

Wonders of Nature
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Hundreds of thousands of people have visited Butterfly World since it opened in Coconut Creek, on the outskirts of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., 10 years ago. Among them have been about 40,000 students each year, some of whom, until then, had never seen a butterfly.

“They’re frightened at first, but by the time they leave, they’ve had their eyes opened,” says Ron Boender, the electronics engineer, music lover and self-made scientist who founded Butterfly World. “We give them tickets to come back with their families.”

When Boender started what is the only free-standing butterfly house in the country, it was difficult even to find butterfly memorabilia for the gift shop. Today, not only is butterfly merchandise flourishing but so is butterfly gardening. And Boender takes pride in knowing he helped create the trend. Butterfly gardening classes are taught regularly at Butterfly World. Boender himself continues to teach the advanced classes.

“Where you have a healthy environment, you have a lot of butterflies,” says Boender. And anyone can raise them, even from the balcony of a condo — if they’re willing to grow host plants and forego chemicals. The problem is (even at Butterfly World’s garden shop) that people often only buy beautiful flowering plants, which offer nectar for the butterflies but little else. Females butterflies will travel for miles to lay their eggs on a particular host plant because the caterpillars that hatch won’t eat anything else.

A walk through Butterfly World with Boender is like taking a full-fledged course. He’s like a big kid, as he bounces across the swaying wooden suspension bridge — a replica of one he has crossed 18 times on expeditions to Ecuador. He points to a passion vine from Costa Rica named after him, since he was the first to identify it. He literally knows every plant and butterfly by name and eagerly tells some bit of history or story about it.

Boender grew up on a farm in a family of Dutch immigrants. The fourth of five children, he was the first allowed to attend high school. Today he’s considered one of the top lepidopterists (butterfly and moth experts) and botanists in the world — and he’s entirely self-taught.

He’s also wonderfully accessible. He takes time to answer even the most basic questions.

Some 80 to 90 percent of the butterflies at Butterfly World are flown in from around the world each week. The other 10 to 20 percent he raises in an area reserved primarily for his own research. While most first-graders today know that caterpillars mysteriously turn into butterflies, Boender points out that scientists don’t know much more than that.

It’s this vacuum — along with his love of beauty — that explains Boender’s fascination. A man of deep religious conviction, his study of the natural world only confirms to him the wonder of life.

“Most butterfly chrysalises metamorphose in one to two weeks,” says Boender. “But there are some that take years and years. We know of those on mountain barrier islands that waited for as long as eight years for the right rain.

“Everything in this garden,” says Boender, “is tied together perfectly.”

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