glass foraging tank (or into the ant farm itself), and allow the ants to drink directly from it.



Once you have attached the two parts of the starter kit, it should look something like this. The plastic tubing from the foraging tank attaches to the largest of the metal tubes sticking out of the side of the slim ant farm. I would strongly recommend that you cover the sides of the slim tank (in which the ants nest) so that light does not get into the nest, as ants hate this and it can make them feel insecure; an insecure queen will not lay eggs. I simply use a folded piece of black bin liner which I wrap around the ant farm, securing it with a piece of sellotape. I normally only cover the side so that all the sand is covered, and allowing the 'above ground' part to be exposed. The second picture hopefully shows you what I mean.



Now to add the ants: I had ordered my ants for these ant farms from Antstore when I ordered the starter kits, so I will show how to add ants using the tubes that they arrive in. If you ordered the complete set (slim ant farm and foraging tank), then you can simply remove the bung from the end of the tube with the ants in and place it into the foraging tank, ensuring, of course, that you replace the tank lid immediately afterwards. The ants will quickly begin exploring their new home. It may take a couple of days before the ants discover and move into the nesting part of the set up, just try not to interfere if they seem to be taking their time, allow them to do what they want in their own time. Do not worry if it appears that the ants are nesting in the foraging box (for example, they may initially move under one of the objects you have placed in the tank – this is completely normal. This first picture shows this method of putting the ants into their new home.



This picture shows another method you can use if you only have the thin ant farm available. Cut a piece of the plastic tubing (about 2 inches should do it,) and stick it over the fatter of the two tubes that stick out of the ant farm, (the thinner one should already have the smaller bung in it if you have followed the above instructions properly).

Gently remove the cotton wool bung from the end of the test tube that the ants are in, (trying to ensure that the ants are all at the opposite end if possible), and then gently insert the test tube over the piece of plastic tubing that you have just put over the metal tube sticking out of the side of the ant farm. Push it as far as it will go, ensuring that you are not crushing any ants. The test tube should hold fast. Once the ants have moved out of it and into the ant farm (which may take a few hours, days, or even weeks), you can then use the tube as a feeding chamber.

Remove the tube when you wish to feed them, place the food within, and then replace the tube.

If you are using the ant farm only then I would recommend removing the lid for a minute or two once or twice a week, just to allow fresh air in. If you have the ant farm attached to the foraging tank that has the grill mesh on top, then you need not worry as air will circulate naturally.

I hope that this guide has been useful to you.