



Camponotus

Carpenter Ant Care Guide



OVERVIEW

Camponotus are the largest ants most keepers will encounter in North America — queens reach 18mm or more, and major workers in mature colonies are striking animals. What makes this genus especially rewarding is polymorphism: a single colony produces minors that handle most foraging, medias that assist with various tasks, and large-headed majors that process food and defend. Watching all three castes work together is genuinely entertaining.

North American species are found across a wide range of habitats, with many stunning species native to the desert Southwest. Bold bicolored patterns in black, orange, red, and tan. Fully claustral founding queens; long-lived colonies that grow into impressive numbers over time.

DIFFICULTY

BEGINNER

Forgiving genus with straightforward care. Founding queens are fully claustral and need no feeding early on. Core needs: warmth, sugar, occasional protein. Growth is slow — this is normal for the genus, not a care problem.

TEMPERAMENT

Calm and non-aggressive. Workers focus on foraging and nest tasks and don't seek confrontation. No sting — they can spray formic acid when threatened but this is rarely an issue in a well-maintained setup. Major workers are visible at nest entrances and outworld areas, making these excellent observation ants.

FEEDING

Sugars (primary energy source): Honey water or sugar water every 1–2 days for active colonies. This should always be available — a dry outworld leads to slow, sluggish workers.

Protein (supplement): Insects 2–3×/week: fruit flies for young colonies; small cricket pieces, mealworms, or roach nymphs as the colony grows. Essential for larval development and caste production. Remove uneaten protein within 24 hours to prevent mold.

Scale with size: Founding queen needs nothing; 50 workers = regular sugar + weekly protein; several hundred workers = daily sugar + protein every other day.

HABITAT

Recommended: Test tubes (16–20mm) for founding; bamboo tube nests (preferred for growing colonies); tub-and-tube or acrylic formicariums for larger colonies.

Founding tip: Keep queens in darkness with minimal disturbance. Checking too frequently is one of the most common causes of queens eating their eggs — leave them alone for at least 2–3 weeks before checking.

Transition to a formicarium at 5–15 workers.



Photo by Jake Nitta

TEMPERATURE

Desert Camponotus need consistent heat — development does not occur reliably at room temperature.

- **Optimal nest range:** 82–90°F
- **Cooler zone:** ~70°F for workers to retreat to

A heat gradient is important — the colony self-regulates by moving brood between zones. Never place heat near water reservoirs.

HUMIDITY

Maintain moderate humidity — 50–70% works well for most North American Camponotus. Never allow the setup to dry out completely. Keep a water source available in the outworld at all times; founding queens need a water tube in their test tube. Bamboo tube nests passively regulate moisture without constant management.

GROWTH

Slow growth is normal — egg to worker takes 7–10 weeks depending on species and temperature, with majors developing more slowly than minors. First-year colonies typically reach a few dozen to over 100 workers. The colony doesn't produce majors until it reaches a threshold size — your first major is a meaningful milestone. Well-established colonies can reach hundreds to thousands of workers and persist for many years.

COMMON CHALLENGES

Problem	Likely Cause	Fix
Queen eating eggs	Disturbance, dehydration, or heat stress	Stop checking; verify water tube; confirm heat
No brood	Temperature too low	Raise heat
Slow worker growth	Normal for genus, or temp/feeding low	Patience; verify heat gradient and feeding
Mold in outworld	Protein left too long	Remove uneaten protein within 24 hours
Workers sluggish	Sugar depleted or temp too low	Refresh sugar water; check heat source