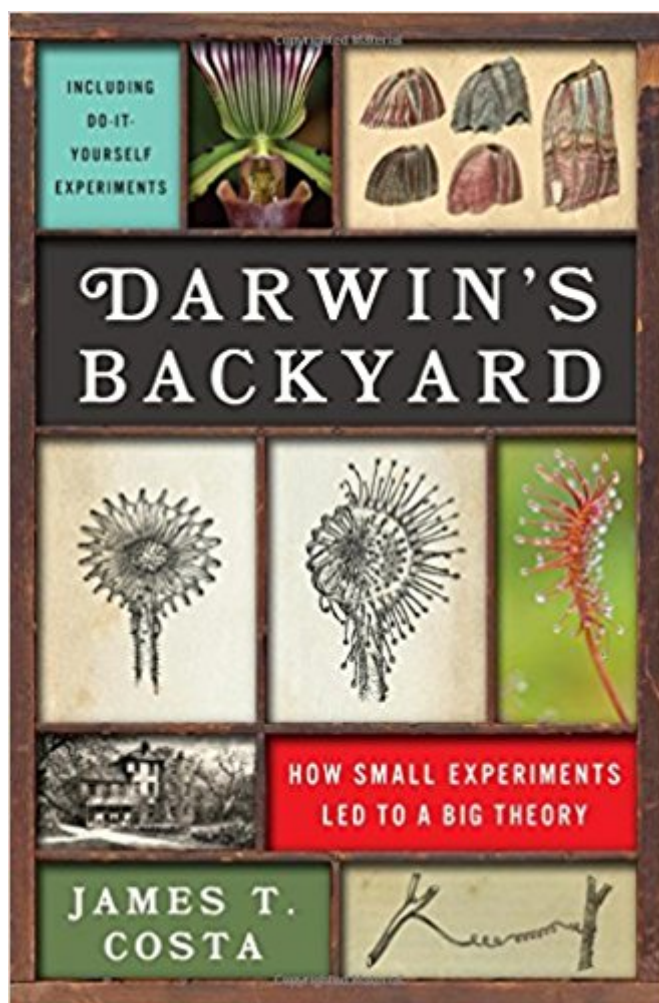


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Darwin's Backyard: How Small Experiments Led To A Big Theory



Synopsis

Darwin's Backyard goes beyond the portrait of Charles Darwin as a brilliant thinker to concentrate on him as a nimble experimenter delving into some of evolution's great mysteries. James T. Costa takes readers on a journey from Darwin's childhood through his voyage on the HMS Beagle where his ideas on evolution began. We then follow Darwin to Down House, his bustling home of forty years, where he kept porcupine quills at his desk to dissect barnacles, maintained a flock of sixteen pigeon breeds in the dovecote, and cultivated climbing plants in the study, and to Bournemouth, where on one memorable family vacation he fed carnivorous plants in the soup dishes. Using his garden and greenhouse, the surrounding meadows and woodlands, and even taking over the cellar, study, and hallways of his home-turned-field-station, Darwin tested ideas of his landmark theory of evolution with an astonishing array of hands-on experiments that could be done on the fly, without specialized equipment. He engaged naturalists, friends, neighbors, family servants, and even his children, nieces, nephews, and cousins as assistants in these experiments, which involved everything from chasing bees and tempting fish to eat seeds to serenading earthworms. From the experiments' results, he plumbed the laws of nature and evidence for the revolutionary arguments of *On the Origin of Species* and his other watershed works. Beyond Darwin at work, we accompany him against the backdrop of his enduring marriage, chronic illness, grief at the loss of three children, and joy in scientific revelation. This unique glimpse of Darwin's life introduces us to an enthusiastic correspondent, crowd-sourcer, family man, and, most of all, an incorrigible observer and experimenter. Includes directions for eighteen hands-on experiments, for home, school, yard, or garden. 60 line drawings

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Customer Reviews

â œInstructive and entertaining . . . the insights Costa provides into Darwin's thinking and his revelations about the great man's working life make this a worthwhile read.â • - Kirkus Reviewsâ œ[Darwin's Backyard] takes readers on a journey . . . revealing how [Darwin] found universal evolutionary truths in simple yet ingenious homespun experiments.â • - Publishers Weeklyâ œMost readers will be surprised to learn of the incredible amount of field research, observation, and experimentation that Charles Darwin did in the many years after his famous voyage. Costa . . . argues that those experiences are not only foundational but also educational: they explain evolution better than any classroom lecture.â • - Library Journalâ œSo much more than a biography. . . . [Darwin's Backyard] is accessible and fun.â • - Booklist (starred review)â œA passionate but balanced celebration of [Darwin's] lifelong obsession with enquiry and how the fields and meadows around his home were a microcosm of the wider world. . . . Costa more than achieves his stated goals of revealing the evolution of Darwin's insights and the relevance of his methods now.â • - Henry Nicholls, Natureâ œAn unusual look at the daily creative life of a great scientist, with opportunities to dig in and observe the workings of nature first hand using methods very similar to his own.â • - Shelf Awarenessâ œReaders will enjoy the tales Costa tells and the experience of re-creating some of the famous naturalist's most enlightening work.â • - Sid Perkins, Science Newsâ œThe immense library available on Darwin's life and contributions may seem exhaustive. James T. Costa, writing only as a modern naturalist of the first rank can, shows us how drastically wrong that perception has been. If you've ever fantasized walking and conversing with the great scientist on the subjects that consumed him, and now wish to add the fullness of reality, read this book.â • - Edward O. Wilson, author of Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life

James T. Costa is a professor of biology at Western Carolina University, executive director of Highlands Biological Station, and a trustee of the Charles Darwin Trust. The author of Wallace, Darwin, and the Origin of Species; The Annotated Origin; and The Other Insect Societies, he lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.

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