

# Nature's miracle keeps farm aflutter

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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On six acres of land just west of Woodland sits a farm unlike any other in the area.

Sure, there is the requisite toiling in the soil, the weeding and watering, marketing and accounting, and as always, the overwhelming amount of labor involved. But there is also this: an end product destined not for a grocery store or a dinner table, but destined simply to fly away.

Butterflies are what John and Heather Utterback produce at their farm — gorgeous black and yellow and orange monarch butterflies.

They are shipped all over the Western United States, released at weddings and funerals, featured in the Turtle Bay Exploration Park butterfly exhibit in Redding and studied by researchers at UC Davis. They've even been known to appear on film and in commercials. After their release, they and their offspring are helping to replenish the supply of monarch butterflies in the wild.

But before all of that, they start out at Utterback Farms as caterpillar eggs the size of a pinprick.

Once hatched, said John Utterback, "the caterpillars grow to the size of my little finger in two weeks.

"They grow faster than any other creature," he added.

From there, they enter a five-week cycle that takes them from caterpillar to butterfly, all under the care of the Utterbacks and their handful of employees.

In the early weeks, caterpillars feast on the milkweed Utterback grows in six greenhouses on the property. Soon they transition into chrysalides and finally, metamorphosis concludes with the emergence of the adult butterflies.

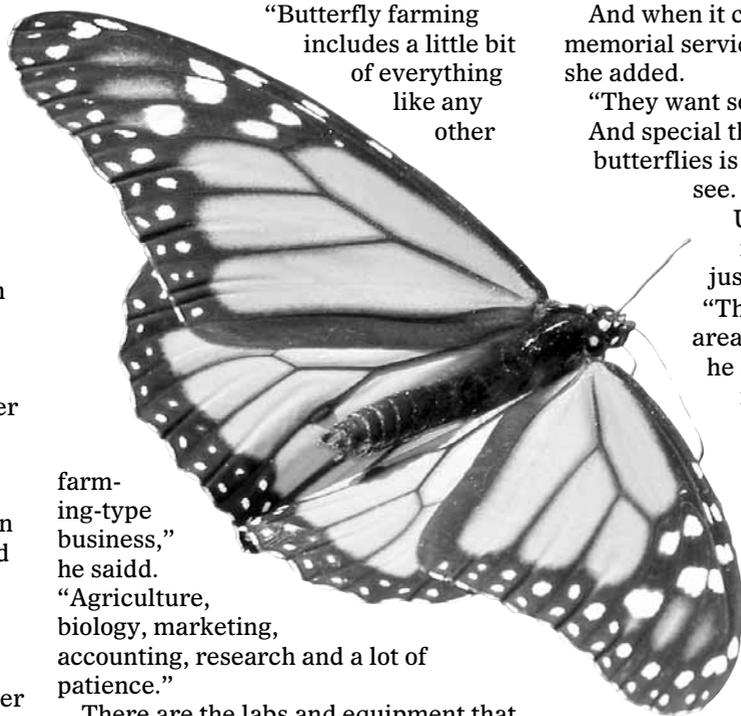
It is a cycle that seems to still amaze John Utterback, even after 14 years in the business and a childhood spent on 400 acres of farmland in New Mexico, where his father grew cotton and alfalfa.

"This cycle and metamorphosis is a miracle," he said. "You take this caterpillar and it pupates into this chrysalis, and 10 to 14 days later it emerges into a butterfly.

"We feel very fortunate to have the privilege to raise such beautiful creatures," he added.

That said, it is no easy business.

"I have never been involved in anything that is more demanding," John Utterback said. "Every aspect is super labor-intensive.



"Butterfly farming includes a little bit of everything like any other

farming-type business," he said. "Agriculture, biology, marketing, accounting, research and a lot of patience."

There are the labs and equipment that must be sterilized every day, he noted, and greenhouses that require constant weeding and watering, planting and harvesting.

"It's just constant attention required," he said. "I have to be here 12 months out of the year."

In addition to the two or three full-time employees and a few more part-time, the Utterbacks get help from their children in the summer: sons Brandon, 21, and Jeffrey, 16, and daughter Amy, 12.

Brandon is finishing up his major in criminal justice at Sacramento State and Jeffrey intends to follow a similar path, Heather Utterback said. She doesn't expect any of them to follow in their parents' footsteps.

"They see how hard Daddy works," she explained. "I think they'll just want something stable."

But as farming goes, rearing butterflies has proved to be pretty stable in itself, she said.

When the Utterbacks started out 14 years ago, they didn't know what to expect as far as demand for butterflies. They needn't have worried, though. They apparently were on the leading edge of a whole new industry, quickly meeting an unmet demand. They remain the largest butterfly producer in the area.

And all these years later, Heather Utterback said, the demand is still there, recession or not.

"I think in the wedding industry, people are always willing to spend for their big day," she noted.

And when it comes to funerals and memorial services, the same holds true, she added.

"They want something special."

And special they get. The release of butterflies is a truly lovely thing to see. Monarchs, said John Utterback, are uniquely friendly, so they don't just fly away.

"They'll hang around the area after they're released," he said. "They land on nearby flowers, land on people."

The butterflies are shipped to their destination overnight, arriving the day before the event. They need only be kept in a cool, shaded area until just before their release. The Utterbacks even provide the single-release boxes — so every guest can release a butterfly — or larger boxes that allow for dozens of butterflies

to be set free all at once.

The Utterbacks have photos and videos customers have provided of butterflies alighting on a bride's veil, or in her bouquet. They've also received many testimonials from customers calling the addition of butterflies to their events inspirational.

"It's very rewarding," John Utterback said of the work that makes it possible.

That said, it isn't work he ever expected to find himself doing again.

"When I left the family farm (in New Mexico), I swore I'd never be a farmer," he said. "But here I am. And it's fulfilling."

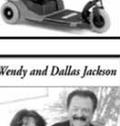
The most challenging part is the plight of most farmers: Trying to find time for his family. Especially tough, he said, is "having my job in my back yard."

For more information about Utterback Farms, visit <http://www.utterbackfarms.com>, call (530) 661-3009 or e-mail [info@utterbackfarms.com](mailto:info@utterbackfarms.com).

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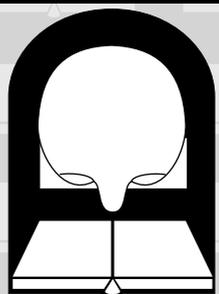
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