You can, of course, take the “path of least resistance” and order a butterfly kit from a commercial supplier. They send you artificial butterfly food and, at the right time of year, a starter culture of Painted Ladies from the California desert. But doesn’t that just reinforce the estrangement of our culture from the real world of experience? Do we want our kids to think meat is created shrink-wrapped or that butterflies come in a box in the mail?

On Caterpillar Safari

If you’re raising butterflies, it’s best to collect eggs or very young caterpillars. Some pupae are victimized by a parasitic wasp which waits until after a pupa is formed to kill and eat its victim. As a result, you might get wasps instead of butterflies from your pupae! The Pipevine Swallowtail caterpillar is deep blackish-purple, with bright red soft “horns” on its body segments. When full-grown, it is about 2” long. At that point it leaves the plant and wanders for several hours before settling down to molt into the pupa, or chrysalis, stage. The caterpillars can be so numerous along the American River that their droppings hitting the forest floor may sound like rain, and thousands are killed by bicycles every year. Remember! Plants and animals in the Parkway corridor are protected by law. Only collect where it’s legal to do so and only collect a modest amount.

Cultivating Butterfly Habitat

The Pipevine plant is easy to grow and can be obtained from native plant nurseries. Once established, it requires little or no care. It is pollinated by gnats. If you live within a mile or so of the river, chances are females will find your plants and lay eggs on them once the plants get big enough. (Also known as “Dutchman’s Pipe,” it gets its name from the weird shape of the flowers, which somewhat resemble the kind of ornate pipe favored in Holland a few centuries ago. The butterfly is not even flying yet when the plant is in bloom–as early as Christmas some years!

The Care & Feeding of Baby Caterpillars

The baby caterpillars can only eat the young plant tissue of the California Pipevine, but the plant stops growing in late spring, and after the Fourth of July, there isn’t any young tissue! The large caterpillars can eat big, old leaves, but they do better on younger ones too, since the old leaves are very difficult to eat and digest. Remember this if you rear Pipevine Butterflies!

Metamorphosis!
The pupa is attached to something–in Nature usually a tree limb–by a button of silk at the tail and a silken girdle around the middle. It may be either light reddish-brown or bright green, and, on close inspection, you will see it has a golden filigree pattern.

So when will your butterflies hatch? That's what's so interesting! In any batch, on average half the pupae will hatch within three weeks. The other half may not hatch until next spring! (It's fun to have the kids "bet" on when each pupa will hatch). After the "direct developers" come out, if you put the dormant pupae on a shelf with no special treatment, adults will dribble out unpredictably over the summer and fall, and then all the remaining pupae will hatch more or less at once in late winter or early spring. When your Pipevine Swallowtails hatch, take them back to the river and let them go!

www.effieyeaw.org Art Shapiro's booklet on butterflies of the American River Parkway is usually available at Effie Yeaw Nature Center.

www.butterfly.ucdavis.edu You can learn even more about local butterflies by visiting Shapiro's website. There you can also download free brochures on how to garden for butterflies in the Valley or the Foothills, or request them by e-mailing the author at amshapiro@ucdavis.edu. He'll be glad to answer questions, though, as a rule, he won't tell you exactly where to go to find a particular species.