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ARLINGTON — Mike Wilbanks unlatched the back of a display case and pulled out a vibrant gold and black ball python that overflowed the palm of his hand. It's his rarest variety, and he's charging \$100,000.

Wilbanks, who has a snake-breeding business in Oklahoma City called Constrictors Unlimited, said he is a self-taught geneticist and a self-made millionaire. Dozens of clear boxes with ball pythons from \$25 to \$100,000 lined his booth at this weekend's North American Reptile Breeders Conference & Trade Show at the Arlington Convention Center.

Two years ago, he discovered the "atomic" gene, as he named it, which causes the snakes' colors and patterns to exhibit individually rather than mixed and resulted in the \$100,000 snake. He hasn't sold one yet but expects buyers to surface as he continues the breeding program.

Wilbanks' snakes and all of the reptiles at the show were bred in captivity, said Brian Potter, the show's co-founder and a Chicago-based snake breeder. The show comes to Arlington each February and August.

Ball pythons, which are docile and relatively small and possess an abundance of genetic possibilities, have boomed in popularity in the past decade. They dominated the weekend-long show, which also featured bearded dragons, geckos, frogs and spiders.

Either you're obsessed, or you couldn't care less, Wilbanks said of his trade. He's never known the latter.

"People want something that's pretty and rare," said Bob Clark of Oklahoma City, who also travels the world selling snakes as valuable as fine jewelry.

His newest and best specimen of genetic artwork is a pied reticulated python that he values at \$25,000. It's mostly white with spots of patterned brown and black. It will grow to 25 feet long.

"Not for everybody," Clark said of the rare species and the high price. He'll travel to similar conventions in Germany, Holland and Japan and said the relative weakness of the dollar draws global investors.

At another booth, Gracie Hamilton, 14, from Carrollton held an adult ball python around her neck. She wanted one, she explained, but her parents wouldn't allow it.

"I'm gonna have to wait until I go to college," she said. "I love reptiles."

Her brother, Charlie, 16, walked beside her with his two scaly and speckled bearded dragons, Bessie and Tyler, resting on his chest.

Others casually browsed the selection or bought new pets. Tommy Desjardins, 16, had a small snake in a container. "He's a normal ball python," he said, meaning his snake wasn't genetically tricked out like the \$100,000 variety.

But it fit in his budget. Tommy, who had saved his money ahead of the show, bought his newest pet for \$25.



Amy, Ian and Daniel Shoemake look closely at a chameleon during the North American Reptile Breeders Conference and Trade Show at the Arlington Convention Center in Arlington, Texas on February 24, 2013. Dozens of clear boxes with ball pythons from \$25 to \$100,000 lined booths at this weekend's North American Reptile Breeders Conference & Trade Show at the Arlington Convention Center. Ball pythons, which are docile and relatively small and possess an abundance of genetic possibilities, have boomed in popularity in the past decade.

Photo: Ian C. Bates/Staff Photographer