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Javed Musarrat
Editors

A close-up photograph of a petri dish containing a microbial culture. The culture is a dark, dense, circular mass in the center, surrounded by a lighter, yellowish ring. The background is a blurred, light blue color.

Microbial Strategies for Crop Improvement

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ISBN 978-3-642-01978-4 e-ISBN 978-3-642-01979-1
DOI: 10.1007/978-3-642-01979-1
Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009928629

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Cover design: WMXDesign GmbH, Heidelberg, Germany

Printed on acid-free paper

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Foreword

With an ever-increasing human population, the demand placed upon the agriculture sector to supply more food is one of the greatest challenges for the agrarian community. In order to meet this challenge, environmentally unfriendly agrochemicals have played a key role in the green revolution and are even today commonly recommended to circumvent nutrient deficiencies of the soils. The use of agrochemicals is, though, a major factor for improvement of plant production; it causes a profound deteriorating effect on soil health (soil fertility) and in turn negatively affects the productivity and sustainability of crops. Concern over disturbance to the microbial diversity and consequently soil fertility (as these microbes are involved in biogeochemical processes), as well as economic constraints, have prompted fundamental and applied research to look for new agro-biotechnologies that can ensure competitive yields by providing sufficiently not only essential nutrients to the plants but also help to protect the health of soils by mitigating the toxic effects of certain pollutants. In this regard, the role of naturally abundant yet functionally fully unexplored microorganisms such as biofertilizers assume a special significance in the context of supplementing plant nutrients, cost and environmental impact under both conventional practices and derelict environments. Therefore, current developments in sustainability involve a rational exploitation of soil microbial communities and the use of inexpensive, though less bio-available, sources of plant nutrients, which may be made available to plants by microbially-mediated processes. These organisms affect plant growth directly by fixation of atmospheric nitrogen, solubilization of minerals such as phosphorus, or by production of plant growth regulators (phytohormones), or indirectly by improving growth-restricting conditions either via production of antagonistic substances, by inducing resistance against pathogens, and by improving soil properties by leaving organic residues. In addition, the rhizobacterial strains can improve plant stress tolerance to drought, salinity, and metal toxicity leading thereby to increased plant growth. Plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria also increase the growth of plants through the synthesis of specific enzymes, which induce physiological changes in plants. For example, ethylene plays a critical role in various developmental processes and regulates nod factor signaling and nodule formation. At higher concentrations, ethylene inhibits growth

and development of plants. However, bacterial enzyme 1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate (ACC) deaminase alleviates the stress induced by an ethylene-mediated impact on plants. Other organism of great practical significance to plant system is arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi, which play a major role in plant resource capture and nutrient cycling. Thus, microbial populations could participate in many key ecosystem processes such as those involved in the biogeochemical cycling of essential nutrients and biological control of plant pathogens, and, consequently, may affect plant development under different agro-ecosystems. The alternative approach to traditional biofertilizers could be the development of bacterial biofilms that may be used effectively as biofertilizers for various crops. Soil microbial communities play an important role in crop improvement in different agro-ecosystems by decomposing various organic matters, but due in part to the scarcity of convenient methods for exploration, our understanding of the different degrees and dynamics of microbial community including structure and functional diversity is so far limited. In addition, soil microbial communities are constantly under environmental pressure. Therefore, we need a better understanding of how different factors including plant genotypes, soil management practices, and agro-chemicals influence the microbial variations in soil environments. Furthermore, there is also a need to examine the rate of these responses to environmental changes and the factors that influence the rate of change and how these responses are related to community composition. Pathogenic microorganisms affecting plant health are a major and chronic threat to food production and ecosystem stability worldwide. To address such problems, pesticides are considered as a relatively reliable method of crop protection, but may instead cause several negative effects including development of pathogen resistance to the applied agents and their nontarget environmental impacts. Furthermore, there are also a number of fastidious diseases for which chemical solutions are few, ineffective, or nonexistent. Control of soil-borne pathogens by applying microbes or microbial products (biopesticides) provides a viable alternative way of reducing the use of chemicals in crop improvement.

Worldwide, salinity is one of the most important abiotic stresses that limit crop growth and productivity. Ion imbalance and hyper-osmotic stress in plants caused by high concentrations of salt often lead to oxidative stress conditions for plants. Soil salinization may be due to natural causes, and is common in the hot and dry regions of the world, or it may be a consequence of inadequate irrigation management practices. In this context, the use of microorganisms offers an attractive alternative to facilitate the growth of plants in otherwise inhibitory levels of salt. An understanding of these mechanisms is likely to lead to the development of simple and practical approaches to dealing with this problem in the field. Furthermore, in the Mediterranean basin, a millenarian history of overexploitation has led to the loss of most primeval forests and an increase of the surface area covered by shrublands that represent stages of degradation of mature forests. In this situation, environmental characteristics act as barriers to succession and, hence, human intervention by applying reforestation practice is usually necessary to improve recovery of woodlands. To address such problems, some native plant species could act as “nurse plants” through their positive impacts on soil abiotic

characteristics and also through positive influence on soil microbiota, especially on symbiotic microorganisms. The beneficial effects of these plant nurses on the growth of Mediterranean tree species, the soil bio-functioning, and the underlining of the benefits of using native plant species to rehabilitate degraded areas especially in stressful conditions are suggested. Release of heavy metals without proper treatment poses a serious threat to soil health because of their nonbiodegradability and persistence. The remediation of heavily contaminated soils involving microbes offers a promising and inexpensive approach to design strategies for crop improvement in soils contaminated with heavy metals. In some instances, indeed, the availability of metal-tolerant microbes with very specific mechanisms of action has contributed substantially to our understanding of plant improvement under stressed environments.

Despite the significant scientific developments, the role of microbial communities in productivity of crops and sustainability of environment is not fully exploited for the benefit of crop improvement under different agro-ecosystems around the world. The beneficial microbial systems involved in plant growth promotion are very often crop- and region-specific besides soil-specific in natural ecosystems. The advent of molecular and biotechnological tools has, however, made it possible to tailor the genetic traits of such microbes to make them suitable for a specific environment.

In recent years, the volume of research published on the contribution of microbes in crop improvement has increased dramatically. This can be attributed to several factors: in general, there has been an increasing interest in the application of inexpensive natural bio-resource, microbes, within the scientific and agrarian communities; there has been the advent of molecular engineering techniques which help to identify and design microbes with specific activities; and finally this has prompted industries to become much more involved in the exploitation of beneficial microbes at a commercial scale. Progress in this exciting and applied field of microbiology has been so pronounced that there has been a strong need for a book on this subject. Although the research in this area has been published in various scientific media, they are unlikely to provide sufficient information on the themes covered in this book. Given the large and growing body of information available on microbial effects in crop improvement, it is becoming difficult to maintain familiarity with the subject. University students and teachers, agronomists in particular and scientists in the private sectors in general, require access to this information. In this book “Microbial Strategies for Crop Improvement”, we have attempted to meet such needs, and to integrate the relevant information on microbial strategies employed to improve crop productivity in different agro-ecological niches into a single volume. Broadly, this book addresses the multidisciplinary nature and many fascinating aspects of microbiological approaches for crop improvement in both conventional and stressed soils where quality and safety are the key concerns. The major goal of microbial strategies for crop improvement is intended to provide a cross-section of latest accomplishments and envisaged future directions in these areas. Furthermore, the information provided here gives a holistic view of the basic concepts and practical utility of microbes. We hope that

the reader will find this book a useful source of information on many aspects of crop improvement through microbial applications as well as a starting point for more advanced reading and research in this area. This compilation is expected to help students, teachers, industry regulators, and nonspecialist readers to get balanced and up-to-date information on potential application of microbes in crop improvement. This book is thus likely to benefit the people working in the area of agronomy, biotechnology, environmental biology, microbiology, plant physiology, plant protection, and soil science.

The contributions by eminent academicians and professionals for this volume have ensured a good equilibrium between theory and practice without compromising the basic conceptual framework of the concerned subject. Qualified editors and authors from different countries have tried to bring in quality and the most attractive presentation. This book will thus present an all-inclusive contemporary treatise on strategic aspects of the diverse microbial communities providing solutions to many of common agronomic problems and indeed some bizarre ones facing the agrarian communities. The book also provides an opportunity to the readers to understand the complexity of microbes and exploit these natural resources for the benefit of crops. This book will serve as an important and comprehensive source material because it includes recent data focusing mainly on the microbial strategies for improvement and sustainability of crops leading thereby to achieve global food security.

Preface

The dramatic increase in the use of chemical fertilizers for achieving optimum yields has become an integral component of present day agricultural practices. The frequent and imbalanced application of such fertilizers is not only expensive but also pollutes the environment at a faster rate and makes soils unsuitable for cultivation. In addition, soil deterioration (soil salinization), disturbances in composition and functional properties of soil microbial communities and, consequently, loss of soil fertility following various soil management practices has further compounded the agronomic problems. To overcome such environmentally undesirable activities, we need to develop a viable substitute that could address those problems more effectively in a sustained manner. In this context, the microbiological strategies involving the use of functionally diverse groups of microbes as vital components of soil ecosystems provides an inexpensive alternative to chemical fertilizers. In recent times, much interest has been generated in exploiting microbial strategies to facilitate plant growth and development, and in some cases they have been commercialized for different crops. The majority of organic growers adopt these microbial technologies without proper knowledge and understanding of it, and use them to inoculate seeds/soils to provide nutrients like phosphate, nitrogen, and other phyto-compounds. In addition, microbes have also attracted worldwide attention due to their role in disease management and remediation of salinized/polluted soils. Thus, the microbial communities in general are the potential tools for sustainable production of crops and the trend for the future. Scientific researchers, however, involve multidisciplinary approaches to understand the complexity and practical utility of the wide spectrum of microbes for the benefits of crops. The success of crop improvement, however, depends largely on the performance of microbes and the willingness and acceptance by the growers. Substantial amounts of research work has been done to highlight the role of microbes in the improvement of crops, but very little attempt is made to organize such findings in a way that could substantially help students/teachers/scientists and to progressive farmers.

“Microbial Strategies for Crop Improvement” written by experts in the field provides a comprehensive source of information on strategies and concepts of microbial technology for the improvement of crops in different agro-ecosystems.

The book presents strategies for the management of salinized soils and crop diseases, and explores means of integrating various approaches to achieve desired levels of crop yield under both conventional and derelict soils. Traditional applications for molecular plant–microbe interactions in crop improvement (e.g., nitrogen fixation in legume–rhizobia symbioses and the improvement of plant P nutrition by arbuscular mycorrhizae) are broadly covered in the book. This book also presents a broad and updated view of the phosphate-solubilising microbes and role of metal-tolerant microbes in providing protection to plants grown in metal-contaminated soils. Thus, it provides a reference point that will be an invaluable resource for crop improvement. The preparation and application of microbial biofilm inoculants, the role of bacterial ACC deaminase in the development of functional symbiosis between rhizobia and legumes, and functional diversity among plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria are also discussed. The book further describes how the plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria facilitate plant growth and how advanced information strategies can be used to manipulate and modify the soil environment. Plant growth-promoting diazotrophs and productivity of wheat on the Canadian Prairies is discussed separately. The common mechanisms regulating symbiosis and development in biopesticides to control pathogenic microbes are discussed, making it possible to further examine their role in the crop improvement. The other factors affecting the crop productivity include the health of soil and how soil management practices affects the fertility of soils. Special attention is paid to highlight the role of a fertile soil in crop improvement and to understand the impact of various management practices on the variability of microbes both in terms of community structure and their function. This book is useful for a wide audience of students/researchers/practitioners specializing in different areas of microbiology and plant science, agro-chemistry, soil biology, molecular biology, and other related disciplines.

We very sincerely wish to acknowledge our colleague authors who participated in this endeavor from different countries and who have assisted in the development of “Microbial Strategies for Crop Improvement” by providing the recent information and comprehensive scripts without which it would have been extremely difficult to complete this herculean task. Also, we want to thank our scientific colleagues who generously spared their valuable time to respond to our queries regarding the preparation of this book and who have informally made suggestions to us to improve the overall presentation of the book. We also wish to thank research scholars working with us, who have helped immensely in making this dream a reality. We also gratefully thank the publisher of this book.

We are grateful to our families for their support during the compilation of this book.

Finally, we believe this book may have some conceptual or printing mistakes arising unintentionally during preparation for which we apologise in anticipation and, if pointed out to us, will certainly correct in subsequent printings/editions. We also invite suggestions and healthy criticism from the readers of this book so that the information on the subject it contains can be improved in future.

India, March 2009

Mohammad Saghir Khan
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Chapter 1

The Use of Microorganisms to Facilitate the Growth of Plants in Saline Soils

Elisa Gamalero, Graziella Berta, and Bernard R. Glick

Abstract Worldwide, salinity is one of the most important abiotic stresses that limits crop growth and productivity. Ion imbalance and hyperosmotic stress in plants caused by high concentrations of salt often lead to oxidative stress conditions for plants. Soil salinization may be due to natural causes, and is common in the hot and dry regions of the world, or it may be a consequence of inadequate irrigation management practices. It has been estimated that around 20% of the world's cultivated lands and up to half of all irrigated lands are affected by high salinity. Moreover, at the present time, there is more arable land being lost through salinity than is gained through the clearing of forests. In this chapter, the ability of plant beneficial microorganisms, notably plant growth-promoting (PGP) bacteria and mycorrhizae, to facilitate plant growth in the presence of salt is reviewed and discussed. Particular attention is paid to the development of a fundamental understanding of precisely how these microorganisms enable plants to proliferate in the presence of otherwise inhibitory levels of salt. A better understanding of these mechanisms is likely to lead to the development of simple and practical approaches for dealing with this problem in the field.

1.1 Introduction

Salinity is an enormous worldwide problem for agriculture, especially for crops that are grown under irrigation. This is because salt is inhibitory to the growth of a large number of different plants (Cuartero and Fernandez-Munoz 1999). Moreover, the

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amount of salt-affected land worldwide is estimated to be >900 million hectares which is approximately 6% of the total global land mass, or about 20% of the world's cultivated area (Flowers 2004). Importantly, around half of the land devoted to the growth of irrigated crops is adversely affected by salt.

Soil salinity inhibits plant growth and development with adverse effects such as osmotic stress, Na^+ and Cl^- toxicity, ethylene production, plasmolysis, nutrient imbalance, production of reactive oxygen species (ROS), and interference with photosynthesis (Sairam and Tyagi 2004). The consequence of these physiological changes is an inhibition of seed germination, seedling growth and vigor, flowering and fruit set. Early responses of plants to drought and salinity are very similar; both are attributed to water stress. Water stress-induced metabolic processes include a decrease in photosynthesis, the production of ROS and generation of the plant hormone abscisic acid (Bartels and Sunkar 2005). When plants are exposed to high salinity, a decrease in the growth rate followed by a gradual recovery to a new reduced growth rate is the plant's first response to the decrease in water potential caused by salt, rather than to any salt-specific toxicity (Verslues et al. 2006). Once taken up, Na^+ may be translocated to shoots in the rapidly moving transpiration stream in the xylem (Smith et al. 1980). Although Na^+ can return to roots via the phloem, this flow is minimal so that leaves or shoots typically accumulate higher concentrations of Na^+ than roots (Tester and Davenport 2003). Moreover, most crops translocate little Na^+ to reproductive or storage structures such as seeds as these organs are fed mainly through the phloem. On the other hand, vegetative tissues are supplied mainly by the xylem flow and therefore tend to be higher in Na^+ levels. The metabolic toxicity of Na^+ is mainly attributed to the Na^+ competition with K^+ for binding sites essential for cellular functioning (Blaha et al. 2000; Tester and Davenport 2003).

Chlorine ion, an essential micronutrient for higher plants, is involved in the oxygen-evolving reactions of photosynthesis, maintaining electrical neutrality across membranes, and adjusting the vacuolative osmotic condition. Root cells take up Cl^- from soil through anion channels; the Cl^- then traverses the root by a symplastic pathway to reach the xylem. Like Na^+ , floral tissues generally have lower Cl^- levels than other shoot parts, and tissues that are fed predominantly through the phloem (e.g., fruits and seeds) tend to have the lowest Cl^- concentrations (White and Broadley 2001). Salinity-induced stress in plants is partly the result of ethylene production (O'Donnell et al. 1996; Cuartero and Fernandez-Munoz 1999; Blumwald 2000; Mayak et al. 2004; Shibli et al. 2007). For instance, ethylene production was stimulated from two- to about tenfold in tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum*) and *Arabidopsis* plants that were exposed to salinity stress (Richard and El-Abd 1989; Hall and Smith 1995). In this regard, in chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*), Kukreja et al. (2005) not only observed a salinity-induced increase in ethylene evolution, but also increases both in 1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate (ACC) content, the immediate precursor of ethylene, and in the activity of the enzyme ACC oxidase. Furthermore, the relationship between salinity stress and ethylene production was consistent with the observation that aminoethoxyvinylglycine (AVG), a chemical inhibitor of ethylene biosynthesis, alleviated salinity-induced

plant responses such as increased hook closure and thickness of seedlings (El Beltagy et al. 1979).

Salt-tolerant plants may be grouped into two categories: salt-excluders and salt-includers. The former group of plants adapt to a saline environment by avoiding salt, whereas the includers take up salt and sequester it. Biochemical strategies to cope with salt stress include (1) selective accumulation or exclusion of ions, (2) control of ion uptake by roots and transport into leaves, (3) compartmentalization of ions at the cellular and whole-plant levels, (4) synthesis of compatible solutes, (5) alteration of membrane structure, (6) induction of antioxidative enzymes, and (7) induction of plant hormones (Khan and Rizvi 1994; Parida and Das 2005). However, it is important to bear in mind that the salt tolerance of any particular species is likely to vary with the growth phase of the plant, the ionic composition of the soil, and the overall health of the plant.

1.2 Mechanisms Used by Plant Growth-Promoting Bacteria

Plant beneficial bacteria are of two general types: those that form a symbiotic relationship, which involves formation of specialized structures or nodules on host plant roots, and those that are free-living in the soil; the latter are often found near, on, or even within the roots of plants (Kloepper et al. 1989; van Peer and Schippers 1989; Frommel et al. 1991). Beneficial free-living soil bacteria are often referred to as plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) and are found in association with the root surfaces of many different plants. However, to be inclusive of the many different types of bacteria that facilitate plant growth, the term plant growth-promoting bacteria (PGPB), is preferred (Bashan and Holguin 1998). Moreover, while numerous free-living soil bacteria are considered to be PGPB, not all bacterial strains of a particular genus and species have identical metabolic capabilities. Thus, for example, some *Pseudomonas putida* strains may actively promote plant growth while others have no measurable effect on plants.

PGPB can function either indirectly or directly (Glick 1995). Indirect promotion of plant growth occurs when bacteria decrease or prevent some of the deleterious effects of a phytopathogenic organism (a fungus or a bacterium) by any one or more of several different mechanisms. On the other hand, direct promotion of plant growth by PGPB generally entails providing the plant with a compound that is synthesized by the bacterium or facilitating the uptake of nutrients from the environment.

Direct promotion of plant growth can occur in several different ways. PGPB may fix atmospheric nitrogen and supply it to plants; synthesize and secrete siderophores which can solubilize and sequester iron from the soil and provide it to plant cells; synthesize different phytohormones, including auxins, cytokinins and gibberelins; solubilize minerals such as phosphorus which then become more readily available for plant growth; and they may synthesize an enzyme that can modulate plant ethylene levels (Brown 1974; Kloepper et al. 1986, 1989; Davison 1988; Lambert and Joos 1989; Glick 1995; Patten and Glick 1996, 2002). In addition, a particular

bacterium may affect plant growth and development using any one, or more, of these mechanisms. Moreover, since many PGPB possess several traits that enable them to facilitate plant growth, a bacterium may utilize different traits at various times during the life cycle of the plant, and may vary considerably in its effectiveness depending upon the plant host and the soil composition. Interestingly, PGPB generally have little or no measurable effect on plant growth when the plants are cultivated in nutrient-rich soil and grown under optimal conditions in the absence of stress.

One of the major mechanisms that many PGPB use to facilitate plant growth is the lowering of plant ethylene levels through the action of the enzyme ACC deaminase (Glick 1995, 2004; Glick et al. 1998, 2007a, b). A model was previously developed to explain the role of ACC deaminase in the promotion of plant growth (Glick et al. 1998). In this model, the ACC deaminase-expressing bacteria bind to the surface of either plant seeds or roots and, in response to exuded tryptophan (or other small molecules), the bacteria synthesize and secrete indole acetic acid (IAA) (Fallik et al. 1994; Patten and Glick 2002), some of which is taken up by the plant. Together with the endogenous pool of plant IAA, the IAA taken up by the plant can stimulate plant cell proliferation and elongation and/or it can induce synthesis of the plant enzyme ACC synthase which converts *S*-adenosylmethionine to ACC (Kende 1993). Some of the newly synthesized ACC is exuded by the plant, along with other small molecules, and taken up by the bacteria where it is cleaved by ACC deaminase to form α -ketobutyrate and ammonia, both of which are readily metabolized by the bacteria (Penrose and Glick 2001; Whipps 1990). Some of the ACC that remains within the plant root or seed may be converted to ethylene when the enzyme ACC oxidase is present (Kende 1993). In essence, bacteria that express ACC deaminase, and are bound to the surface of roots or seeds, act as a sink for ACC, thereby decreasing the amount of ethylene that can form when the plant is stressed (Glick et al. 1998; Glick 2004). In this way, ACC deaminase-expressing PGPB protect plants against the growth inhibition that might otherwise result following flooding, extremes of temperature, the presence of organic or inorganic toxicants, phytopathogens, drought, or high salt (Glick 2004).

Given that the overwhelming majority of rhizobacteria are able to synthesize and secrete IAA (Patten and Glick 1996), the question arises why the IAA produced by these bacteria does not eventually result in inhibitory levels of ethylene in response to the IAA (activating ACC synthase transcription). In fact, as the level of ethylene rises, it progressively blocks IAA signal transduction (Dharmasiri and Estell 2004; Glick et al. 2007a). Thus, ACC deaminase works synergistically with IAA so that when a bacterium expresses ACC deaminase, the enzyme lowers the ethylene repression of auxin response factor synthesis, and allows IAA to “do its job” and increase plant growth without producing excessive amounts of ethylene (Glick et al. 2007a).

1.3 Mechanisms Used by Plant Growth-Promoting Fungi

There is an enormous amount of literature regarding the use of fungi to protect agricultural plants from salt-induced damage. However, microorganisms promoting salt tolerance in trees have received relatively little attention. Thus, while numerous

reports have highlighted the beneficial role of arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi, only a few of them have focused on the positive effects induced by ectomycorrhizal (ECM) fungi which are typically found in association with many trees in nature. Surprisingly, to our knowledge, only one report (Waller et al. 2005) deals with the alleviation of salt stress by the employment of a nonmycorrhizal soil fungus. The mechanisms by which PGP fungi (both mycorrhizal and nonmycorrhizal ones) enhance plant tolerance to salinity are described in the following section.

The main mechanisms thought to be involved in salt stress alleviation by AM fungi may be summarized as follows: (1) improvement of mineral nutrition leading to plant growth promotion; (2) variation in the plant accumulation of Na and K as well as soluble sugars and electrolytes; (3) modification of some physiological processes and enzymatic activities involved in plant antioxidative reactions; and (4) alteration of the root architecture facilitating water uptake by the plant. Obviously, differential gene expression/protein synthesis induced by the establishment of the symbiosis between the fungi and plant under salt stress is at the base of these strategies. Early studies demonstrated that improved P nutrition increases crop yields under saline conditions (Hirrel and Gerdemann 1978; Champagnol 1979). In addition, several papers (Poss et al. 1985; Awad et al. 1990; Azcón and Atrash 1997; Ruiz-Lozano et al. 1996; Cantrell and Linderman 2001; Feng et al. 2002; Colla et al. 2008) have compared the effect of AM fungi with P applications on plant growth in saline conditions. It is now evident that the increased salinity tolerance in mycorrhizal plants is based on AM fungi-catalyzed effects, such as the improvement of the plant's water status, and the enhancement of nutrient uptake from the soil (Smith and Read 1997). Moreover, the improvement of plant nutrition and water uptake may be attributed to mycorrhizal-induced modifications of the root architecture, which result in more numerous, thicker and/or more branched roots in herbaceous plants, and in a strong increase in the number of laterals of highest order in woody plants (Berta et al. 1993, 2002, 2005; Gamalero et al. 2002, 2004). Furthermore, studies on the effect of salinity on mycorrhizal plants have shown that AM roots maintain a high K^+/Na^+ ratio (Allen and Cunningham 1983; Pfeiffer and Bloss 1988; Sannazzaro et al. 2006; Giri et al. 2004, 2007).

Some physiological processes, such as increased carbon dioxide exchange rate, stomatal conductance and water use efficiency, all involved in osmoregulation, are facilitated by AM fungi (Ruiz-Lozano et al. 1996). Depending on the particular fungal species involved, AM plants under water deficit conditions are more efficient in taking up water than non-AM plants under the same conditions (Marulanda et al. 2003; Khalvati et al. 2005). An improved osmoregulation capacity in AM maize (*Zea mays* L. cv. Yedan 13) plants is indicated by the higher soluble sugar and electrolyte concentrations recorded (Feng et al. 2002). Furthermore, salt is known to reduce the activity or abundance of Hg-sensitive water channels, termed aquaporins, in plants (Carvajal et al. 1999, 2000). In salt-stressed tomato plants preinoculated with a mixture of *Glomus geosporum* and *G. intraradices*, the content of aquaporins in roots is reduced, while the content of these proteins in leaves is significantly increased, suggesting a major impact of AM fungi on the distribution of water throughout the plant. In addition, it is likely that AM fungi facilitate the mobilization of water in the presence of salt by mediating its transfer from the root to the shoot (Ouziad et al. 2006).

A higher relative water content, leading to the prevention of leaf dehydration caused by drought or salinity, has been measured in the leaves of common beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) inoculated with the AM fungus *G. intraradices* (Aroca et al. 2007). In agreement with the previously mentioned beneficial effect of AM fungi on the host plant water status, the variation in the relative water content of AM plants is associated with a reduction of the transpiration stream and an increase of free exuded sap flow (Aroca et al. 2007).

Damage to plants that are induced by salt stress may also be a consequence of the production of ROS (Hernandez et al. 1995). In this regard, plants with high concentrations of antioxidants or antioxidative enzymes are typically more resistant to damage by ROS (Spychalla and Desbough 1990; Dionisio-Sese and Tobita 1998; Jiang and Zhang 2002). It has been well established that AM fungi affect the expression of various antioxidative enzymes. For example, in soybean (*Glycine max*) plants that were grown in the presence of salt and were inoculated with a salt-adapted isolate of the AM fungus *G. etunicatum*, the amount of peroxidase and polyphenoloxidase activity was found to increase (Ghorbanli et al. 2004).

Clear positive effects of AM fungi on the formation of nodules and the expression of antioxidative activity by leguminous plants have recently been described (Garg and Manchanda 2008). Thus, although pigeonpea (*Cajanus cajan*) plants exposed to salt had a higher number of nodules compared to untreated plants, these nodules were characterized by reduced biomass, relative permeability, lipid peroxidation, acetylene-reducing activity (ARA), and leghemoglobin content. Inoculation with *G. mosseae* increased nodulation, leghemoglobin content, nitrogenase activity, and the activity of several antioxidant enzymes (superoxide dismutase, catalase, ascorbate peroxidase, peroxidase, and glutathione reductase), suggesting that these factors may be responsible for the positive effects of mycorrhiza to stress-induced premature nodule senescence. The synthesis of the plant polyamines putrescine, spermidine and spermine is often affected by stressful environmental conditions such high salt concentrations (Krishnamurthy and Bhagwat 1989; Aziz et al. 1998; Simon-Sarkadi et al. 2002). Recently, Sannazzaro et al. (2007) found higher amounts of total free polyamines in AM plants (*Lotus glaber*) compared to non-AM ones suggesting that the modulation of polyamine content could be one of the mechanisms involved in the adaptation of plant by AM fungi to saline soils.

AM fungi may influence the level of the plant hormone, abscisic acid (Danneberg et al. 1992). This hormone plays a key role in mediating plant responses to several stresses (Zhang et al. 2006) For instance, it promotes stomatal closure to reduce transpirational water loss and activates a number of genes involved in stress responses. As observed by Jahromi et al. (2008), the abscisic acid content in lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*) roots colonized by the AM fungus *G. intraradices* was significantly higher than in non-AM lettuce roots. Furthermore, in the presence of salt, non-AM roots accumulated more abscisic acid than roots colonized by the AM fungus. Thus, AM fungi may alter the expression of abscisic acid and

thereby modulate gene expression that results in protection of the plant against salt stress.

In addition to the other mechanisms used by AM fungi, it has recently been demonstrated that modifications of plant morphogenetic parameters and photosynthetic efficiency induced by these organisms may be involved in supporting the plant's development in salt conditions (Gamalero et al. 2009). Thus, leaves of cucumber plants inoculated with the AM fungus *Gigaspora rosea* and grown under salt stress were more abundant and had a higher average and total leaf projected area than uninoculated plants. Roots of AM plants under salt stress were more developed than those of uninoculated plants grown in presence or absence of salt. It is likely that the higher total root length, surface area and tip number found in the roots of AM plants may be more efficient at supporting plant growth in saline soils. In addition, while the presence of salt caused a fivefold reduction in leaf photosynthetic efficiency (PI), AM plants exposed to salt showed PI values comparable to plants grown in absence of salt (Gamalero et al. 2009). It is likely that the observed improvement of photosynthetic activity in the presence of AM fungi is related to the increase of chlorophyll content in the leaves of AM plants (Ruiz-Lozano et al. 1996; Giri and Mukerji 2004; Sannazzaro et al. 2006; Zuccarini 2007).

Although several *in vitro* studies (Hutchison 1990; Chen et al. 2001; Kernaghan et al. 2002; Bois et al. 2006; Langenfeld-Heyser et al. 2007) have demonstrated the potential of salt-tolerant ECM fungi to enhance the tolerance of trees to salinity, little is known about the mechanisms involved. However, variations in the plant water status and in the Na^+ and K^+ content induced by the interaction of the plant with ECM have been reported. For example, Muhsin and Zwiazek (2002a, b) found that the ECM fungus *Hebeloma crustuliniforme* enhanced the root hydraulic conductance of white spruce (*Picea glauca*) trees in the presence of salt. Reduction of Na^+ and Cl^- , with a concomitant increase of PO_4^{3-} and K^+ , in the tissues of seagrape (*Coccoloba uvifera* L.) seedlings colonized by the ECM *Scleroderma bermudense* indicate a higher osmoregulating capacity of ECM plants in saline soils (Bandou et al. 2006). Similar results were obtained by Nguyen et al. (2006) in ECM spruce and pine. Nevertheless, this salt exclusion mechanism seems to be host plant-specific (Yi et al. 2008). In fact, while salt-treated aspen (*Populus tremuloides* Michx.) colonized by the ECM fungus *H. crustuliniforme* had higher Na^+ and Cl^- than non-ECM plants, Na^+ and Cl^- concentrations in ECM and non-ECM birch (*Betula papyrifera* Marsh.) did not differ. Nevertheless, no information exists about the possibility of salt tolerance in these trees when colonized by AM fungi.

Finally, it has been found that the PGP-endophytic fungus *Piriformospora indica* protects barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) seedlings from the stress induced by moderate concentration of salt as well as biotic stress, such as infection with the necrotrophic fungus *Fusarium culmorum*. This beneficial activity appears to be a consequence of an increase of antioxidant activity in the plant and the activation of systemic resistance induced by the colonization of the plant by *P. indica* (Waller et al. 2005). From this brief overview, it is apparent that the mechanisms employed by PGP fungi are quite different from those used by PGPB. Moreover, these two types

of microorganisms colonize plant roots (and possibly other tissues) very differently. Thus, it should be possible, by better understanding of how plants, bacteria, and mycorrhizae interact with one another, to eventually design/engineer this tripartite relationship so that it is most beneficial for the promotion of plant growth in the presence of salt and other environmental stresses.

1.4 Amelioration of Salt Stress by Plant Growth-Promoting Bacteria

Numerous reports on the role of soil bacteria in mitigating the inhibitory effects of salt on growth and development of plants are available. For the most part, the mechanistic basis of this protection is unknown. However, several studies have suggested a variety of possible explanations for this behavior.

It is well known that a variety of environmental stresses, including the presence of salt, induce the production of ethylene in a number of different plants (Jones and El-Abd 1989; Abeles et al. 1992; Hall and Smith 1995; Kukreja et al. 2005; Parida and Das 2005). While the physiology of salt-stressed plants is often dramatically altered compared to plants grown in the absence of salt (Munns 2002; Sairam and Tyagi 2004; Parker et al. 2006), many of the changes observed (including increased production of osmolytes and antioxidants) may be secondary effects of increased ethylene levels within the plant. In this regard, it has been demonstrated that the *NTHK1* gene from tobacco, which encodes an ethylene receptor, is specifically induced by salt (Zhang et al. 2001; Cao et al. 2006). If ethylene does indeed act as a stress signal activating the synthesis of a range of salt-stress response genes in plants then it should be possible, by attenuating plant ethylene levels, to significantly modify the stress response of the plant to salt. Based on the idea that bacterial strains that contain the enzyme ACC deaminase can lower ethylene levels throughout the plants where these bacteria are bound to the roots, Mayak et al. (2004) reasoned that these bacteria should not only lower the level of stress ethylene following exposure of plants to salt, they should also prevent much of the growth inhibition that might otherwise ensue. Mayak et al. (2004) collected soil samples from dried river beds in the arid and salty Arava region in the southern part of the Negev desert in Israel. PGPB isolated from these soil samples were selected to assess their ability to produce ACC deaminase and, on the basis of preliminary testing, one bacterium, *Achrobacter piechaudii* ARV8, was selected for further characterization. This strain not only significantly lowered the ethylene produced by tomato plants following the addition of salt, but also dramatically increased both root and shoot growth in the presence of salt concentrations up to 200 mM. This pioneering work served as the basis for a spate of experimental work on several different plants by scientists from all over the world. Since then, laboratories from India, Pakistan, China and Canada have reported successfully employing ACC deaminase-expressing bacteria to promote plant growth in the presence

of high levels of salt (Saravanakumar and Samiyappan 2006; Cheng et al. 2007; Nadeem et al. 2007; Yue et al. 2007). These studies have included groundnut (Saravanakumar and Samiyappan 2006), maize (Nadeem et al. 2007), cotton (Yue et al. 2007), and canola (Cheng et al. 2007). Importantly, Saravanakumar and Samiyappan (2006) demonstrated that the protection against growth inhibition that ACC deaminase-expressing bacteria provide to plants grown in salt-impacted soil is evident in the field as well as in a laboratory or greenhouse setting. In the experiments reported by Cheng et al. (2007), only wild-type *P. putida* UW4 and not an ACC deaminase minus mutant of this bacterium protected canola plants against growth inhibition by salt. This result provides a clear demonstration of the role of ethylene in growth inhibition by high salt. In addition to the work mentioned above, we are aware of the unpublished results of researchers in Uzbekistan and Iran which are also consistent with the successful use of ACC deaminase-expressing bacteria to promote plant growth in the presence of high levels of salt, both in the laboratory and in the field.

It was found, in a recent study of tomatoes treated with salt, that while the chemical ethylene inhibitors CoCl_2 and NiCl_2 significantly reduced ethylene accumulation in the headspace of the reaction vessel, thereby reducing epinasty, the negative effects of the salt on growth and other physiological parameters were essentially unchanged (Shibli et al. 2007). These results were interpreted as indicating that ethylene does not make a major contribution to the inhibition of plant growth under saline conditions (Shibli et al. 2007). The differences between the results with chemical inhibitors of ethylene production and those observed with bacteria that express ACC deaminase may reflect artifacts that are part of the closed system including tomato microshoots that were utilized to study the effects of salt plus chemical inhibitors. On the other hand, several studies that employed PGPB that contained ACC deaminase were conducted with whole plants in various types of soil (including in the field) reflecting a more natural situation. Moreover, in addition to the studies reported using ACC deaminase-expressing bacteria, transgenic canola plants that express a bacterial ACC deaminase gene under the control of a root-specific promoter were significantly protected against the growth inhibitory effects of 50, 100 and 200 mM salt compared to nontransformed plants (Sergeeva et al. 2006), consistent with the fact that ethylene is a major contributor to growth inhibition in the presence of salt.

A number of researchers have reported that treatment of plants with either *Azospirillum lipoferum* or *A. brasilense* can mitigate some of the inhibitory effects of salt stress on wheat, maize, beans or lettuce (Bacilio et al. 2004; Hamdia et al. 2004; Rabie and Almadini 2005; Barassi et al. 2006). Since at least some of these strains do not possess ACC deaminase activity (Holguin and Glick 2001), those bacteria must utilize mechanisms other than lowering ethylene with ACC deaminase to protect plants. In this regard, it is possible (but not proven) that bacterial IAA, synthesized by these *Azospirillum* spp. Strains, is responsible for the promotion of plant growth in the presence of salt.

A number of other bacterial mechanisms have been implicated, but not proven, to be involved in ameliorating some of the inhibitory effects of high salt concentrations on plant growth and development. In one study, several different commercial

seed treatments, primarily consisting of various *Bacillus* spp. strains, were tested for the ability to protect squash plants against salt stress (Yildirim et al. 2006). These workers concluded that these seed treatments worked by altering the uptake of minerals into the plant thereby increasing the K^+/Na^+ ratio which is positively correlated with plant growth. Other workers have suggested that *N*-acyl-homoserine lactone quorum-sensing signaling molecules can mediate the ability of two different strains of the PGPB *Burkholderia graminis* to promote tomato plant growth and to induce protection against salt stress (Barriuso et al. 2008). While the data presented clearly indicate the involvement of quorum sensing as a component of the overall functioning of these bacteria, quorum sensing per se is unlikely to fully explain the mechanistic basis behind the ability of these strains to protect plants against salt stress.

In a novel approach to developing an understanding of some of the mechanisms used by PGPB to facilitate plant growth in the presence of salt, protein changes that occur in the bacterium *Pseudomonas fluorescens* MSP-393 as a consequence of salt stress were elaborated using a proteomics approach (Paul et al. 2006). Thus, when *P. fluorescens* MSP-393 was incubated in the presence of high salt, the synthesis of a number of unique proteins was induced. Not surprisingly, the majority of the proteins that could be identified were homologous to stress proteins from other prokaryotes. It was therefore suggested that, by maintaining its normal metabolic capabilities in the presence of salt, a salt-stressed PGPB is still able to facilitate plant growth (by whatever, unspecified, mechanism(s) it normally employs).

Finally, two separate laboratories have reported the isolation and characterization of different bacterial strains, all of which confer some measure of salt tolerance on treated plants, specifically maize and wheat (Príncipe et al. 2007; Egamberdieva et al. 2008). These studies evaluated various biological activities of these bacteria such as IAA production, biocontrol activity, siderophore production, phosphate solubilization, plant growth promotion with and without salt, and bacterial genus and species. Unfortunately, from the data presented, no correlation between salt stress amelioration activity and any one or two biological traits measured was found. Thus, while it may be straightforward to select soil bacteria that can ameliorate some of the inhibitory effects of salt stress, these studies do not provide any clear indication as to the mechanism (s) that are employed by these bacteria.

1.5 Amelioration of Salt Stress by Plant Growth-Promoting Fungi

Despite the fact that some AM fungi naturally occur in saline environments (Pond et al. 1984; Rozema et al. 1986; Ho 1987; van Duin et al. 1989; Cooke and Lefor 1990; Sengupta and Chaudhuri 1990; Hoefnagels et al. 1993; Johnson-Green et al. 1995), the reports on the effects of salts on AM fungi are contradictory. For instance, some researchers observed inhibition of AM colonization by salt

(Ojala et al. 1983; Duke et al. 1986; Rozema et al. 1986; Dixon et al. 1993; Johnson-Green et al. 1995; Juniper 1996; McMillen et al. 1998), while others noted that the development of the symbiosis remained unaffected by salt application (Levy et al. 1983; Hartmond et al. 1987). It is likely that AM fungi isolated from saline soils are better adapted to this environmental condition and, therefore, are more efficient at plant growth promotion under salt stress. Surprisingly, in one instance, it was found that AM fungi from nonsaline soil performed better in the amelioration of plant growth under salt stress than AM fungi from saline soils (Cantrell and Linderman 2001). On the other hand, in these experiments, AM fungi from saline soils colonized roots more intensively than AM fungi from nonsaline soils, indicating that, in this case, the plant beneficial effects of AM fungi were independent of the root colonization efficiency and the hypothetical adaptation of the microorganism to salt. Similar results were obtained for two strains of *Glomus mosseae*, one isolated from a saline soil and the other from a nonsaline soil (Tian et al. 2004). The fungus from the saline soil induced a high accumulation of sodium and chloride and had very little effect on the alleviation of salt stress in cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum*) plants suggesting that the main mechanism involved in the protection of these plants from the detrimental effects of salinity by AM fungi is related to the capability of the fungi to influence the uptake of sodium and chloride. This notwithstanding, performing salt-acclimatization of AM fungi, by exposing the fungal isolate to gradual increases of NaCl concentration, has been reported to increase their efficiency in supporting plant growth in saline conditions (Sharifi et al. 2007). In addition, it is important to stress that a preferential association exists between plants and AM fungi (Bever et al. 2002; Gollotte et al. 2004; Copetta et al. 2006; Pivato et al. 2007) that could help to select the appropriate/specific fungus to better tolerate salt stress.

Since AM fungi are obligate symbionts, differentiation between the AM fungal response to environmental stress and the AM fungal response to plant-mediated factors is not straightforward. In an effort to sort it out, several workers have attempted to understand how AM fungi react to environmental stimuli by focusing on the precolonization phase and spore germination (Daniels and Trappe 1980; Elias and Safir 1987; Gianinazzi-Pearson et al. 1989). Following this approach, Juniper and Abbott (2006) observed that the main effect of soil salinity is a delay of spore germination and inhibition of hyphal growth from propagules of AM fungal isolates. In addition, in the presence of salt, the number of branched absorbing structures and the rate of sporulation both significantly declined (Jahromi et al. 2008).

Despite numerous contradictory results, especially in the earlier literature, the more recent literature that is our main focus document a significant extent of plant protection by AM fungi. As pointed out by Cantrell and Linderman (2001), it may be important to preinoculate plants with AM fungi in order to firmly establish their symbiotic relationship which might otherwise be inhibited/prevented by salt in the soil. In fact, AM lettuce and onion (*Allium cepa* L.) transplants grown in saline soil had higher shoot biomass than noninoculated plants indicating that preinoculated AM plants grow better than non-AM plants under saline conditions (Cantrell and Linderman 2001). The composite application of AM fungi has been reported to be

more efficient than single inoculation in alleviating plant salt stress. As an example, the growth of *Acacia auriculiformis* under salinity stress varied with the fungal species used, but the mixed inoculum (*Glomus fasciculatus* and *macrocarpum*) resulted in the highest root colonization, biomass production, K^+ concentration, PO_4^{2-} level, and chlorophyll content at all salinity levels (Giri et al. 2003). The contribution of this mixed inoculum to plant growth is not limited to improved nutrition, but also to variation in root development so that plants treated with the two fungi had very branched roots. This AM-mediated modification of root architecture is probably caused by the decreased meristematic activity of root apices as shown in leek (Berta et al. 2002). AM fungi also increase the number of adventitious roots, thereby improving nutrient uptake and water balance in the host plant under salinity stress. The root modifications previously described occur in herbaceous plants, where AM fungi also delay root senescence (Lingua et al. 1999). Different modifications are described in AM woody plants where root turnover may be facilitated. These two strategies (delayed senescence and root turnover) enable AM fungi to accomplish the same result, namely a more vital and efficient root system, that could allow plants to better tolerate abiotic stresses, including salt stress. The positive effects of AM fungi on plants under salt conditions may also lead to increases in fruit yield. As an example, in tomato, fruit fresh yield was enhanced by 29% under nonsaline and by 60% under saline water conditions following preinoculation of transplants with *G. mosseae* (Al-Karaki 2006). It would be interesting to ascertain whether the same occurs in other fruit plants, whose root systems are strongly influenced by AM fungi (Schellenbaum et al. 1991; Berta et al. 1995; Manschke et al. 1995).

AM fungi can also stimulate the rhizobial symbiosis efficiency of leguminous plants exposed to salt. As observed by Giri et al. (2004), in saline soil, plants of *Sesbania aegyptiaca* and *S. grandiflora* inoculated with *Glomus macrocarpum* had higher root and shoot dry biomass production, chlorophyll content and PO_4^{2-} , N and Mg^{+2} concentrations, than non-AM seedlings. Moreover, the number of nodules was significantly higher in AM than non-AM plants. Interestingly, the mycorrhizal dependency of both *Sesbania* species in salt conditions increased with plant age suggesting that, under salinity, plants need AM fungi not only for acclimatization but also for continued nutrient uptake for their development (Giri et al. 2004). In addition, the mycorrhizal dependency is higher for salt-sensitive than for salt-tolerant plant varieties (Sannazzaro et al. 2006).

Although Basidiomycetes are generally considered to be relatively salt-sensitive (Tresner and Hayes 1971), several isolates of *Laccaria*, *Hebeloma*, and *Pisolithus* have been characterized as relatively salt tolerant (Chen et al. 2001; Kernaghan et al. 2002). In addition, several in vitro studies highlight the salt tolerance of ECM fungi, generally ascribed to salt exclusion and osmoregulation, and their potential exploitation under field conditions (Chen et al. 2001; Kernaghan et al. 2002; Bois et al. 2006). Experiments performed under greenhouse conditions confirmed the beneficial effects of ECM fungi on plant growth in the presence of salt. Thus, seagrape plants colonized by *S. bermudense* were exposed to a wide range of NaCl levels. The beneficial effects of the fungus on plant growth and

mineral nutrition occurred both under salt stress and nonstress conditions, suggesting that the ECM effect in improving plant growth is not a specific process induced by salinity. In addition, as already reported for AM fungi, the mycorrhizal dependency of seagrape increased with increasing NaCl levels (Bandou et al. 2006).

It has recently been shown that the fungus *Paxillus involutus* can tolerate high NaCl concentrations (Langenfeld-Heyser et al. 2007). The establishment of symbiosis between this fungus and the salt-sensitive poplar hybrid *Populus canescens* positively affected plant biomass and reduced Na⁺ uptake. The plant's symptoms of salt stress (e.g., leaf degradation) were delayed but not fully prevented by the symbiosis (Langenfeld-Heyser et al. 2007). It has been suggested that the fungus might provide a physical barrier against salt uptake into the root (Muhsin and Zwiazek 2002b). However, microscopical analysis performed by energy-dispersive X-ray microanalysis showed that tissues of both mycorrhizal and nonmycorrhizal roots contained comparable amounts of Na⁺ and Cl⁻. In addition, outer cell walls adjacent to mycorrhizal hyphae contained higher sodium concentrations than those of nonmycorrhizal plants indicating that mycorrhizal roots have access to more NaCl than nonmycorrhizal roots and that the hyphal mantle does not provide a physical barrier against NaCl influx.

Under saline conditions, the effect of ECM fungi may vary according to the plant. In their work, Yi et al. (2008) compared the impact of the ECM *H. crustuliniforme* on trembling aspen (*P. tremuloides* Michx.) and paper birch (*B. papyrifera*) in the presence of salt. Despite the fact that both tree species are relatively tolerant to NaCl, ECM inoculation in NaCl-treated plants increased the biomass. However, roots of NaCl-treated aspen inoculated with *H. crustuliniforme* had over twofold higher concentrations of sodium compared with nonmycorrhizal ones. On the contrary, Na⁺ and Cl⁻ concentrations in mycorrhizal and nonmycorrhizal birch did not differ. What is clear from the bulk of the data examining the interaction of mycorrhizae and plants in the presence of salt is that these fungi typically protect plants from growth inhibition by salt. On the other hand, notwithstanding many years of experimentation with different plants and mycorrhizal fungi in different soils, the detailed mechanisms used by these PGP fungi remain elusive. However, it is likely that through the use of microarray technology, proteomics and metabolomics to study the changes in both plants and mycorrhizae that occur when these two organisms interact will provide greater insight into these fundamental mechanisms.

1.6 Examples of Generating Salt Tolerance with Bacteria and Mycorrhizae

Many of the manuscripts mentioned earlier in this chapter summarize the host of beneficial effects of either PGPB or fungi on salt-stressed plants. In addition, several pieces of evidence suggest the possibility of additive or synergistic effects

between these beneficial microorganisms in supporting plant growth in saline conditions. However, the interactions among PGPB, PGP fungi, plants and stressful conditions have not been studied in depth. Moreover, despite the fact that mycorrhizal helper bacteria (MHB) (Garbaye and Bowen 1989), as well as fungal endophytic bacteria (Bonfante-Fasolo and Scannerini 1977), were discovered some time ago for ECM fungi, to our knowledge no studies have been performed on the possible enhancement of plant tolerance to salt stress by the combination of ECM fungi and these bacteria. Studies dealing with the coinoculation of bacteria and fungi on plants exposed to salt stress have mainly been focused on the rhizobia–AM fungi–legume tripartite symbioses (Hatimi 1999; Diouf et al. 2005; Rabie and Almadini 2005).

In Northern Africa, the salt-tolerant tree *Acacia cyanophylla* is used to stabilize the coastal dunes, increase saline soil fertility and produce large amounts of wood and forage. Soil salinization and the low availability of water induce severe reductions of plant height and dry biomass production (Hatimi 1999). Nevertheless, the inhibitory physiological alterations of *A. cyanophylla* that were induced by salt stress were moderated in the presence of *Bradyrhizobium* sp. Moreover, the tolerance of the plant to salinity increased significantly when this symbiosis between *A. cyanophylla* and *Bradyrhizobium* sp. was associated with a mixture of endomycorrhizal fungi isolated from coastal dune soils. In plants grown in the presence of salt and treated with both microsymbionts, the observed reduction of dry matter was lower than when plants were inoculated with any one of these organisms (Hatimi 1999). Similar results were obtained by combining *Glomus intraradices* and *Bradyrhizobia* sp. with salt-stressed *Acacia auriculiformis* (A. Cunn. ex Benth.) or *Acacia mangium* (Willd.) seedlings (Diouf et al. 2005).

An increase of plant tolerance to salt stress was observed in fava bean (*Vicia faba*) plants inoculated with *Glomus clarum*. And the presence of nitrogen fixing rhizobia in mycorrhizal fava bean plants resulted in an additional increase of plant tolerance to salt. Moreover, the inhibitory effects of salinity on nitrogen fixation were significantly reduced by preinoculating the fava bean plants with the AM fungus (Rabie and Almadini 2005).

A clear example of the impact that salt stress can have on the interactions between mycorrhiza and bacteria has recently been described by Gamalero et al. (2008a, 2009). Under nonstressful conditions, the ACC deaminase-expressing strain *P. putida* UW4 stimulated the development of the AM fungus *G. rosea*, and this positive cooperation between microorganisms induced synergistic effects on plant growth. Unfortunately, with this system, this synergism disappeared when the plants were exposed to high levels of salt (Gamalero et al. 2009). The lack of these positive interactions in the presence of salt may be explained in several different ways. For example, plants exposed to salt stress can release different root exudates that may decrease or abolish the synergism between the microorganisms, even to the point where they are in competition with one another. Alternatively, since salt stress can induce an increase in the level of ethylene in the stressed plant, under these conditions, the amount of ACC deaminase that is synthesized by the bacterial strain may become insufficient to reduce the ethylene due to both the

salt stress and to the localized plant response that occurs as a direct consequence of AM colonization. Given that both PGPB and fungi can separately ameliorate some of the effects of salt stress, there is a paucity of studies where these two types of microorganisms are utilized together. Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe that, with the right combinations of bacteria and fungi, the salt stress of many important agricultural plants may be decreased significantly. In turn, this would increase crop productivity on saline soils and facilitate agricultural practice on some marginal lands.

1.7 Conclusion

1. Given the current reluctance on the part of many consumers worldwide to embrace the use as foods of genetically modified plants, it may be advantageous to consider the use of either PGPB or fungi (or a combination of the two) as a means of promoting plant growth in the presence of otherwise inhibitory levels of salt.
2. Using PGPB and/or fungi instead of genetically manipulated plants is also advantageous when one considers the large number of different plants, the many cultivars of those plants, and the multiplicity of genes that would need to be engineered into plants to ensure that they are salt tolerant.
3. PGPB or fungi may be readily selected and/or manipulated to maximally protect a wide range of different salt-stressed plants. Thus, it is easier to select and/or modify a few dozen soil bacteria than hundreds or even thousands of different plant cultivars.
4. The wide-scale use of PGPB and/or fungi may decrease the worldwide dependence on agricultural chemicals. Moreover, it is a technology that is readily accessible to farmers in both developed and developing countries.
5. The successful implementation of this approach has already been demonstrated in the field to a limited extent. However, the large-scale use of this technology would benefit from additional studies, particularly those directed toward understanding how the synergism between PGPB and fungi might be facilitated.

Acknowledgments The work from our laboratories that is cited in this manuscript has been financially supported by grants from the Italian MIUR and by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada.

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Chapter 2

Recent Advances in Plant Growth Promotion by Phosphate-Solubilizing Microbes

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Abstract Most soils contain large reserves of total phosphorus (P), but its fixation and precipitation with soil constituents cause a major P-deficiency and severely restrict the growth and yield of plants. The use of chemical P-fertilizers is obviously the best means to circumvent P-deficiency, but their use is always limited due to its spiraling cost. In order to increase the availability of P and to reduce the use of chemical fertilizers, solubilization of insoluble P by phosphate-solubilizing microorganisms has provided an alternative to chemical phosphatic fertilizer. Besides P, these organisms promote the growth of plants by N₂ fixation, enhancement of other plant nutrients, synthesizing phytohormones, suppressing plant diseases (bio-control) and reducing the toxicity of ethylene through 1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate (ACC) deaminase. In this chapter, attention is paid to understanding the fundamental and molecular basis as to how precisely these microbes, notably bacteria and fungi, help plants to grow better in P-deficient soils. Effective use of such microbes is likely to result in an ideal cropping system with a lesser impact on the environment through decreased application of chemical fertilizers.

2.1 Introduction

Phosphorus is one of the major nutrients limiting plant growth. In contrast, P is required for growth and development of plants and promotes N₂ fixation. It is also involved in photosynthesis, energy transfer, signal transduction, macromolecular biosynthesis, and respiration (Saber et al. 2005; Fernández et al. 2007). However, most of the soils throughout the world are P-deficient (Batjes 1997) and, therefore, require P to replenish the P-demand by crop plants. Worldwide, 5.7 billion hectares

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contain too little available P for sustaining optimal crop production (Hinsinger 2001), and P-ion concentration in most soils varies from 0.1 to 10 μM while P required for optimal growth ranges from 1 to 5 μM for grasses and from 5 to 60 μM for high P-demanding crops, such as, tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum*) and pea (*Pisum sativum*) (Raghothama 1999). Suboptimal levels of P can, however, lead to a 5–15% loss in the yield of plants (Hinsinger 2001). To circumvent the P-deficiency, synthetic P-fertilizers are applied. The repeated and injudicious applications of these fertilizers, however, lead to (1) the loss of soil fertility, (2) disturbance to microbial diversity and their associated metabolic activities, and (3) reduced yield of agronomic crops. Moreover, after application, a considerable amount of P is rapidly transformed into less available forms by forming a complex with Al or Fe in acid soils or with Ca in calcareous soils (Goldstein 1986; Toro 2007) before plant roots have had a chance to absorb it. This has led to the search for environment-friendly and economically feasible alternative strategies for improving crop production in low or P-deficient soils. Phosphorus is present in soils both in organic and inorganic forms. Of these, organic forms, as found in humus and other organic materials including decayed plant, animal and microbial tissues, is an important reservoir of immobilized P accounting for about 20–80% of total soil P (Richardson 1994). Organic P compounds can be slowly mineralized as available inorganic P or they can be immobilized as part of the soil organic matter (Mckenzie and Roberts 1990). The process of mineralization/solubilization or immobilization affected by rhizosphere microbes, especially phosphate-solubilizing microorganisms (PSM), serves as an alternative to chemical phosphatic fertilizers and provides the available forms of P to plants (Bojinova et al. 2008; Oliveira et al. 2008).

Besides providing P to the plants, the PSM(s) also facilitate the growth of plants by stimulating the efficiency of N_2 fixation, accelerating the accessibility of other trace elements and by synthesizing important growth promoting substances (Wani et al. 2007a; Mittal et al. 2008), including siderophores (Wani et al. 2007b) and antibiotics (Lipping et al. 2008), and providing protection to plants against soil-borne pathogens (Hamdali et al. 2008). Accordingly, these microbial communities when used singly (Poonguzhali et al. 2008; Chen et al. 2008) or in combination with other rhizosphere microbes (Zaidi and Khan 2006; Wani et al. 2007c; Vikram and Hamzehzarghani 2008) have shown substantial measurable effects on plants in conventional agronomic soils. Furthermore, bacterial strains capable of solubilizing P have also been isolated from various niches of saline–alkali soils. For example, strain RMLU-26, identified as *Xanthomonas campestris* with the ability to efficiently solubilize P, was subjected to *N*-methyl-*N'*-nitro-*N*-nitrosoguanidine (NTG) for development of mutants. The wild-type and mutant strains of *X. campestris* revealed a differential response to various stress factors (high pH, temperature, and salt concentration). Both the wild and mutant strains revealed substantial P-solubilization, but percent P_2O_5 solubilization by both strains revealed a steep decline in tricalcium phosphate (TCP) solubilization with an increase in NaCl concentration from 0.5 to 10% along with a concomitant drop in pH of the medium

from 8 to 4.5 in wild-type and 4 in mutant strain. However, the mutant strain displayed a 1.5- to 2-fold increase in P-solubilization compared to the wild-type strain when grown in the presence of NaCl. The overall improved tolerance of the strains to alkalinity and salinity could be due to accumulation and/or secretion of specific solute (xanthan), suggesting that these strains could also be used as a bio-inoculant under stressed soil environments (Sharan et al. 2008). In the following section, particular attention is paid to identifying such microbes and the mechanisms by which they solubilize insoluble P and promote the growth of plants. Special attention is further paid to the exploitation of microbial communities endowed with P-solubilizing activity for their use in agricultural practices in different agro-ecological niches.

2.2 Strategies for Isolation and Inoculant Development

Phosphate-solubilizing microbes form an integral bio-component of soils and affect the fertility of soils through biogeochemical cycles. Numerous rhizosphere microorganisms capable of dissolving insoluble P have been reported (Henri et al. 2008; Hameeda et al. 2008). Of these, the important genera of P-solubilizing bacteria include *Bacillus* and *Pseudomonas* (Illmer and Schinner 1992; Wani et al. 2007a), while *Aspergillus* and *Penicillium* form the important fungal genera (Souchie et al. 2006; Pandey et al. 2008). Other bacteria reported as P-solubilizers include *Rhodococcus*, *Arthrobacter*, *Serratia*, *Chryseobacterium*, *Gordonia*, *Phyllobacterium*, *Arthrobacter*, *Delftia* sp. (Wani et al. 2005; Chen et al. 2006), *Azotobacter* (Kumar et al. 2001), *Xanthomonas* (de Freitas et al. 1997), and *Enterobacter*, *Pantoea*, and *Klebsiella* (Chung et al. 2005). Furthermore, symbiotic nitrogenous rhizobia, which fix atmospheric nitrogen into ammonia and export the fixed nitrogen to the host plants, have also shown PS activity. For instance, *Rhizobium leguminosarum* bv. *trifolii* (Abril et al. 2007), *R. leguminosarum* bv. *viciae* (Alikhani et al. 2007) and *Rhizobium* species nodulating *Crotalaria* species (Sridevi et al. 2007) improved plant P-nutrition by mobilizing inorganic and organic P. These organisms are ubiquitous but vary in density and mineral PS (mps) ability from soil to soil or from one production system to another. They are generally isolated from rhizosphere and nonrhizosphere soils, rhizoplane, phyllosphere, and RP deposit area soil and even from stressed soils using serial plate dilution method or by enrichment culture technique. The viable microbial preparations possessing P-solubilizing activity are generally termed microphos. The microphos production involves three critical stages: (1) screening and selection and in vitro evaluation of P-solubilizing potentials of the microbial strains, (2) selection of carriers, mixing of inocula with selected carriers and proper development of microbial inoculants, and (3) testing of the quality of inoculants in terms of persistence of P-solubilizing activity, viable microbial load per gram of carrier, and proper distribution to the farmers. Since 1948, when Gerretsen suggested that microbes could dissolve not

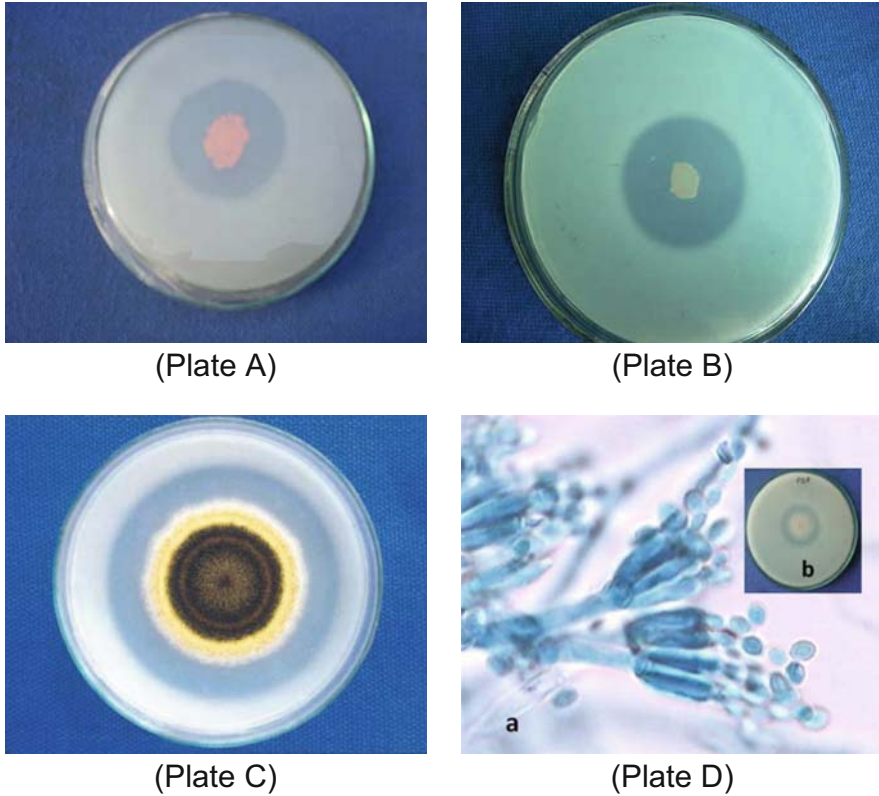


Fig. 2.1 Solubilization of tricalcium phosphate on Pikovskaya by species of (Plate A) *Serratia* (Plate B) *Bacillus* (Plate C) *Aspergillus* and (Plate D) *Penicillium*

easily available forms of soil P and play an important role in providing P to plants, numerous methods and media, such as Pikovskaya (Pikovskaya 1948), bromophenol blue dye method (Gupta et al. 1994), and National Botanical Research Institute P (NBRIP) medium (Nautiyal 1999), have been proposed.

Both bacterial and fungal strains exhibiting PS activity are detected by the formation of clear halo (a sign of solubilization) around their colonies (Fig. 2.1). Due to inconsistency and variations in PS activity, these cultures are repeatedly subcultured. Once the efficient PS organisms have been selected, the release of P by PS organisms is quantitatively assayed. The phosphate-solubilizing microbes showing greater solubilization (both qualitatively and quantitatively) of insoluble P under in vitro conditions are selected for bulk production for ultimate transmission to the farmers. For instance, use of fungi as inoculants for increasing plant P-nutrition has been demonstrated by the successful commercial release of *Penicillium bilaiae* (JumpStart; Philom Bios, Saskatoon, Canada) and *Penicillium radicum* (PR-70 RELEASE; Bio-Care Technology, Somersby, Australia).

2.3 Mechanisms of P-Solubilization: A General Account

The solubilization of P-compounds by naturally abundant P-solubilizing microbes is common under in vitro conditions (Souchie et al. 2007; Song et al. 2008). Indeed, soil microorganisms are effective in releasing P from inorganic P through solubilization (Toro 2007; Wani et al. 2007b, c) and from organic pools of total soil P by mineralization (Bishop et al. 1994; Ponmurugan and Gopi 2006). The microbial biomass in soil also contains a significant quantity of immobilized P that is accessible for uptake by plants (Brookes et al. 1984; Oberson et al. 2001). The mechanisms used by PS microbes to solubilize mineral phosphate have been investigated by several workers (Cunningham and Kuiack 1992; Illmer and Schinner 1995; Song et al. 2008). Generally, the mps trait is correlated with the production of organic acids (OA) via the direct oxidation pathway that occurs on the outer face of the cytoplasmic membrane, with concomitant drop in pH value. The inverse correlation between pH of the culture and the release of P consolidates the hypothesis of OA involvement in the solubilization of insoluble P. The OA(s) released by PS microbes, notably bacteria (Table 2.1) and fungi (Table 2.2), chelate mineral ions or drop the pH to bring P into solution (Maliha et al. 2004; Pradhan and Sukla 2005). The OA produced both by bacteria and fungi in turn leads to acidification of

Table 2.1 Organic acids involved in P-solubilization and produced by PS bacteria

Bacterial communities	Organic acids produced	References
<i>Burkholderia cepacia</i> DA23	Gluconic acid	Song et al. (2008)
<i>Pseudomonas corrugata</i> (NRRL B-30409)	Gluconic, 2-ketogluconic acid	Trivedi and Sa (2008)
<i>Citrobacter</i> sp. DHRSS	Acetic and gluconic acid	Patel et al. (2008)
<i>Burkholderia</i> , <i>Serratia</i> , <i>Ralstonia</i> and <i>Pantoea</i>	Gluconic acid	Elizabeth et al. (2007)
<i>Bacillus</i> , <i>Rhodococcus</i> , <i>Arthrobacter</i> , <i>Serratia</i> and one <i>Chryseobacterium</i> , <i>Delftia</i> , <i>Gordonia</i> , <i>Phyllobacterium</i> , <i>Arthrobacter ureafaciens</i> , <i>Phyllobacterium myrsinacearum</i> , <i>Rhodococcus erythropolis</i> and <i>Delftia</i> sp.	Citric acid, gluconic acid, lactic acid, succinic acid, propionic acid	Chen et al. (2006)
<i>Enterobacter intermedium</i>	2-ketogluconic	Hwangbo et al. (2003)
<i>Bacillus amyloliquefaciens</i> , <i>B. licheniformis</i> , <i>B. atrophaeus</i> , <i>Penibacillus macerans</i> , <i>Vibrio proteolyticus</i> , <i>xanthobacter agilis</i> , <i>Enterobacter aerogenes</i> , <i>E. taylorae</i> , <i>E. asburiae</i> , <i>Kluyvera cryocrescens</i> , <i>Pseudomonas aerogenes</i> , <i>Chryseomonas luteola</i>	Lactic, itaconic, isovaleric, isobutyric, acetic	Vazquez et al. (2000)
<i>Pseudomonas cepacia</i>	Gluconic, 2-ketogluconic	Bar-Yosef et al. (1999)
<i>Bacillus polymyxa</i> , <i>B. licheniformis</i> , <i>Bacillus</i> spp.	Oxalic, citric	Gupta et al. (1994)

Table 2.2 Organic acids produced by phosphate solubilizing fungi

Organism	Predominant acids	References
<i>Aspergillus niger</i>	Gluconic acid, oxalic acid	Chuang et al. (2007)
<i>Penicillium oxalicum</i>	Malic acid, gluconic acid, oxalic acid	Shin et al. (2006)
<i>Aspergillus flavus</i> , <i>A. niger</i> , <i>Penicillium canescens</i>	Oxalic, citric, gluconic succinic	Maliha et al. (2004)
<i>Penicillium rugulosum</i>	Citric, gluconic acid	Reyes et al. (2001)
<i>A. niger</i>	Succinic acid	Vazquez et al. (2000)
<i>Penicillium variabile</i>	Gluconic acid	Fenice et al. (2000)
<i>Penicillium rugulosum</i>	Gluconic	Reyes et al. (1999)
<i>Penicillium radicum</i>	Gluconic	Whitelaw et al. (1999)
<i>P. variabile</i>	Gluconic	Vassilev et al. (1996)
<i>A. niger</i>	Citric, oxalic, gluconic	Illmer et al. (1995)
<i>A. awamori</i> , <i>A. foetidus</i> , <i>A. terricola</i> , <i>A. amstelodemi</i> , <i>A. tamari</i>	Oxalic, citric	Gupta et al. (1994)
<i>A. japonicus</i> , <i>A. foetidus</i>	Oxalic, citric gluconic succinic, tartaric acid	Singal et al. (1994)

microbial cells and their surroundings and, consequently, the release of P-ions from the P-mineral by H⁺ substitution for Ca²⁺ (Goldstein 1994). However, a lot of fixed P in acidic soil (such as red soil) accumulates Fe or Al ions, and no correlation was found between pH and the amount of P-solubilized (Asea et al. 1988). It is still unexplained why no substantial amounts of OA production could be detected from some PS microorganisms (Illmer and Schinner 1992; Chen et al. 2006). For this reason, alternative possibilities other than OA for insoluble inorganic P-solubilization have been proposed. Such mechanisms include the release of H⁺, production of chelating substances and inorganic acids (Khan et al. 2007b). In this context, Illmer and Schinner (1995) suggested that the OA released by the bacterial cells are not the only means of P-solubilization and, hence, acidification does not seem to be the only mechanism of solubilization, as the ability to reduce the pH in some cases did not correlate with the ability to solubilize mineral P. The chelating ability of the OA is also important, as it has been shown that the addition of 0.05 M EDTA to the medium has the same solubilizing effect as inoculation with *Penicillium bilaii* (Kucey 1988). In another study, Altomare et al. (1999) investigated the capability of the plant growth-promoting and bio-control fungus *Trichoderma harzianum* T-22 to solubilize in vitro insoluble minerals including rock phosphate. OA were not detected in culture filtrates and, hence, the authors concluded that the insoluble P could be solubilized by mechanisms other than acidification process. In this study, the fungal-solubilizing activity was attributed both to chelation and to reduction processes, which could also play a role in the bio-control of plant pathogens. Among nodule bacteria, e.g., *Rhizobium/Bradyrhizobium*, the PS activity of *Rhizobium* was associated with the production of 2-ketogluconic acid which was abolished by the addition of NaOH, indicating that PS activity of this organism was entirely due to its ability to reduce the pH of the medium (Halder and

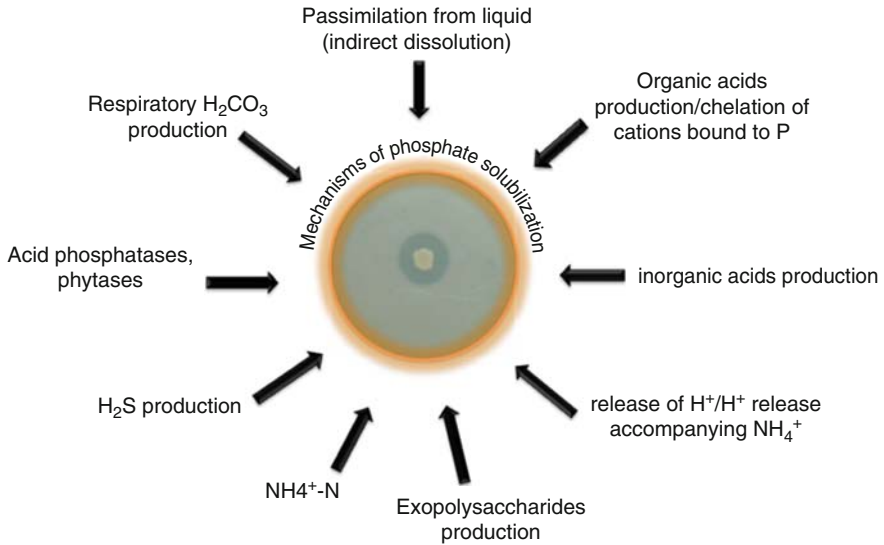


Fig. 2.2 Mechanisms of P-solubilization by phosphate solubilizing bacteria

Chakrabarty 1993). However, the detailed biochemical and molecular mechanism of P-solubilization by symbiotic nodule bacteria are not conclusive. In addition to OA, the solubilization of insoluble P by inorganic acid, e.g., HCl (Kim et al. 1997), and involvement of the H^+ pump, as reported in *Penicillium rugulosum*, is suggested (Reyes et al. 1999).

Recently, four bacterial strains of *Enterobacter* sp. (EnHy-401), *Arthrobacter* sp. (ArHy-505), *Azotobacter* sp. (AzHy-510) and *Enterobacter* sp. (EnHy-402), possessing the ability to solubilize TCP, were used to assess the role of exopolysaccharide (EPS) in the solubilization of P (Yi et al. 2008). These PS bacteria produced a significant amount of EPS and demonstrated a strong ability for P-solubilization. Of these, the strain EnHy-401 with the highest EPS and OA production had a stronger capacity for P-solubilization than the others. Further studies demonstrated that addition of EPS into the medium could increase the amount of P-solubilized by OA, but it failed to release P from TCP alone. The synergistic effects of EPS and OA on TCP-solubilization varied with the origin and the concentration of EPS in medium. EPS produced by EnHy-401 was most effective in promoting P release at an optimal concentration in the medium. The increase in P-solubilization by EPS was attributed mainly to the participation of EPS which led to a change in the homeostasis of P-solubilization, pushing it towards P-dissolving by holding free P in the medium, consequently resulting in greater P released from insoluble P. It was, therefore, suggested that EPS with the ability of P-holding may be a novel important factor in the microbial dissolution of TCP except for OA. A general mechanism how PS organisms bring out solubilization of insoluble P is presented in Fig. 2.2.

2.3.1 Enzymatic Dissolution of Phosphates by Phosphate-Solubilizing Microbes

Organic compounds containing P is mineralized in soil by phosphatases, phytases and phosphonases and C–P lyases. The efficiency of microbial phosphatases, a widely distributed exoenzyme, in dissolution and mineralization of organic P-compounds in the rhizosphere and P-uptake by plants has been reported (Rodriguez and Fraga 1999; Rodriguez et al. 2006). Among phosphatases, acid phosphatase (To-O et al. 2000) is commonly found in fungi (To-O et al. 1997; Omar and Abd-Alla 2000) and activates the release of inorganic P from P-esters (Nozawa et al. 1998). Acid phosphatase has been detected in vacuoles and vesicles (Ruch and Motta 1987; Saito 1995) and other intracellular and extracellular (Ruch and Motta 1987) organs of fungi like phenotypic mutants of *Aspergillus tubingensis* (Varenyam et al. 2007). For instance, the enzyme was found in the vacuoles of ungerminated conidia of *Colletotrichum graminicola*, and also during germination (Schadeck et al. 1998a, b). Under in vitro conditions, phosphatase activity is identified by a distinct zone of clearing (transparent yellow halos) around fungal colonies on Pikovskaya medium or agar plates supplemented with 1-naphthyl P as a chromogenic substrate (Goud et al. 2008). *Aspergillus*, *Emmericella* and *Penicillium*, isolated from arid and semiarid regions of India, have shown phytin and glycerophosphate hydrolyzing activity (Yadav and Tarafdar 2003). In this report, the extracellular (E) phosphatases released by fungi were less than their intracellular (I) counterpart, and the E:I ratio of fungi ranged from 0.39 to 0.86 for acid phosphatase and 0.29 to 0.41 for alkaline phosphatases. The efficiency of hydrolysis of organic P-compounds of fungi varied from 2.12 to 4.85 $\mu\text{g min}^{-1}\text{g}^{-1}$ for glycerophosphate to 0.92–2.10 $\mu\text{g min}^{-1}\text{g}^{-1}$ for phytin. The trend of efficiency was: *Aspergillus* sp. > *Emmericella* sp. > *Penicillium* sp. Similar phosphatase activity is also reported for *A. caespitosus* and *Mucor rouxii* (Guimarães et al. 2006). Another attractive use of P-dissolving enzymes is the solubilization of soil organic P through phytate degradation mediated by enzyme phytase. In its basic form, phytate is the primary source of inositol and the major stored form of P in plant seeds and pollen, and is a major component of organic P in soil (Richardson 1994). Although the ability of plants to obtain P directly from phytate is very limited, yet the growth and P-nutrition of *Arabidopsis* plants supplied with phytate was significantly improved when they were genetically transformed with the phytase gene (phyA) derived from *Aspergillus niger* (Richardson et al. 2001a). This led to an increase in P-nutrition to such an extent that the growth and P-content of the plant was equivalent to control plants supplied with inorganic P. A similar increase in utilization of inositol P by plants in the presence of PS fungus (*A. niger*) capable of producing phytase is reported (Richardson et al. 2001b; Vassilev et al. 2007). Therefore, developing inoculants with high phosphatase and phytase activity would be of great practical interest for augmenting plant nutrition and reducing P-pollution in soil.

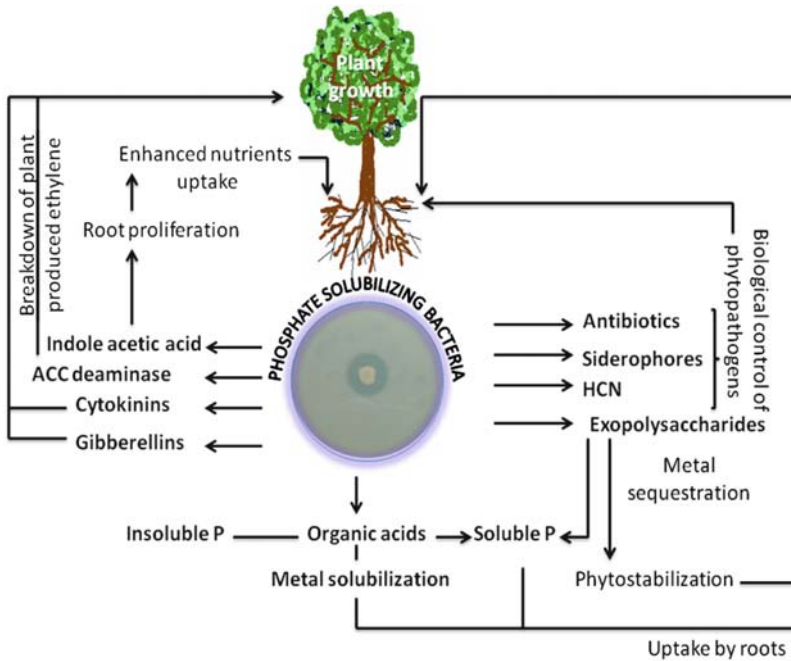


Fig. 2.3 Mechanism of growth promotion by phosphate solubilizing bacteria

2.4 Mechanism of Plant Growth Promotion by P-Solubilizing Microbes

PS microbes are well known for making soluble P accessible for uptake by plants. They can also facilitate growth and development of plants by producing essential nutrients (Thomas et al. 2005) or by changing the concentration of plant growth-promoting substances including phytohormones such as indoleacetic acid (Wani et al. 2007a, b), through asymbiotic or symbiotic N_2 fixation (Zaidi 1999; Zaidi and Khan 2007), soil conditioning, exhibiting bio-control activity (Pandey et al. 2006), by synthesizing siderophores (Vassilev et al. 2006), antibiotics, and cyanide (Lipping et al. 2008), by synthesizing an ACC deaminase that can modulate plant ethylene levels (Anandham et al. 2008; Poonguzhali et al. 2008), and by solubilizing or reducing the toxicity of metals (bioremediation) (Khan et al. 2009). These mechanisms can probably be active simultaneously or sequentially at different stages of plant growth. However, the intrinsic ability of PS microbes for synthesizing the growth-promoting substances varies considerably under different ecological niches. The mechanisms involved in plant growth promotion (Fig. 2.3) and growth regulators produced by PS organisms are presented in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3 Growth-promoting substances released by phosphate solubilizing bacteria

Phosphate solubilizing bacteria	Plant growth-promoting traits	References
<i>Dyella ginsengisoli</i> , <i>Burkholderia kururiensis</i> , <i>Pandoraea</i> sp. strain ATSB30	Siderophore, IAA, salicylic acid, ACC deaminase	Anandham et al. (2008)
<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp.	ACC deaminase, IAA, siderophore	Poonguzhali et al. (2008)
<i>Bacillus subtilis</i>	IAA, siderophore, antifungal activity	Singh et al. (2008)
<i>Serratia marcescens</i>	IAA, siderophore, HCN	Selvakumar et al. (2008)
<i>Pseudomonas fluorescens</i>	ACC deaminase	Shaharoon et al. (2008)
<i>Acinetobacter</i> sp., <i>Pseudomonas</i> sp.	ACC deaminase, IAA, antifungal activity, N ₂ -fixation	Indiragandhi et al. (2008)
<i>Enterobacter</i> sp.	ACC deaminase, IAA, siderophore	Kumar et al. (2008)
<i>Burkholderia</i>	ACC deaminase, IAA, siderophore, heavy metal solubilization	Jiang et al. (2008)
<i>Pseudomonas jessenii</i>	ACC deaminase, IAA, siderophore, heavy metal solubilization	Rajkumar and Freitas (2008)
<i>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</i>	ACC deaminase, IAA, siderophore	Ganesan (2008)
<i>Azotobacter</i> sp., <i>Mesorhizobium</i> sp., <i>Pseudomonas</i> sp., <i>Bacillus</i> sp.	IAA, siderophore, antifungal activity, ammonia production, HCN	Ahmad et al. (2008)
<i>P. aeruginosa</i> , <i>P. plecoglossicida</i> and <i>P. mosselii</i>	Siderophore, IAA, protease, cellulase and HCN	Jha et al. (2008)
<i>Bacillus</i> spp.	IAA, siderophores, ammonia production, HCN, chromium reduction, metal solubilization	Wani et al. (2007a, 2007b, 2007c)
<i>Mesorhizobium loti</i> MP6	HCN, IAA	Chandra et al. (2007)
<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp., <i>Bacillus</i> sp.	IAA, siderophore	Rajkumar et al. (2006)

2.4.1 Phosphate-Solubilizing Microbes as Bio-Control Agent

Phosphate-solubilizing microorganisms as a group form an integral component of soils. In addition to providing P to plants, PS microorganisms also act as a bio-control agent and promote the growth of plants by suppressing the soilborne phytopathogens. Several in vitro studies show the potential of PS microorganisms for the simultaneous synthesis and release of pathogen-suppressing metabolites, mainly siderophores, and lytic enzymes (Pandey et al. 2006; Rane et al. 2008). Potential application of PS microbes as bio-control agents is reviewed and discussed.

Bio-control ability of PS bacterium *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* ID 4365, a bio-control agent of groundnut (*Arachis hypogaea*) phytopathogens of marine origin, was previously attributed to the production of pyoverdinin type of siderophores. However, pyoverdinin-rich supernatants of this organism have shown better antifungal activity compared to equivalent amounts of purified pyoverdinin indicating the presence of undetected metabolite(s) in pyoverdinin-rich supernatants. In addition

to pyoverdine, the strain produced additional siderophores, i.e., pyochelin and salicylic acid, and two broad spectrum antifungal compounds, i.e., pyocyanin and phenazine-1-carboxylic acid, and exhibited antifungal activity (Rane et al. 2008). Similarly, P-solubilizer *Pseudomonas putida* exhibited antifungal activity against phytopathogenic fungi in Petri dish assays, and produced chitinase, β -1,3-glucanase, salicylic acid, siderophore, and hydrogen cyanide. The plant growth-promotion and antifungal properties were demonstrated through a maize (*Zea mays*)-based bioassay under greenhouse conditions. Although the bacterial inoculation demonstrated a substantial increase in plant biomass, it stimulated bacterial and suppressed fungal counts in the rhizosphere. This study leads to a better understanding of the microbial diversity of the colder regions as well as to understanding the potential biotechnological applications of native microbes (Pandey et al. 2006). Among the fungal P-solubilizers, *Trichoderma* species are the most commonly studied bio-control microorganisms which also exhibit plant growth-promoting activity (Harman and Bjorkman 1998). While the mechanisms of bio-control have been well investigated, those responsible for the growth promotion by *T. harzianum* have not been extensively studied. In one study, Altomare et al. (1999) investigated the capability of the plant growth-promotion and bio-control activity of *T. harzianum* T-22 to solubilize in vitro insoluble minerals including RP. OA were not detected in the culture filtrates and, hence, the authors concluded that acidification was probably not the major mechanism of solubilization as the pH never fell below 5. The fungal-solubilizing activity was attributed both to chelation and to reduction processes, which also play a role in the bio-control of plant pathogens. A similar bio-control effect of PS filamentous fungi against *Fusarium* wilt in tomato (*Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *lycopersici*; Fol) was reported by Khan and Khan (2001). Root-dip applications of *B. subtilis*, *P. fluorescens*, *Aspergillus awamori*, *A. niger*, and *Penicillium digitatum* declined the rhizosphere population of Fol. Tomato yield was enhanced, being greatest with *A. awamori* and *P. digitatum*. Direct soil-plant inoculation with *A. niger*, *A. awamori*, and *P. digitatum* decreased the rhizosphere Fol population by 23–49% while the tomato yield increased by 28–53% in field experiments. The authors propose that OA produced by these microorganisms may inhibit fungal infection but that other metabolites such as bulbiformin and phenazine could also be involved, particularly in the treatments with *B. subtilis* and *P. fluorescens*. Research using *P. variable* P16 demonstrated increased glucose oxidase (GOD) production in the presence of polysaccharides, which were found to serve as activators of defensive systems in this filamentous fungus (Petruccioli et al. 1999). In fact, GOD activity can play a significant role in antibiosis in the soil environment, and H_2O_2 enzymatically produced is cytotoxic for microorganisms. In another report, PS fungus *P. oxalicum* showed strong antibiotic activity against pathogenic fungi, including *Sclerotinia sclerotiorum*, a widespread pathogenic fungus that severely attacks rapeseed (*Brassica napus*) (Lipping et al. 2008). The combination of P-solubilization and bio-control activity of PSM(s) could prove very effective in promoting the growth of plants both in conventional and stressed soils of different agro-ecosystems.

Table 2.4 Phosphate solubilizing microbes with bio-control activity

Strain species	Bio-control activity	Metabolite with bio-control activity	References
<i>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</i> ID 4365	+	Siderophores and phenazines	Rane et al. (2008)
<i>P. aeruginosa</i> , <i>P. plecoglossicida</i> and <i>P. mosselii</i>	+	Protease, cellulase	Jha et al. (2008)
<i>P. putida</i>	+	Chitinase, β -1,3-glucanase, salicylic acid, siderophore, and hydrogen cyanide	Pandey et al. (2006)
<i>Aspergillus niger</i>	+	Siderophores	Vassilev et al. (2006)
<i>A. niger</i> , <i>A. awamori</i>	+	Organic acids	Khan and Khan (2001, 2002)
<i>Penicillium digitatum</i>			
<i>P. variable</i> P16	–	Glucose oxidase	Petrucchioli et al. (1999)
<i>Trichoderma harzianum</i> T22	+	Siderophores	Altomare et al. (1999)

+ Proved, – not proved: modified from Nikolay et al. (2006)

Some of the metabolites released both by PS bacteria and fungi are presented in Table 2.4.

2.5 Molecular Engineering of P-Solubilizing Bacteria

Studies at the molecular level in order to understand how precisely the PS microbes brings out the solubilization of insoluble P were inconclusive (Rodriguez et al. 2006). However, several phosphatase-encoding genes have been cloned and characterized, and a few genes involved in mps have been isolated (Table 2.5) and characterized (Fraga-Vidal et al. 2003; Krishnaraj and Goldstein 2001). Genetic manipulation of PS bacteria to improve their ability to improve plant growth may include cloning genes involved in both mps and organic P-solubilization (ops), followed by their expression in selected rhizobacterial strains. For example, Goldstein and Liu (1987) have shown that mps activity is genetically coded in a gene cluster on plasmids of microbes endowed with PS activity. They further transferred this gene cluster to an *E. coli* strain that did not previously possess PS activity but could demonstrate that the transferred gene was expressed in the transgenic *E. coli* strain. They have also found that the gene expression and mps activity of bacteria is affected by the presence of soluble P in the medium (feed-back regulation). Chromosomal insertion of these genes under appropriate promoters is another interesting approach (Rodriguez and Fraga 1999). Rodríguez et al. (2000) carried out a genetic construction using the broad host range vector pKT230 and plasmid pMCG898, which encode the *Erwinia herbicola* pyrroloquinoline quinone (PQQ) synthase, a gene involved in mps. The final construct was transformed and

Table 2.5 Cloning of genes involved in mineral phosphate solubilization

Microorganisms	Gene or plasmid	Features	Reference
<i>Serratia marcescens</i>	pKG3791	Produces gluconic acid and solubilizes P	Krishnaraj and Goldstein (2001)
<i>Rahnella aquatilis</i>	pKIM10	Solubilizes P and produces gluconic acid in <i>E. coli</i> DH5 α	Kim et al. (1998)
<i>Enterobacter agglomerans</i>	pKKY	Solubilizes P in <i>E. coli</i> 109; Does not lower pH	Kim et al. (1997)
<i>Pseudomonas cepacia</i>	Gab Y	Produces gluconic acid and solubilizes mineral P in <i>E. coli</i> JM109; No homology with PQQ genes	Babu-Khan et al. (1995)
<i>Erwinia herbicola</i>	Mps	Produces gluconic acid and solubilizes mineral P in <i>E. coli</i> HB101; Probably involved in PQQ synthesis	Goldstein and Liu (1987)

expressed in *E. coli* MC1061, and the recombinant plasmids were transferred to *Burkholderia cepacia* IS-16 and *Pseudomonas* sp. PSS recipient cells by conjugation. Clones containing recombinant plasmids produced higher clearing halos in plates with insoluble P as the unique (P) source, in comparison to those strains without plasmids, demonstrating the heterologous expression of the *E. herbicola* gene in the recipient strains. This genetic manipulation allowed the increase in mps ability of both strains, enhancing their potential as growth promoters of agricultural crops. In addition, the subcloning of the gene encoding the PhoC acid phosphatase from *Morganella morganii* (phoC gene), in a vector that permits stable chromosomal integration of this gene in plant growth-promoting bacteria, has been reported (Fraga-Vidal et al. 2003). Another important rhizosphere-competent bacteria (*Pseudomonas* spp.) can form gluconic acid through the oxidative metabolism and overexpression of PQQ synthase and glucose dehydrogenase (GDH) genes make them functionally a better PS organism. Interestingly, in addition to its role in P-solubilization, PQQ also plays an important role in beneficial traits, such as antifungal activity and induced systemic resistance (ISR) of *Enterobacter intermedium*, possibly by acting as a cofactor for several enzymes including GDH (Han et al. 2008). In yet another approach, the mps genes can directly be transferred into the target bacteria by over-/underexpression of genes followed by the selection of transformants with mps ability. Such an approach has been used to obtain mps genes from *Synechosystis* PCC 6803 in *E. coli* (Gyaneshwar et al. 1998). However, it remains to be seen if this will also be effective in other bacteria. Genetic engineering could also help in increasing the survival of the inoculant strains by incorporating the abilities to utilize certain nutrients better than the rest of the microbial populations (Glick and Bashan 1997). In addition, genes for utilization of salicylate were transferred to growth-promoting bacteria and the recombinant bacterium was able to survive and enhance plant growth better than the wild-type (Colbert et al. 1993).

2.6 Crop Improvement by P-Solubilizing Microbes

2.6.1 Inoculation Effects of Phosphate-Solubilizing Bacteria

Phosphate-solubilizing bacteria in general enhance the growth of plant by providing soluble P to plants. However, they also affect the growth and development of plants by other mechanisms. For example, PS strains of *Pseudomonas* capable of synthesizing IAA, ACC deaminase, and siderophores in vitro, increased the root elongation and biomass of Chinese cabbage (*Brassica rapa*) but had no effect on P-uptake of plants, suggesting that the growth promotion by PS strain could be due to the production of phytohormones or mechanisms other than P-solubilization (Poon-guzhali et al. 2008). Similarly, a significant increase in biomass and total P of winter wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) following a single inoculation of *Phosphobacterium* (strain 9320-SD) under both pot and field conditions has been reported; although no obvious difference was found in plant height (Chen et al. 2006). Cold-tolerant PS *Serratia marcescens* with inherent plant growth-promoting traits (IAA, HCN and siderophore production) has also been found to significantly enhanced plant biomass and nutrient uptake of wheat seedlings grown in cold temperatures (Selvakumar et al. 2008). Two plant growth-promoting PSB, *Pseudomonas fluorescens* and *P. fluorescens* biotype F, having ACC deaminase showed a profound effect on growth, yield, and nutrient use efficiency of wheat under simultaneously varying levels of all the three major nutrients, N, P, and K (at 0, 25, 50, 75, and 100% of recommended doses). Results of pot and field trials revealed that the growth-promoting efficacy of these strains decreased with increasing rates of NPK added to the soil. In most of the cases, significant negative linear correlations were recorded between percentage increases in growth and yield parameters of wheat caused by inoculation and increasing levels of applied NPK fertilizers. They speculated that, under low fertilizer application, the ACC deaminase activity of PS strains might have caused reduction in the synthesis of stress (nutrient)-induced inhibitory levels of ethylene in the roots through ACC hydrolysis into NH_3 and α -ketobutyrate. This study suggested that *Pseudomonads* could be used in combination with appropriate doses of fertilizers for better plant growth and savings of fertilizers (Shaharoon et al. 2008). A similar increase in biomass of maize plants following inoculation of two efficient strains of *Serratia marcescens* (EB 67) and *Pseudomonas* sp. (CDB 35) has been reported (Hameeda et al. 2008). Of these PS bacteria, strain EB 67 increased the biomass by 99% while strain CDB 35 demonstrated an increase of 94%. Increase in plant biomass at 48 and 96 days after sowing was 66 and 50%, respectively, with EB 67 and 51 and 18%, respectively, with CDB 35 under field conditions. Seed bacterization with strain EB 67 and CDB 35 increased the grain yield of field-grown maize by 85 and 64%, respectively. Similarly, *B. subtilis* having antifungal activity against *Macrophomina phaseolina* and other phytopathogens, including *Fusarium oxysporum* and *Rhizoctonia solani* and plant growth-promoting attributes (IAA and siderophore production) isolated from chirpine (*Pinus roxburghii*) rhizosphere, resulted in 44 and 94% increases in

root and shoot dry weights of chirpine, respectively (Singh et al. 2008). Phosphate-solubilizing *Acinetobacter* sp. (PSGB04) and *Pseudomonas* sp. (PRGB06) with plant growth-promoting traits (N_2 fixation, IAA, salicylic acid production) isolated from the larval guts of diamondback moths (*Plutella xylostella*) have also been tested for their effects on growth of canola (*Brassica napus*) and tomato (Indiragandhi et al. 2008). *Acinetobacter* sp. (PSGB04) significantly increased root length (41%), seedling vigor, and dry biomass (30%) of the canola test plants, whereas a substantial increase, greater than that of the control, was also recorded for the tomato plants when seeds were treated with *Pseudomonas* sp. (PRGB06) possessing antifungal activity.

Phosphate-solubilizing microbes cohabit in the rhizosphere with other agronomically beneficial microbes and could play an additive or synergistic role in the growth promotion of plants. Subsequently, dramatic increases in yield of various crops following seed or soil inoculation with PS organisms and other plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (Afzal and Bano 2008) or AM fungus (Khan and Zaidi 2006; Ehteshami et al. 2007) under different agro-ecosystems have been reported. The inoculation of PS bacteria *Pseudomonas striata* and N_2 -fixing bacterium *Rhizobium* sp. (*Vigna*) substantially increased the yield of greengram (*Vigna radiata* L.) (Khan et al. 1997, 1998) and nodulation, available P of soil as well as dry matter of the plants, grain yield, and P- and N-uptake by chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*) (Wani et al. 2007b, c) compared to single inoculation of either PS bacteria or N_2 fixers. Similarly, the seed inoculation of chickpea with single, dual and triple inoculations of *Rhizobium*, *Bacillus subtilis* (OSU-142) and PS *Bacillus megaterium* (M-3) increased biological and chemical properties of chickpea (Elkoca et al. 2008). Substantial increases in the seed yield under different inoculation treatments ranged between 18% (*Rhizobium*) and 31% (*Rhizobium* + OSU-142 + M-3) over control. Generally, the increases in seed and total biomass yields were more pronounced in dual and triple inoculations. In another study, Wani et al. (2007c) demonstrated synergistic effects of N_2 -fixing and PS rhizobacteria on chickpea plants. Legume grain yield and concentration and uptake of N and P were significantly increased following coinoculation with *Mesorhizobium* and PS *Pseudomonas* and *Bacillus* spp. The inoculation of *M. ciceri* with *Azotobacter chroococcum* and *Bacillus* tripled the seed yield and resulted in the highest grain protein (295 mg g^{-1}). An 8% increase in P concentration above the uninoculated control was observed in the case of a single inoculation with *Pseudomonas*, while the P-uptake was highest (2.14-fold above the uninoculated control) when *M. ciceri* was applied with *A. chroococcum* and *Bacillus*. They showed that the multiple inoculations with rhizospheric microorganisms can synergistically facilitate growth and yields and increase concentrations and uptake of N and P by field-grown chickpea, as also reported by Valverde et al. (2006). In another study, Canbolat et al. (2006) observed a significant increase in seedling growth, total dry matter accumulation and available P in barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) bioprimered with N_2 -fixing and P-dissolving *Bacilli* suggesting that the N_2 -fixing and PS bacterial strains could be used to save fertilizer application. It is also reported that PS *P. putida*, possessed with antifungal activity, antibiotic resistance and ability to

produce chitinase, β -1,3-glucanase, salicylic acid, siderophore, and HCN significantly increased the plant biomass in a maize-based bioassay under greenhouse conditions (Pandey et al. 2006). The effect of a combined inoculation of *Rhizobium*, a P-solubilizing *B. megaterium* subsp. *phosphaticum* strain-PB and a bio-control fungus *Trichoderma* spp. on the performance of chickpea under glasshouse and field conditions is also reported (Rudresh et al. 2005b). Tripartite inoculations exhibited increased germination, nutrient uptake, plant height, number of branches, nodulation, yield, and total biomass of chickpea compared to either individual inoculations or an uninoculated control. Increased growth and yield parameters were more pronounced when *T. harzianum* was inoculated along with the PS bacterium and *Rhizobium*.

Furthermore, the PS bacteria forms a strong association with AM fungi in P-deficient soils or RP-enriched soils and can release some P-ions from an otherwise sparingly soluble P source, which is tapped and translocated by the AM fungal hyphae to the plants. In this context, the composite inoculation of PS bacteria and AM fungi has been found to improve plant growth in a more sustainable manner in soil deficient in P (Zaidi et al. 2004; Zaidi and Khan 2007). During this intergeneric interaction, the AM fungi increases plant growth via improved uptake of nutrients, especially P, due to the exploration by the external hyphae of the soil beyond the root-hair zone where P is depleted. The AM fungi also produce plant hormones and increase the activity of N₂-fixing organisms in the root zone. In contrast, the PS bacteria could alter the composition of root exudates and plasticity which in turn may affect the colonization and development of AM fungi. These factors together facilitate the colonization and establishment of AM fungus onto the root system of plants and also alter microbial composition of rhizospheres, which in turn affect the competition between inoculated and native soil organisms. However, a thorough understanding of interactions between organisms of agronomic importance is required so that a bio-inoculant with multifaceted activity could be developed.

Phosphate-solubilizing microbes are reported to reduce the toxicity of metals and protect the plants against the toxic effects of these metals and consequently enhance the growth and yield of plants in contaminated soils (Wani et al. 2007a). For instance, Rajkumar et al. (2006) assessed the plant growth-promoting activity of Cr (vi) resistant plant growth-promoting bacteria having PS potential, *Pseudomonas* sp. and *Bacillus* sp., recovered from heavy metal contaminated soils, on the Indian mustard (*Brassica juncea*) with different concentrations of Cr (vi) added to soil. Inoculation of both strains promoted the growth of plants at 95.3 and 198.3 g of Cr (vi)/g soil by protecting the plants against the inhibitory effects of chromium, and probably due to the solubilization of P and production of IAA and siderophores. In another report, a heavy metal- and antibiotic-resistant bacterial strain, *Burkholderia* sp., isolated from metal-contaminated soils capable of solubilizing inorganic P, producing IAA, siderophore and ACC deaminase, was found to appreciably increase the biomass of maize and tomato plants (Jiang et al. 2008). Rajkumar and Freitas (2008) reported that the inoculation of metal-resistant plant growth-promoting *Pseudomonas* sp. (PsM6) and *P. jessenii* (PjM15) strains possessing intrinsic ability of P-solubilization ability for the utilization of ACC as the sole N source and

production of IAA. increased the growth and the uptake of Ni, Cu and Zn by *Ricinus communis*, grown in noncontaminated and contaminated soil. Application of cadmium-resistant plant growth-promoting *P. aeruginosa* exhibiting P-solubilization, ACC deaminase activity, siderophore production, and auxin synthesis, when used as inoculant for blackgram (*Vigna mungo* L.) plants grown in soil treated with a gradient of CdCl₂ concentration, reduced the toxicity of metal to plants (Ganesan 2008). These and other associated data suggest that such PS microbes could be used as biofertilizer not only to provide P to plants but could also play an important role in reducing/detoxifying the effects of heavy metals in derelict soils.

2.6.2 Inoculation Effects of Phosphate-Solubilizing Fungi

The inoculation of P-solubilizing fungi is a promising technique because it can increase P-availability in soils fertilized with RP. Accordingly, several authors have reported a profound increase in dry weight yield, and in N- and P-contents of *Brassica chinensis* Linn. (Chuang et al. 2007) and soybean and faba bean (*Vicia faba*) (Abd-Alla et al. 2001) through inoculation of PS fungi. Recently, Mittal et al. (2008) observed the effect of six PS fungi, including two strains of *A. awamori* and four strains of *P. citrinum*, on growth and seed production of chickpea cv. GPF2 plants. The PS fungi was biocompatible and produced growth-promoting hormone, indole acetic acid (IAA), varying in concentration from 2.5 to 9.8 g ml⁻¹. Inoculation of four strains of *P. citrinum* exhibited a smaller stimulatory effect and increased the shoot height by 7%, seed number by twofold, and seed weight by 87% above uninoculated plants. However, a consortium of all the six fungal isolates showed no stimulatory effect on chickpea plants. Similarly, the inoculation of *P. oxalicum* (CBPS-3F-Tsa) used either alone or along with fused phosphates (FP) and RP, increased the growth and N and P accumulation in maize plants compared to control (Shin et al. 2006), while the mutant strain of *P. regulosum* (Mps⁺) also stimulated the growth of maize plants as indicated by a 3.6–28.6% increase in dry matter yield. In the presence of RP, P-uptake by maize plants inoculated with the two mutants, Mps⁺⁺ and Mps⁻, was not always in agreement with their P-solubilizing phenotypes (Reyes et al. 2002). Also, a substantial increase in plant height (1.4 times), plant weight (5.2–8.1 times) and root length (1.1–1.2 times) of maize following inoculation of PS fungus *Penicillium* sp. PS-113 is reported (Kang and Choi 1999). Babana and Antoun (2006) isolated two TPR (Tilemsi phosphate rock)-solubilizing fungi (TSM) *A. awamori* Nakazawa C1 and *P. chrysogenum* Thom C13 with high P-solubilizing trait from the rhizosphere of three wheat cultivars (Alkama Beri, Hindi Tossom and Tetra) and tested against wheat cv. Tetra fertilized with 30 kg ha⁻¹ P (added as TPR or DAP). *A. awamori* Nakazawa C1 increased the root dry matter yields by 60% while *P. chrysogenum* Thom C13 enhanced the root dry matter yields by 40%. A 3-year field trial on a Gangetic alluvial soil of India was conducted to examine how P demands of rice (*Oryza sativa*)–wheat cropping systems might be met with heavy initial dressings of RP.

Preplant inoculation of rice seedling roots or wheat seeds with P-solubilizing fungus (*A. Awamori*) led to a yield increase over noninoculated treatments of 0.09–0.22 tha^{-1} in rice and 0.15–0.45 tha^{-1} in wheat. The agronomic efficiency and recovery efficiency of fertilizer P in the rice–wheat system were highest (57.2 kg grain/kg P and 40.4%, respectively) under DAP-fertilized treatments. The agronomic efficiency ranged from 14.3 to 44.4 kg grain/kg P and the recovery efficiency ranged from 7.7 to 26.4% for phosphate rock treatments. The agronomic efficiency and recovery efficiency increased with increasing initial phosphate rock application rate and with P-solubilizing fungus inoculation (Dwivedi et al. 2004). In another study, PS fungi, *A. niger*, *A. fumigatus* and *P. pinophilum*, significantly increased the yield components of wheat and faba bean plants, *P. pinophilum* being the most efficient, which increased the yield of wheat grains by 28.9 and 32.8% in the soil treated with RP and superphosphate, respectively. Similarly, it increased the production of faba bean seeds by 14.7 and 29.4% with the same treatments, and the uptake of P by both plants significantly increased due to inoculation of the soil with the tested fungi (Wahid and Mehana 2000). Inoculation of *Trichoderma* spp. has also shown a substantial increase in growth and yield parameters of chickpea under both glasshouse and field trials (Rudresh et al. 2005).

Volcanic soils in the south of Chile have an elevated quantity of total P, which is hardly available due to its high P-fixation capacity. One strategy for increasing the availability of P for the vegetables that grow there would be to use PS fungi. In one assay conducted in a greenhouse on a volcanic soil, the effect of inoculation with *Penicillium albidum* on the growth of red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) including active inoculum [In (+)], inactive inoculum [In (–)] and without inoculum [In (0)] was reported. The In (+) significantly increased the root growth of the plants and the P mobilized by the shoot with In (+) was twofold higher than in the In (0) or In (–) treatments. In soil, available P was not different among the treatments but phosphatase activity in In (+) was higher in comparison to In (0). The author suggested that *P. albidum* could be developed as fungal inoculant to increase the productivity of crops in volcanic soils of Chile (Morales et al. 2007). Wakelin et al. (2007) tested the PS fungi *P. radicum*, *P. bilaiae* (strain RS7B-SD1), and an unidentified *Penicillium* sp. designated strain KC6-W2 for their ability to increase the growth and P nutrition of wheat and lentil (*Lens culinaris*) in three soils of neutral to alkaline pH reaction. The strongest plant growth-promoting strain was found *Penicillium* sp. (KC6-W2), which increased shoot growth and dry mass. Levels of increase by *Penicillium* sp. KC6-W2 ranged from 6.6 to 19% and were associated with increased uptake of P to the shoot. Inoculation of seed with *P. radicum* increased lentil growth by 5.5% in soil from Tarlee but did not affect plant growth in the eight other experiments. However, when significant, stimulation of plant growth promotion by *P. bilaiae* RS7B-SD1 was strong and showed a 15% increase in lentil shoot dry matter.

Nitrogen and P are the two major plant nutrients whose composite inoculation has shown a greater impact on the performance of various crops than those observed for single inoculation treatments. For example, when PS bacterium (*Bacillus*) and asymbiotic N_2 fixer (*A. chroococcum*) were used in combination with PS fungus,

P. variable, significantly enhanced the seed yield, grain protein and N- and P-accumulation in wheat (Khan and Zaidi 2007). The increase in overall performance of wheat was attributed to the ability of PS fungi to solubilize inorganic P. During interactions, the phytostimulator, *A. chroococcum*, besides providing N, produced considerable amounts of growth-promoting substances in the rhizosphere (Kucey et al. 1989). Combining an improved nutrient supply with N (*A. chroococcum*) and P (PS fungus) with plant growth promotion appears to have additive and possibly even multiplicative effects. Furthermore, a plant growth-promoting rhizobacterium, *Azospirillum brasilense* SP7, when applied with a bio-control fungus possessing PS activity (*T. harzianum* Rifai 1295-22) and RP at 1 mg ha⁻¹, significantly increased seed yield, total N and total P of field-grown beans (Mehmet et al. 2005). However, variations in the effectiveness of microbial combinations under field conditions are reported which may possibly be due to (1) variations in the survivability and colonization efficiency of the inoculated microbial cultures in the soils, (2) strong competition from the natural microbiota of the field soils, leading possibly to the exclusion of inoculated cultures from the rhizosphere, (3) differential rhizosphere effect of plants in harboring a target microbial strain (Pal 1998), (4) the modulation of the PS activity by specific root exudates (Goldstein et al. 1999; Dakora and Phillips 2002), (5) availability of inadequate nutrients in the rhizosphere to produce enough OA, (6) variation in the persistence of PS activity, and (7) genetic instability among inoculated strains. Furthermore, there are reports that also suggest the inhibitory effect of fungi on crop improvement (Zaidi et al. 2003). This inhibition has been due to high OA-secreting ability of fungi which in turn limits the growth of even associative partners that require neutral or alkaline growth conditions for their active metabolism. Moreover, the inhibitory effect of PS fungi on the associative partners could be due to the release of toxins in the growing environment which might affect the functional symbioses between rhizobia and their specific host plants. These data suggests that, before carrying out in situ experiments, the compatibility between the two associate members must be checked in vitro.

The use of AM fungi has been shown to possess the ability to increase nutrient uptake of plants by developing associations with roots of more than 80% of higher plant species (Marschner and Dell 1994; Schreiner et al. 1997). The combined inoculation of N₂ fixers, P-solubilizers and AM fungi has been found to stimulate plant growth more than inoculation of either organism used alone in certain situations when the soil is P-deficient (Khan et al. 2007). During this intergeneric pairing, the P-solubilizers interact well with the AM fungi in P-deficient soils or soils having RP (Poi et al. 1989). The PS fungi release some P-ions from otherwise sparingly soluble P sources which is tapped and translocated by the AM fungal hyphae to the plant (Azcon-Aguilar et al. 1986). Moreover, the P-solubilizers survives longer around mycorrhizal roots compared to nonmycorrhizal roots, and acts synergistically with AM fungi leading to increased plant growth. In this context, the coinoculation of AM fungus (*G. fasciculatum*) and PS fungus (*P. variable* or *Penicillium* sp.) has been shown to facilitate chickpea (Zaidi and Khan 2007) and greengram (Khan and Zaidi 2006) growth more than single inoculation. However, when *Mesorhizobium* or *Bradyrhizobium* sp. (*Vigna*) was

simultaneously applied with dual inoculation of AM fungus and P-solubilizing fungi, the seed yield, grain protein and nutrient (N and P) accumulation was further enhanced in these legumes. The simplest interpretation of this fact is that mycorrhizal endophyte could be stimulated in quantity, efficiency, and longevity. The main effect of this mycorrhiza in improving plant growth is through improved uptake of nutrients, especially P, due to the exploration by the external hyphae of the soil beyond the root-hair zone where P is depleted. In addition, root exudation and plasticity might change by the activity of PS fungi, which could also affect mycorrhizal development. Moreover, the triple inoculation of nitrogen fixer (*Mesorhizobium/Bradyrhizobium*), PS fungus (*P. variable*) and AM fungus (*G. fasciculatum*) synergistically enhanced the dry matter accumulation, seed yield, grain protein and N and P of chickpea (Zaidi et al. 2003; Zaidi and Khan 2007) and greengram (Khan and Zaidi 2006). These results strongly suggested that a relationship existed between root colonization, P-uptake and growth promotion, which in turn profoundly enhanced the yield of crops.

2.7 Conclusion

In agricultural practices, to circumvent the P-deficiency, chemical P fertilizers are applied. However, the excessive and injudicious applications of these fertilizers leads to a severe threat to microbial diversity, soil microbial community structure, soil fertility and consequently the productivity of crops in different agro-ecosystems. Microbiologists and soil scientists are thus searching for an alternative to these P problems. Since the majority of soils the world over are deficient in plant-available P and since phosphatic fertilizers are expensive, focus is placed on the use of soil microorganisms endowed with PS ability, which could be used as inoculants to mobilize P from poorly available sources in soil. The use of such PSM(s) opens up a new horizon for better plant productivity besides reducing the reliance on chemical P and protecting the agro-ecosystems from the hazards of agrochemicals. The protection of the soil environment by applying PSM(s) could become a major breakthrough for plants grown in derelict soils. Moreover, the molecular engineering of these microbes has also provided a new insight into the promotion of crops in P-deficient soils. In this context, novel, genetically engineered and soil- and region-specific PSM(s) and technologies have to be developed, pilot tested and transferred to farmers in a relatively short time in order to improve plant P-nutrition and agro-ecosystem sustainability.

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Chapter 3

Developing Beneficial Microbial Biofilms on Roots of Non legumes: A Novel Biofertilizing Technique

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Abstract Biofilms are often complex communities of multiple microbial species and remain attached to surfaces or with interfaces. Such beneficial biofilms can be developed in vitro and be used as biofertilizers (biofilmed biofertilizers, BBs) and biocontrolling agents for nonlegumes, when applied at high cell densities. This chapter describes research studies conducted so far in this field with special attention into development of biofilms of N₂-fixing bacteria and P-solubilizing fungi. When these two distinct microbes were cocultured in vitro, the bacteria colonized fungal mycelia to form the biofilms. The biofilms showed higher rates of biological nitrogen fixation and organic acid production, which was directly proportional to the synthesis of indoleacetic acid-like substances, than microbes when used alone. The plant growth-promoting effects of such BBs were evaluated using rice (*Oryza sativa*), tea (*Camellia sinensis*), wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), and anthurium (*Anthurium andraeanum*). The biofilms formed nodule-like structures or “pseudonodules” on roots of such plants. For rice and tea, the results showed that recommended chemical fertilizers may be reduced by about 50% while applying BBs. Since this field of research is in its infancy, both laboratory and field experiments are required to fully explore the potential of this emerging biotechnological approach in the future.

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3.1 Introduction

Although microorganisms have historically been studied as planktonic (freely swimming) cells in many ecosystems, it is common to find assembling of microorganisms adherent to each other and/or surfaces and embedded in a matrix of polymers, which are then known as biofilms (Harrison et al. 2005; Rudrappa et al. 2008). The assemblage leads to metabolic cooperation among the microbes (Davey and O'toole 2000). Newly developed microbiological and molecular biological methods clearly show that most bacteria live as biofilms formed on various biotic and abiotic surfaces (Romanova et al. 2006).

A biofilm consists of microbial cells (algal, fungal, bacterial and/or other microbial) and sticky extracellular polymeric substances (EPS), which provide structure and protection to the community (Vandevivere and Kirchman 1993; Seneviratne 2003). The EPS is composed of polysaccharides, proteins, nucleic acids and other substances which help protect the biofilm organisms from various environmental stress factors, such as UV radiation, extreme pH conditions, osmotic shock, dehydration, antimicrobial substances, predators, etc. (Costerton et al. 1987; Stewart and Costerton 2001; Romanova et al. 2006). As the biofilm microbes behave like a group within the EPS coating, external environmental stresses and attacks of competitors are tolerable (Seneviratne and Jayasinghearachchi 2005). This is why microorganisms prefer to exist in the biofilm mode rather than the planktonic stage. As an example, when *Pseudomonas putida* cells were incubated in the presence of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* in grape (*Vitis vinifera*) juice or in a synthetic medium containing various concentrations of glucose, their stationary phase survival improved dramatically (Romano and Kolter 2005), possibly through biofilm formation. Similarly, when introduced into soils after coupling with a common soil fungus to form biofilms, rhizobial cells were observed to perform better than when they were used alone (Seneviratne and Jayasinghearachchi 2005).

Biofilms occur naturally in animals, plants and the environment. These bio-filmed communities could be harmful/pathogenic or beneficial (Morikawa 2006). Beneficial biofilms attached to the plant roots of some crops may help cycle nutrients as well as biocontrol of pests and diseases and, consequently, improve the productivity of crops. However, the density in the soil of such naturally occurring beneficial biofilms is too low to have a significant effect. This was reflected by the success of the microbial inoculation into a soil planted with rice (G. Seneviratne, unpublished). Critical cell density-dependant quorum sensing is a prerequisite for biofilm formation (Kong et al. 2006), which is frequently not attainable in the soil solution under natural conditions. Further, the naturally occurring biofilms are N-deficient for optimal action, which may be overcome by incorporating N₂ fixers to them (Seneviratne 2008). Therefore, the development of such biofilms in vitro and their application as biofertilizers are essential for augmenting agricultural productivity (Bandara et al. 2006). This chapter highlights the recent advances in research, focusing on the potential effect of the BBs on non leguminous crops.

3.2 Effects of Beneficial Microbial Biofilms

With the first in vitro development and observation of interactions between common nonmycorrhizal soil fungi (e.g., *Penicillium* spp.) and rhizobia forming the biofilms (Seneviratne and Jayasinghearachchi 2003), a series of studies were conducted to assess their potentials as microbial agents in plant growth. Microbes used in this study were mainly N₂-fixing bacteria and P-solubilizing fungi. When they were cocultured in vitro, the bacteria attached and colonized on fungal mycelia to form the biofilms, known as fungal–bacterial biofilm (FBB). When the bacterium is a *Rhizobium* species, they are called fungal–rhizobial biofilm (FRB). It was observed that the interaction in the FRB fixed N₂ biologically, as revealed by nitrogenase activity and N-accumulation, which was not observed when a rhizobial strain was used alone as a monoculture (Jayasinghearachchi and Seneviratne 2004a). The rhizobial strain used here was *Bradyrhizobium elkanii* SEMIA 5019, a soybean (*Glycine max*)-nodulating strain with a high N₂-fixing capacity. A recent study showed the enhanced release of organic acids and plant growth-promoting substances by developed FBB/FRB, leading to an increase of 25% in dry matter accumulation in early grown rice over the monocultured conventional inocula (Seneviratne et al. 2008a). It was also observed that there was a significant negative relationship between pH and indoleacetic acid-like substances (IAAS) production in liquid culture media of the biofilms, but not in mixed cultures without biofilm formation of a large collection of microbes (Seneviratne et al. 2008b). Thus, when biofilms were formed, high acidity reflected high production of IAAS. The high acidity is generally important for pathogen suppression. The biofilmed inocula can also be used effectively to enhance biosolubilization of rock phosphate, due to high acid production (Jayasinghearachchi and Seneviratne 2006a; Seneviratne and Indrasena 2006). Moreover, the biofilmed inocula can be used for successful establishment of introduced beneficial microorganisms in plants for biocontrol of diseases. For instance, a *Pleurotus ostreatus*–*Pseudomonas fluorescens* biofilm (FBB) increased endophytic colonization of tomato (*Lycopersicon lycopersicum*) by *P. fluorescens*, a biocontrolling agent, by over 1,000%, compared to inoculation with *P. fluorescens* alone under in vitro conditions (Jayasinghearachchi and Seneviratne 2006b).

3.3 Developing Beneficial Biofilms on Roots of Non legumes

It has now been clearly shown under axenic conditions that the monocultures of *Rhizobium* sp. inoculated into nonleguminous plant roots develop biofilms on the root surface (Santaella et al. 2008). Recent studies conducted under axenic conditions demonstrated that the inoculation of the FRB helped maintain a higher cell density of rhizobia on the root system of wheat than the inoculation of rhizobial monocultures (Fig. 3.1). The monocultures developed clusters of rhizobial cells on

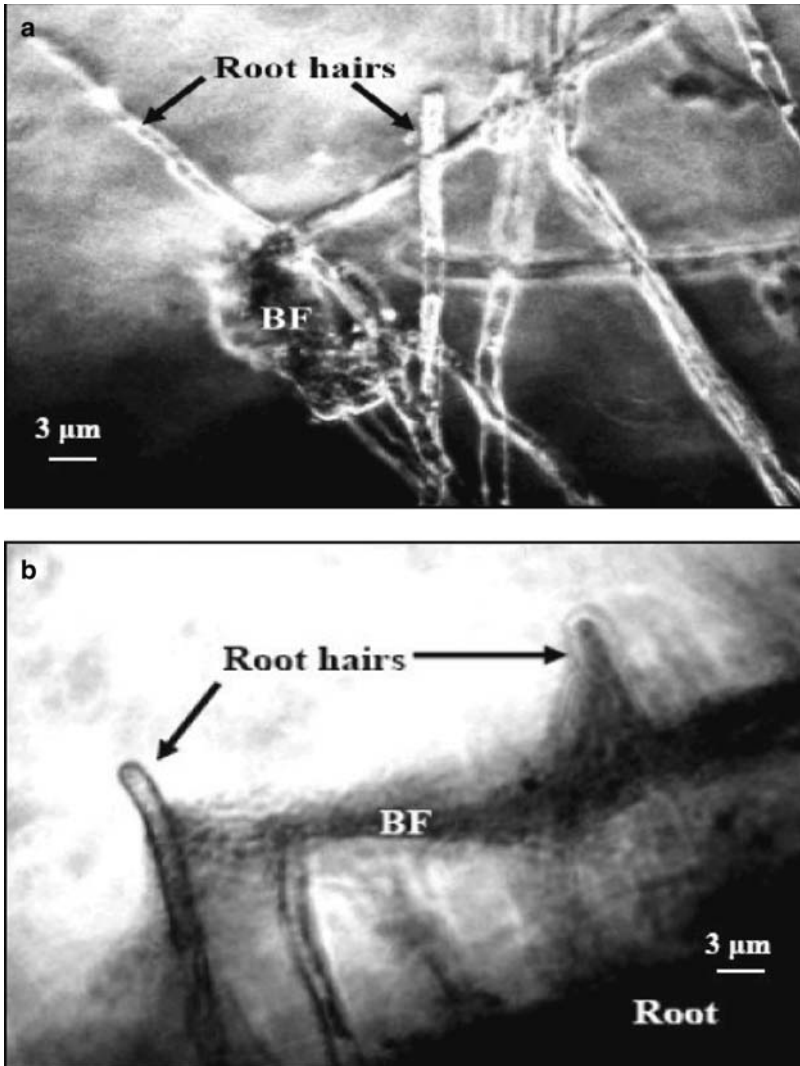


Fig. 3.1 Rhizobial biofilms (*BF*) developed on root hairs of wheat, when rhizobial monocultures (a) or fungal–rhizobial biofilms (*FRB*) (b) was inoculated under axenic conditions. The inoculation of the FRB helped maintain a higher cell density of rhizobia on the root hairs than the inoculation of the monoculture

the root hairs whereas fungal mycelium of the FRB linked root hairs, which provided support to maintain the higher cell density (Seneviratne et al. 2008b). Thus, the FRB may act as nodule-like structures or “pseudonodules” capable of fixing N_2 biologically on roots of such non legumes, as reported earlier by Jayasinghachari and Seneviratne (2004b). The FBB/FRB can also develop biofilms

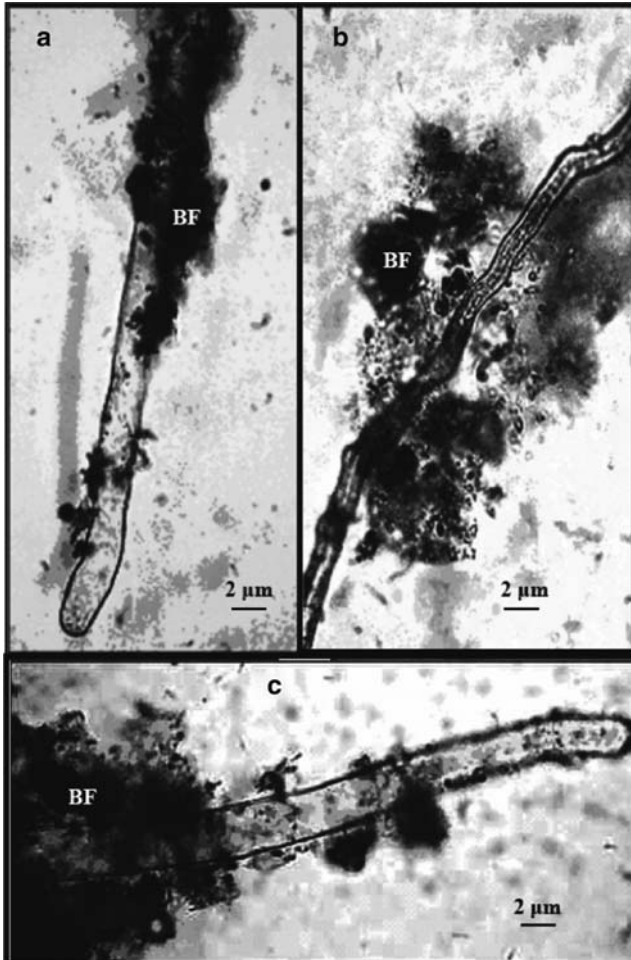


Fig. 3.2 Root hairs of rice (a), tea (b) and *Anthurium* (c) colonized by microbial biofilms (BF), when fungal–bacterial biofilms (FBB) or fungal–rhizobial biofilms (FRB) were inoculated under axenic conditions. Darkness is due to cotton blue stain absorbed by the EPS produced by the BF

on root hairs of other non legumes, when inoculated under axenic conditions. Root hairs of rice, tea and *Anthurium* have been found heavily colonized with biofilm formation, as evidenced by the EPS produced by the biofilms (Fig. 3.2). It was reported recently that the adsorption of rhizobia to biotic surfaces like plant roots is governed by the rhizobial adhesion protein RapA1 (Mongiardini et al. 2008). It can therefore be speculated that this adhesion protein, which may also have contributed to attachment and formation of the FBB/FRB, is common in many bacteria.

3.4 Effects of Biofilmed Biofertilizers on Plant Growth and Yield

When the FBB/FRB formulated as the BBs were applied to the growing medium of plants, they formed biofilms on the root system, as discussed earlier. These biofilms have shown their positive effects on growth and yield of crops. For instance, in a soil pot experiment, when rice was grown in the absence of chemical fertilizers, it was found that the shoot growth of this crop improved when the number of beneficial microbial species of the BBs was increased (Fig. 3.3). Conventional biofertilizers with single microbial species or monocultures increased the shoot biomass by only 7% compared to control. In contrast, the inoculation of BBs containing three microbes FBB/FRB (two bacteria + one fungus) increased the dry matter accumulation in shoots substantially by 25%. However, when a tripartite culture of FBB/FRB was used with 50% of the recommended rates of chemical fertilizers (urea 100 kg N ha⁻¹, triple super phosphate 13 kg P ha⁻¹ and muriate of potash 28 kg K ha⁻¹) for rice, plant biomass increased by ca. 55% compared to those observed for 100% application of the recommended fertilizers alone (Table 3.1). This was mainly attributed to increased root dry weight. Increasing the recommended fertilizer level up to 100% with the BBs, however, did not increase the plant growth. Both panicle formation and seed yield per hill were comparable between the BBs + 50% of the recommended fertilizers and the 100% of the recommended fertilizers alone (G. Seneviratne, unpublished).

In a nursery trial of tea with BBs of diazotrophic bacteria and/or recommended chemical fertilizers (T65; sulfate of ammonia, mono-ammonium phosphate, sulfate of potash and epsom salt; 15:20:15:15 (weight ratio) 80 kg per 10,000 plants during nursery period), there was a positive correlation between net photosynthetic rate and relative growth rate of leaf area (Fig. 3.4a). When two-bacterial BBs were applied, there was a propensity of increasing photosynthesis compared to one-bacterial BBs. Moderate application of 50% of the recommended fertilizers with the two-bacterial BBs helped increase leaf growth compared to other microbial fertilizer treatments and even 100% of the recommended fertilizer application. Soil C after harvest of the tea plants of the nursery was positively related to shoot/root ratio of the plants (Fig. 3.4b). The two-bacterial BBs with the moderate fertilizer level showed the highest shoot/root ratio and the soil C, which could possibly be due to increased growth of fine roots (Zavahir et al. 2008) and subsequent rapid turnover. The application of recommended fertilizers alone resulted in a low shoot/root ratio and soil C. The high shoot/root ratio with the two-bacterial BBs and the moderate N application maintained a low transpiration rate (Fig. 3.4c). However, the plants treated with the recommended fertilizers alone showed a high transpiration rate, as reflected by early wilting when exposed to sunlight (Jayasekara et al. 2008). The application of BBs with the N fertilizer helped increase leaf N of tea due to increased root growth (Fig. 3.4d). In a field experiment, young tea applied with

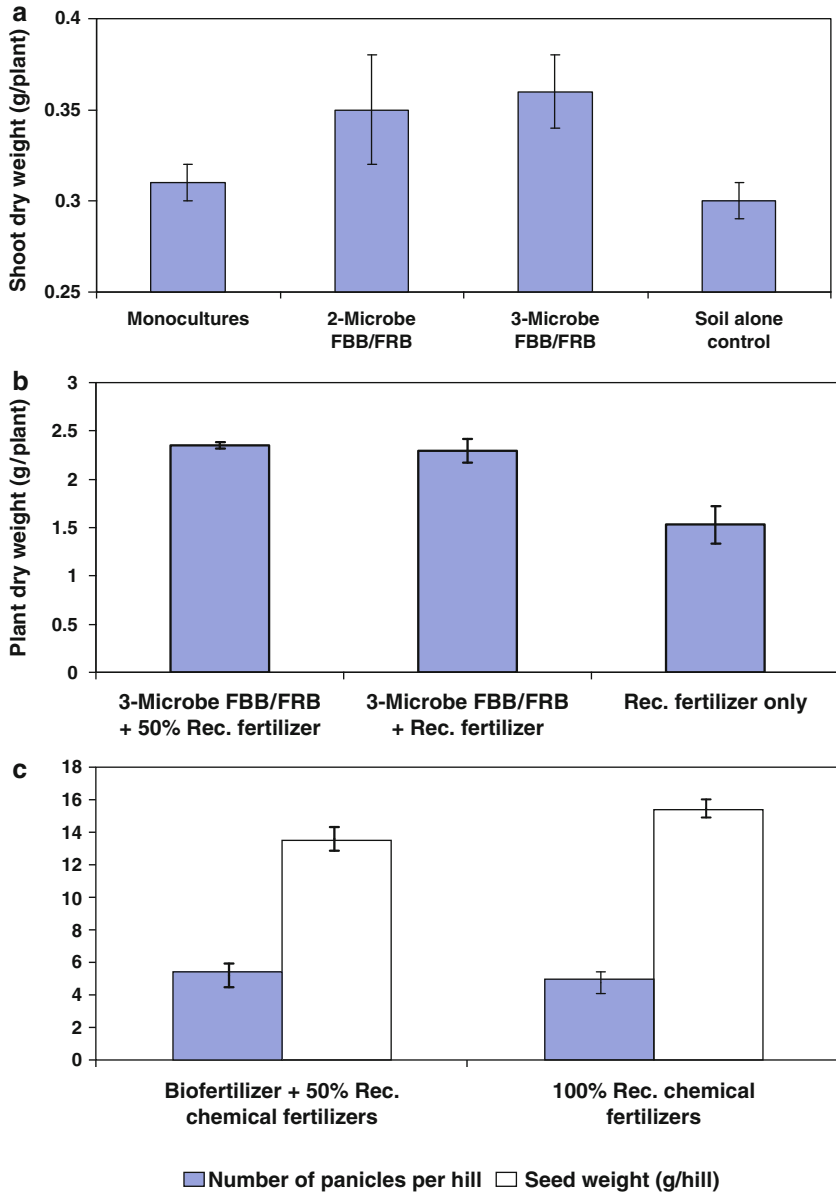


Fig. 3.3 Shoot growth of rice (a) in a soil pot experiment, when the number of beneficial microbial species of the fungal–bacterial biofilms (*FBB*) and fungal–rhizobial biofilms (*FRB*), formulated and applied as biofilmed biofertilizers (*BBs*) was increased, in comparison to microbial monocultures. Total plant growth (b), when a three-microbe *FBB/FRB* was coupled with 50% or 100% of the recommended chemical fertilizers, or 100% of the recommended fertilizers alone. Panicle formation and seed yield of rice (c), when the *BBs* were coupled with 50% of the recommended chemical fertilizers or 100% of the recommended fertilizers alone. Vertical bars show standard error

Table 3.1 Dry matter accumulation in shoot, root and whole plant of rice grown in pot soil treated with a tripartite FBB/FRB with 50% or 100% of recommended chemical fertilizer, or 100% of the recommended fertilizer alone

Treatment	Shoot dry weight (g per plant)	Root dry weight (g per plant)	Total dry weight (g per plant)
Tripartite FBB/FRB + 50% recommended fertilizer	1.95a±0.03	0.40a±0.001	2.35a±0.03
Tripartite FBB/FRB + 100% recommended fertilizer	1.99a±0.10	0.29b±0.02	2.29ab±0.12
100% recommended fertilizer alone	1.42a±0.19	0.10c±0.01	1.53b±0.19
CV (%)	14.5	6.20	13.4

Mean ±SE. Values in each column followed by a same letter are not significantly different at 5% probability level

four-microbe FRB (three bacteria + one fungus) alone produced a leaf weight of 506 kg ha⁻¹ compared to 431 kg ha⁻¹ with 100% of the recommended chemical fertilizers alone, at the first tipping.

Anthurium plantlets treated with four-microbe FRB and 50% of recommended chemical fertilizers in an inert particle medium showed a higher relative growth rate of plant dry weight than that of the 100% of the recommended fertilizers alone, in early growth (Fig. 3.5). The four-microbe FRB alone marginally supported the plant growth, possibly due to low microbial biomass of the biofilm, in the absence of the fertilizer nutrients. These findings suggested that the input of chemical fertilizers can be reduced by 50% during the vegetative growth phase and possibly for the entire crop of such non legumes, which could be a huge economic gain in terms of fertilizer saving.

The BBs once applied to a root establish an association between the root and the biofilm, as shown in the conceptual model presented in Fig. 3.6. The moderate application of the chemical fertilizer nutrients helps increase the microbial biomass of the biofilm, which in turn tends to increase the microbial efficiency or the functionality, as the concentrations of the fertilizer nutrients, particularly N depletes. The biofilm acts as a nodule-like structure or a pseudonodule-fixing N₂. This fixed N may be transferred to the root, and in return the root may supply carbon sources to the biofilm, the processes of which need future investigations. The release of organic acids by the biofilm helps suppress microbial pathogens (Browning et al. 2006) as well as increase mineralization of soil nutrients in the rhizosphere (Seneviratne and Jayasinghearachchi 2005). Moreover, plant growth hormones, such as IAA produced by the biofilms (Bandara et al. 2006), should increase the growth of roots and mycorrhizal fungi. In this manner, this association constitutes an excellent metabolic cooperation that helps the healthy growth of the plant. In addition, the BBs are also important in replenishing beneficial microbial communities in deteriorated soils due to heavy use of chemical inputs and intensive cropping (Seneviratne 2009).

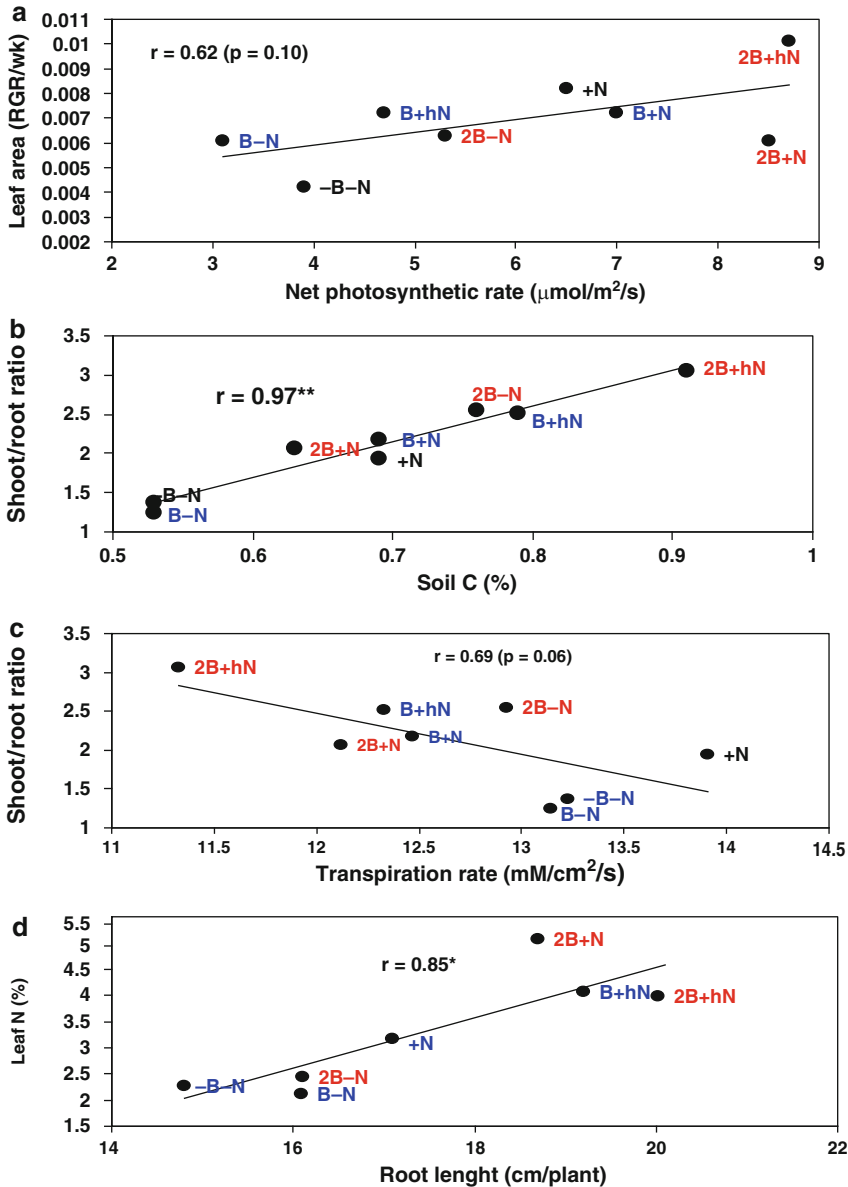


Fig. 3.4 Relationships among plant and soil parameters in a nursery trial of tea, when biofilmed biofertilizers (*BBs*) of diazotrophic bacteria and/or recommended chemical fertilizers were applied. Correlations between (a) net photosynthetic rate and relative growth rate of leaf area (b) soil C after harvest of the plants and shoot/root ratio (c) shoot/root ratio and transpiration rate and (d) leaf N and root growth. Treatments included no bacteria (*-B*), one (*B*) or two (*2B*) bacteria, and half (*hN*) or full (*N*) recommendation of chemical fertilizers, or no fertilizers (*-N*)

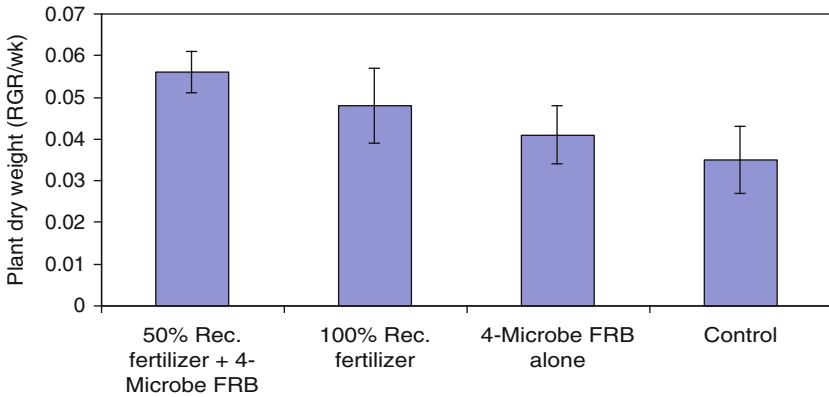


Fig. 3.5 Relative growth rate (*RGR*) of plant dry weight of *Anthurium* plantlets treated with a four-microbe fungal–rhizobial biofilm (*FRB*) alone, four-microbe *FRB* and 50% of recommended chemical fertilizers or 100% of the recommended fertilizers alone, in an inert particle medium during early growth. Vertical bars show standard error

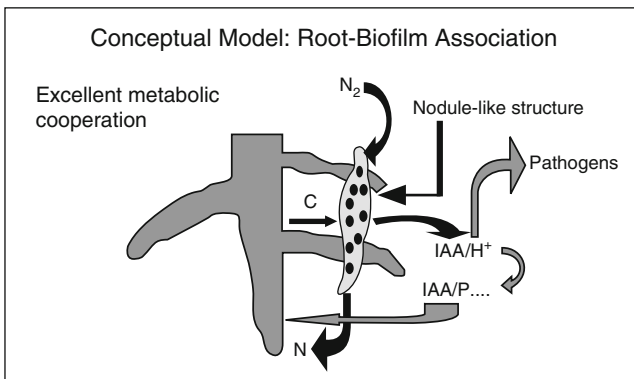


Fig. 3.6 Conceptual model showing the association established between the root and the biofilm, when the biofilmed biofertilizers (*BBs*) were applied to a root of a non legume

3.5 Conclusion

It is clear from various studies that the *FBB/FRB* when formulated as *BBs* and applied to non legumes enhance the plant growth in the presence of even moderate levels of chemical fertilizers. The biofilms with a higher number of beneficial microbial species (higher order biofilms) increased the plant growth possibly due to improved microbial activities. However, selection of combinations of microbes possessing the highest efficiency, simultaneous biofertilizing and biocontrolling activities is a key factor in the preparation and formulation of *BBs*. Diverse forms of the *BBs* can serve as a source to increase N_2 fixation, promote nutrient uptake

and to manage plant diseases in different agro-ecosystems. Therefore, both laboratory and field trials are required to realize the full impact of this biotechnological approach for sustainable crop production.

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Chapter 4

Role of 1-Aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate deaminase in *Rhizobium*–Legume Symbiosis

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Abstract Rhizobia form symbiotic relationships with leguminous plants and convert atmospheric nitrogen into ammonia which can be utilized by host legume plants. Symbiotic nitrogen fixation is important not only for the production of protein-rich legumes but also to improve the fertility of soils. Nodulation in the roots of legumes is regarded as an initiating event in the onset of N₂ fixation. Inhibition of nodulation restricts the N₂-fixing ability of legumes, which may occur due to variety of reasons. For instance, ethylene, as a stress hormone, inhibits nodulation in legumes. However, its action is naturally offset by an enzyme 1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate (ACC) deaminase, produced by rhizobia. This enzyme cleaves plant-produced ACC into ammonia and α -ketobutyrate thereby lowering the ethylene level. As a consequence of decreased ethylene levels, nodulation is increased. Moreover, the ACC deaminase-containing plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria including symbiotic N₂ fixers reduce the physiological damage to plants caused by other environmental factors. In this chapter, the focus is to understand how the rhizobial ACC deaminase lowers the ethylene level in legumes and overcomes the inhibitory effects of ethylene on nodulation. The strategy adopted by rhizobial species to promote nodulation by adjusting ethylene levels could be exploited as an effective tool for legume improvement in different agro-ecological niches.

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4.1 Introduction

Microbial communities, in general, predominate in or around the plant root surfaces compared to bulk soil, and play a crucial role in maintaining soil health and plant development (Kloepper et al. 1980). This “rhizosphere effect” occurs primarily owing to the release of as much as 40% of photosynthates (e.g., sugars, organic acids and amino acids, etc.) from the plant roots (Lynch and Whipps 1991; Nelson 2004). The microorganisms use these exudates as nutrients and rapidly colonize the roots of plants (VanLoon and Glick 2004). Root-colonizing bacteria commonly referred to as “rhizobacteria” may remain confined to the root surface (rhizoplane), or enter the root interior and behave as endophytes (Sturz et al. 2000). Such rhizobacterial strains, including both free-living and symbiotic bacteria, capable of facilitating plant growth after inoculation on to seeds or when already present in soils, are called plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) (Kloepper et al. 1980; Zahir et al. 2004). Of these PGPR, soil bacteria belonging to various genera of the order rhizobiales (collectively called rhizobia) invade legume roots in nitrogen-limiting environments, leading to the formation of a highly specialized organ, the root nodule, on compatible legume roots or stems, and converts atmospheric N_2 into NH_3 and exports the fixed N to the host plants (Long 1989). Besides promoting the growth of plants by providing N to plants, rhizobia also facilitate the growth of plants by preventing the deleterious effects of one or more phytopathogenic organisms (e.g., *Botrytis cinerea* and *Fusarium oxysporum*) by synthesizing an array of antibiotics, such as phenazines (Krishnan et al. 2007) and phytohormones like IAA (Mandal et al. 2007; Sridevi and Mallaiah 2007; Wani et al. 2007) and siderophores (Storey et al. 2006; Wani et al. 2008) which can solubilize and sequester iron and make it available to plants, and solubilize not easily available forms of phosphorus (Abd-Alla 1994; Alikhani et al. 2006).

The gaseous hormone ethylene produced endogenously by plants has many strong effects on plant development and has been shown to act as a secondary signal in the induction of plant defenses (Ecker 1995). Ethylene has been involved in many physiological processes, such as seed germination, tissue differentiation, formation of root and shoot primordial, root elongation, lateral bud development, flowering initiation, anthocyanin synthesis, flower opening and organ senescence, fruit aroma and ripening, storage product hydrolysis, and leaf and fruit abscission (Frankenberger and Arshad 1995; Spaink 1997). In addition, ethylene acts as a messenger of biotic and abiotic stresses (Herder et al. 2006). It also plays a major role in the beneficial rhizobial and arbuscular mycorrhizal symbioses (Guinel and Geil 2002). Ethylene is produced and sensed in response to a wide variety of environmental and developmental factors, including salinity, drought, water logging, heavy metals, pathogenicity and nodulation (Abeles et al. 1992; Spaink 1997). Despite acting as a plant growth regulator, ethylene at higher concentrations inversely affects many physiological stages of plants including nodulation by rhizobia in various legumes (Hirsch and Fang 1994; Oldroyd et al. 2001; VanLoon et al. 2006). For instance, ethylene has been shown to inhibit nodule development in

alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) (Ligero et al. 1991; Glick et al. 2007a) and pea (*Pisum sativum*) (Guinel and Geil 2002; Cheng et al. 2008). However, *Medicago truncatula*, a hypernodulating mutant sickle, is ethylene insensitive (Penmetsa and Cook 1997) and has shown altered auxin transport regulation during nodulation (Prayitno et al. 2006).

Similar to the model proposed for free-living bacteria, the strains of N₂-fixing bacteria also synthesize a multimeric (homodimeric or homotrimeric) enzyme, 1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate (ACC) deaminase (Glick 1995; Glick et al. 1999), which facilitates symbiosis by metabolizing the immediate biosynthetic precursor (ACC) of ethylene (Glick et al. 1994; Mayak et al. 1999) into ammonia and α -ketobutyrate (Glick et al. 1998). Hence, ACC deaminase decreases ethylene levels in host plants (Ma et al. 2003a, 2004; Glick 2005) and consequently improves the overall growth of plants (Glick et al. 2007b; Contesto et al. 2008). This enzyme was first detected in *Pseudomonas* sp. strain ACP and the yeast, *Hansenula saturnus* (Honma and Shimomura 1978; Honma 1993; Minami et al. 1998) and since then, it has been reported in numerous other PGPR strains (Shaharoon et al. 2007; Naveed et al. 2008; Duan et al. 2008) including large number of symbiotic N₂-fixing bacteria, such as *Rhizobium leguminosarum* bv. *viciae*, *R. hedysari*, *Rhizobium* spp., *Mesorhizobium* and *Bradyrhizobium* (Belimov et al. 2005; Hontzeas et al. 2005; Blaha et al. 2006; Bajgiran et al. 2008). When the bacteria possessing ACC deaminase are bound to the seed coat of a developing seedling, they act as a sink for ACC ensuring that the ethylene level does not increase to the point where root growth is impaired. By facilitating the formation of longer roots, these bacteria may enhance the survival of some seedlings, especially during the first few days after the seeds are planted. Plants treated with ACC deaminase-containing bacteria have longer roots (Hall et al. 1996; Shah et al. 1998) and help plants to better resist the inhibitory effects of stress ethylene on growth imposed by heavy metals (Reed and Glick 2005; Safronova et al. 2006; Zhang et al. 2008), pathogens (Wang et al. 2000; Belimov et al. 2007), drought (Zahir et al. 2008; Arshad et al. 2008), flooding (Grichko and Glick 2001; Farwell et al. 2007), and high salt (Cheng et al. 2007; Yang et al. 2008; Jalili et al. 2008). Thus, understanding the role of rhizobial ACC deaminase in reducing the effect of ethylene would help to develop the rhizobial inoculant containing ACC deaminase activity that could become useful in sustaining growth and development of legumes under stress conditions by reducing stress-induced ethylene production.

4.2 Rhizobia–Legume Symbiosis: An Overview

The interaction between rhizobia and their corresponding specific legume host plants leading to nodule formation is a complex process that requires a continuous and adequate signal exchange between the plant and the bacteria (Perret et al. 2000; Bartsev et al. 2004). The symbiotic associates show a high degree of mutual specificity

which is often mediated by the exchange of signal compounds (Long and Staskawicz 1993; Spaink 1997). During this interaction, rhizobia are attracted by root exudates and colonize plant root surfaces. Flavonoids, the plant signal compounds present in the exudates, trigger the transcription of bacterial nodulation (*nod*) genes leading thereby to the synthesis of lipochito-oligosaccharide signals called Nod factors (Perret et al. 2000). These signal compounds in turn cause the legume root hairs to curl. Nod factors together with additional microbial signals, such as polysaccharides and secreted proteins, allow bacteria attached to root hairs to penetrate the root through a tubular structure called the infection thread, through which the rhizobia enter, move into root hair, and subsequently reach to the dividing cortical cells. When the thread reaches the primordium, the bacteria are released into the plant cytoplasm, where they differentiate into endosymbiotic form, the N₂-fixing bacteroids. Inside the central nodule cells, rhizobia are housed as symbiosome that are horizontally acquired organelles and are involved in the enzymatic reduction of atmospheric nitrogen to ammonia and make this N accessible to their hosts. In return, the bacteria are supplied with carbohydrates in a protected environment. The host plant, however, regulates the number of nodules formed, the maturation of nodules, and the N₂ fixation of the nodules dependent upon available nitrogen.

Despite substantial progress in biological sciences, the mechanisms regulating legume root nodule development are still poorly understood, and very few regulatory genes have been cloned and characterized. For instance, *EFD* (ethylene response factor, ERF, required for nodule differentiation), a gene that is upregulated during nodulation in *M. truncatula*, has recently been characterized (Vernié et al. 2008). The *EFD* transcription factor belongs to the ERF group V, which contains ERN1, 2, and 3, three ERFs involved in Nod factor signaling. The role of *EFD* in the regulation of nodulation has been examined through the characterization of a null deletion mutant (*efd-1*), RNA interference, and overexpression studies (Vernié et al. 2008). *EFD* is a negative regulator of root nodulation and infection by *Rhizobium*. It is required for the formation of functional nitrogen-fixing nodules and affects the plant and bacteroid differentiation processes occurring beneath the nodule meristem. Furthermore, *EFD* also activate a cytokinin primary response gene Mt *RR4* that encodes a type-A response regulator. Induction of Mt *RR4* leads to the inhibition of cytokinin signaling with the suppression of new nodule initiation and activation of differentiation as cells leave the nodule meristem. Thus, a key regulator linking early and late stages of nodulation and the regulation of the cytokinin pathway are important both for nodule initiation and development.

Rhizobia, in general, produce both indeterminate and determinate types of nodules. Indeterminate nodules are characterized by different zones: (1) the distal meristem, where bacteria are internalized, (2) an interzone with amyloplast accumulation and differentiation of bacteroids, and (3) a fixation zone that includes plant cells and a senescent zone (Pawlowski and Bisseling 1996; Timmers et al. 1999; Jeroen et al. 2006). In comparison, determinate nodules are typically round shaped and are derived from the cessation of meristem activity after nodule initiation and growth of the nodule mainly by cell expansion (Jeroen et al. 2006).

4.3 Effect of Ethylene on Symbiosis

Legumes form a mutualistic symbiosis with rhizobia. Although the interaction is beneficial to the plant, the symbiosis is tightly regulated. The gaseous plant hormone ethylene has been found to be involved in many physiological events including regulation of symbiotic process in legumes. For instance, many plants require a burst of ethylene to break seed dormancy (Esashi and Esashi 1991) but, following germination, a sustained high level of ethylene may inhibit root elongation (Jackson 1991). It is reported that root growth is stimulated at low concentrations of ethylene but is markedly decreased at higher concentrations. Another interesting response of plant species to ethylene is the massive production of root hairs. Ethylene may also modify shoot growth (Bajgiran et al. 2008) and nodule formation in legumes by rhizobia (Table 4.1). However, the mechanism by which ethylene inhibits nodulation is unclear, and the position at which it acts during the

Table 4.1 Effect of ethylene on *Rhizobium*–legume symbiosis

Legume	Host specific rhizobia	Effect on nodulation	References
<i>Medicago truncatula</i>	<i>Sinorhizobium meliloti</i>	Initiation of infection threads, Inhibits the Nod factor signal transduction pathway, Inhibits the maintenance of calcium spiking	Oldroyd et al. (2001)
<i>Glycine max</i> cv. Gong jiao 6301-1	<i>Bradyrhizobium japonicum</i>	Decrease in nodule number	Xie et al. (1996)
<i>Pisum sativum</i> cv. Rondo	<i>Rhizobium leguminosarum</i> bv. <i>viciae</i>	Decrease in nodule number	Lee and LaRue (1992)
<i>Melilotus alba</i> U389	<i>S. meliloti</i>	Decrease in nodule number	Lee and LaRue (1992)
<i>Pisum sativum</i> cv. Sparkle	<i>R. leguminosarum</i> bv. <i>viciae</i>	Decrease in nodule number; blockage of infection thread elongation in inner cortex	Lee and LaRue (1992)
<i>Pisum sativum</i> cv. Feltham First	<i>R. leguminosarum</i> bv. <i>viciae</i>	Inhibition of root extension, decrease in nodule numbers and nitrogen fixation	Goodlass and Smith (1979)
<i>Trifolium repense</i> cv. Huia	<i>R. trifoli</i>	Decrease in nodule number and nitrogen fixation	Goodlass and Smith (1979)
<i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i> var. Pencil Podded Black Wax	<i>Rhizobium</i> sp.	Decrease in nodule number and nitrogen fixation	Grobbeelaar et al. (1971)

Modified from Okazaki et al. (2004)

complex symbiotic process is inconclusive. For example, inoculation with sinorhizobia and bradyrhizobia enhanced ethylene production in the roots of alfalfa and soybean (*Glycine max*) plants (Ligero et al. 1986, 1991; Sukanuma et al. 1995). In contrast, there are several reports that suggest that exogenously applied ethylene inhibits nodulation in legumes by blocking cortical cell division and reducing the number of cortical infections (Lee and LaRue 1992; Spaink 1997). The inhibition of nodule formation could be a result of developmental effects that ethylene exerts on the plant. For example, ethylene is required for the elongation of root hairs (Tanimoto et al. 1995; Pitts et al. 1998); a function clearly involved in the invasion of rhizobia, but simultaneously inhibits cell division (Goodlass and Smith 1979), a function that would be detrimental to nodule formation. However, a report suggests that the induction of root hair growth by nod factors occurs independently of ethylene (Heidstra et al. 1997). Moreover, the synthesis of endogenous ethylene in legume (e.g., pea) controls the position of nodule primordia formation (Heidstra et al. 1997). Additionally, the exogenously applied ethylene inhibits infection thread elongation in inner cortex and root growth (Xie et al. 1996), and also reduces nodule number (Peters and Crist-Estes 1989; Lee and LaRue 1992) and the morphology of nodules (Fernandez-Lopez et al. 1998) formed on the root systems and, consequently, nitrogen fixation. The production of ethylene in legume roots has been found to increase after application of rhizobial cells (Ligero et al. 1986), nitrate (Ligero et al. 1986) and nod factor (van Spronsen et al. 1995), suggesting that these factors control nodulation through their effects on the levels of ethylene. For example, the fate of rhizobial infection in the root hairs of legumes has been proposed to be regulated by the levels of ethylene in the underlying plant cortex (Guinel and Geil 2002); a low level of ethylene, allowing proper disposition of the cytoskeleton, is probably required for successful entry of the infection thread in the outermost layer of cortical cells, whereas higher levels of the hormone induce abortion of the infection thread by inducing crosslinking of its matrix glycoproteins. This hypothesis is substantiated by much evidence, for instance, *sickle*, an ethylene-insensitive mutant of barrel medic, has a very high persistence of infection threads (Penmetsa and Cook 1997), while *brz*, a potential ethylene-oversensitive mutant of pea, had much higher numbers of aborted infection threads than those observed for wild-type plants. Ethylene effect has commonly been reported in legumes that form indeterminate nodules. It has been shown to inhibit nodule development in pea (Guinel and Sloetjes 2000; Guinel and Geil 2002), *Trifolium repens* (Goodlass and Smith 1979), and *M. sativa* (Peters and Crist-Estes 1989). On the other hand, the nodulation response of determinate nodules to ethylene is variable and species-dependent. For example, ethylene inhibited nodulation in *Lotus japonicus* and *Macropodium atropurpureum* (Nukui et al. 2000) but failed to alter nodulation in soybean (Schmidt et al. 1999; Sukanuma et al. 1995), although the number of nodules on soybean cv. Bragg was reduced by ethylene. Also, *Sesbania rostrata* is less sensitive to ethylene because exogenous ACC or CEPA (2-chloroethylphosphonic acid) did not negatively influence root nodulation (Xie et al. 1996). In *S. rostrata* roots, differential ethylene concentrations may

determine the fate of nodule development by influencing the persistence of the nodule meristem (Fernandez-Lopez et al. 1998). Differential ethylene concentrations could be caused by mechanisms interfering with ethylene production, diffusion, or perception. Ethylene, thus, (1) regulates the formation of the infection thread, (2) regulates the maintenance of the nodule meristems, as reported in *S. rostrata*, and (3) inhibits the maintenance of calcium spiking after induction by nod factor (Oldroyd et al. 2001).

However, when ethylene pressure is removed from plants, a substantial increase in nodule formation occurred in *M. trunculata* (Oldroyd et al. 2001), *M. sativa* (Nukui et al. 2000), *L. japonicus* (Bras et al. 2000), pea (Lorteau et al. 2001), and *M. atropurpureum* (Nukui et al. 2000). Since legume root nodulation is dependent on the density of *Rhizobium* in the root environment (Kucey and Hynes 1989), it is, therefore, possible that ethylene controls nodulation by also limiting rhizobial multiplication. To validate this hypothesis, Tamimi and Timko (2003) suggested that ethylene could modulate an early step in the Nod factor signal transduction pathway indicating that the effect of ethylene on nodulation is not limited to the host plant but might also affect the bacterial symbiont.

4.4 Rhizobial Strategies for Decreasing Ethylene Levels

Legume production depends heavily on biologically fixed nitrogen (BNF) derived from the symbiotic interactions between rhizobia and its specific host plants. Despite a phytohormone, ethylene acts as a negative factor in the nodulation process. Conversely, nodulation can be promoted when plants are treated with ethylene inhibitors or antagonists (Peters and Crist-Estes 1989; Yuhashi et al. 2000). Interestingly, recent discoveries suggest that rhizobia employ several strategies to reduce the amount of ethylene and consequently its inhibitory effect on nodulation. In this context, two potential strategies have been reported for lowering the ethylene effect. One strategy involves an ethylene biosynthesis inhibitor, called rhizobiotoxine, an enol-ether amino acid [2-amino-4-(2-amino-3-hydroxypropoxy)-trans-3-butenoic acid] produced by rhizobia (Okazaki et al. 2007) that inhibits ACC synthase while the other involves an enzyme, ACC deaminase, produced by the symbiotic nitrogen-fixing bacteria (Duan et al. 2008; Bajgiran et al. 2008). Of these, rhizobiotoxine are secreted outside rhizobial cells probably by a rhizobiotoxine transporter and delivered to plants. Although rhizobiotoxin is best known for its chlorosis-inducing activity on leguminous plants (Owens and Wright 1965; Owens 1973), the recent studies have shown that rhizobiotoxine plays a positive role in nodule development through its inhibition of ethylene biosynthesis. The positive and necessary role of rhizobiotoxine in mutualistic symbiosis was demonstrated by Duodu et al. (1999) who suggested that rhizobiotoxine is required for *Bradyrhizobium elkanii* for efficient nodulation in greengram (*Vigna radiata* L. Wilczek). Since then, the role of rhizobiotoxine in symbiosis improvement has been reported for other legumes (Yuhashi et al. 2000; Sugawara et al. 2006).

The cumulative evidence suggests that rhizobitoxine-producing bacteria modulate plant–microbe interactions via ethylene in the rhizosphere and phyllosphere environments. In addition, rhizobitoxine-producing capability might be utilized as tools in agriculture and biotechnology (Sugawara et al. 2006). The reduction in ethylene levels by synthesizing rhizobitoxin is, however, limited to slow growing rhizobial species. Therefore, how fast growing rhizobia alleviate the toxicity of ethylene needs to be addressed since they could enhance nodulation as well. Hence, an alternative strategy for reduction in the effects of ethylene on plants involves ACC deaminase. The extent of ACC deaminase in rhizobial strains varies greatly. For example, out of the total 33 strains of rhizobia collected from 30 different sites across Saskatchewan, Canada, only 11% had ACC deaminase activity (Duan et al. 2008), while in another study, around 38% *Rhizobium* spp. displayed ACC activity (Ma et al. 2003a).

Rhizobia capable of producing ACC deaminase are able to reduce ethylene concentration in the plant cells in the immediate vicinity of the infection threads. Therefore, the infection threads containing ACC deaminase-producing rhizobial cells can better suppress the defense signals in the plant cell and increase the persistence of the infection threads. This leads to higher nodule numbers as reported in plants inoculated with *S. meliloti* Rm11466 as well as a higher portion of nodules formed by Rm11466 when the plants were coinoculated with both *S. meliloti* Rm5356 and Rm11466. In addition, since a high percentage of infection threads abort before a nodule is formed, infection threads containing Rm11466 could suppress the development of those containing Rm5356 by reaching nodule primordia and forming nodules faster. This also accounts for the higher competitiveness of Rm11466 (Ma et al. 2004). Gage et al. (1996) observed that *S. meliloti* proliferates inside the infection threads of alfalfa. The population of bacteria inside the threads originates from the clonal expansion of a small number of founder cells which enter the threads early, and only the bacterial cells of the threads will eventually be released into the cytoplasm of the plant cell as reported by Ma et al. (2004). It is also suggested that *S. meliloti* cells travel down the infection threads by proliferation instead of swimming, since bacteria do not have flagella when inside the threads. However, what nutrient source(s) *S. meliloti* cells utilize to proliferate in the infection threads is not known. Although the ACC concentrations in the infection threads are expected to be low, the possible ability of the ACC deaminase-producing cells to utilize ACC as an extra nutrient source makes the bacterium proliferate better in the infection threads than those that do not have this enzyme. Therefore, infecting cells that produce ACC deaminase are more likely to reach nodule primordia and form mature nodules, which results in the higher competitiveness of *S. meliloti* Rm11466 than of Rm5356.

In order to explain how ACC deaminase-containing PGPR can lower plant ethylene levels and in turn stimulate plant growth, a model (Fig. 4.1) similar to those originally proposed by Glick et al. (1998) has also been reported for reducing the levels of ethylene in legumes by rhizobia (Ma et al. 2003a, 2004). According to this model, the reduction in the concentration of ethylene by ACC deaminase

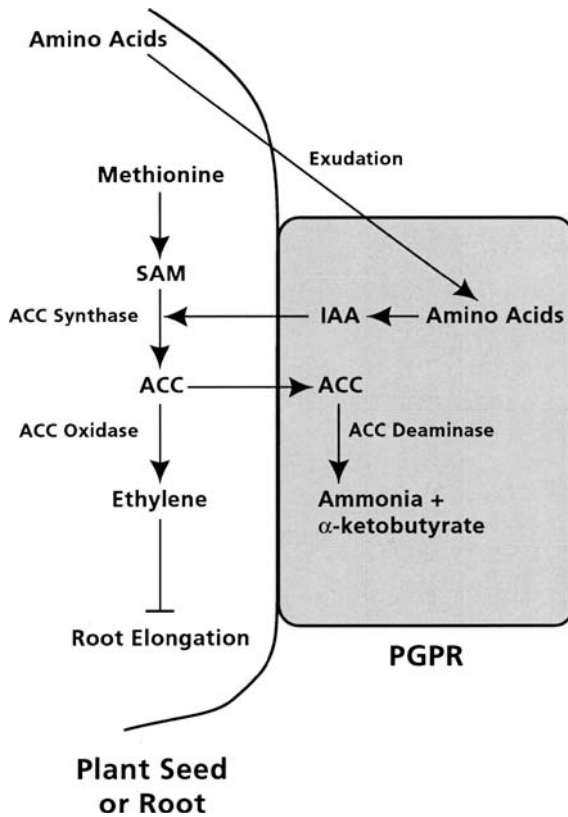


Fig. 4.1 Schematic representation of mechanisms through which the PGPR attached to either a seed or plant root lowers ethylene concentration and prevents ethylene inhibition of root elongation. The (\perp) indicates inhibition. IAA indicates indoleacetic acid, ACC 1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylic acid and SAM, S-adenosyl-methionine (adapted from Glick et al. 1998)

involves: (1) binding or colonization of organisms onto the surface of either the seed or root of a developing plant; (2) synthesis and release of IAA by bacterial strains in response to tryptophan and other small molecules present in the seed or root exudates; some of IAA secreted could be used by the plants; the IAA so released, together with endogenous plant IAA, stimulate plant cell proliferation and elongation, or it can also induce the activity of ACC synthase to produce ACC; (3) exudation of the plant's ACC along with other small molecules such as sugars, organic acids and amino acids (Penrose and Glick 2001); (4) uptake of exudates by the bacteria which is used as a source of nutrients; and (5) cleavage of ACC by ACC deaminase forming ammonia and α -ketobutyrate, which are further metabolized by the bacteria. Thus, the uptake and cleavage of ACC by ACC deaminase containing N_2 fixers decreases the amount of ACC and thereby acts as a sink for it. In turn, the

decreased level of ACC lowers the levels of ethylene and alleviates its potential inhibitory effect and consequently help plants to grow better under ethylene stressed environment.

4.5 Genes Involved in the Synthesis of ACC Deaminase and Nodulation Enhancement

1-amino cyclopropane-1-carboxylic acid deaminase (AcdS) is an enzyme that degrades the precursor of plant hormone ethylene. The AcdS activity has been identified in many soil bacteria (Hameeda et al. 2006; Cheng et al. 2007) including rhizobia, which is reported to play an important role in plant growth promotion. Genes encoding ACC deaminase have been reported in PGPR (Venkadasamy et al. 2008) including *B. japonicum* (Kaneko et al. 2002), *Mesorhizobium loti* (Kaneko et al. 2000; Sullivan et al. 2002; Uchiumi et al. 2004), *R. leguminosarum* and *R. gallicum* (Ma et al. 2003a; Duan et al. 2008) and *R. radiobacter*. The ACC deaminase genes from *R. leguminosarum* bv. *viciae* 128C53K and 99A1 showed 64% similarities with the gene reported in plant growth-promoting bacterium, *Pseudomonas putida* UW4 (Shah et al. 1998). However, all these rhizobial strains had relatively low ACC deaminase activities compared to that expressed by *P. putida* UW4. Furthermore, the regulation study of ACC deaminase in strain 128C53K revealed its very low basal level of expression in the absence of ACC, which could be induced by ACC concentrations as low as 1 μ M (Ma et al. 2003a), suggesting that ACC deaminase in strain 128C53K could lower the ethylene concentration in pea roots as a consequence of nodulation (Ma et al. 2003a). In fact, an ACC deaminase knockdown strain 128C53K was approximately 30% less efficient at nodulating pea plant roots than the wild-type. In contrast, introduction of the ACC deaminase gene and its upstream regulatory gene, a leucine responsive regulatory protein (LRP)-like gene (*acdR*) from strain 128C53K, into a strain of *S. meliloti*, which does not produce this enzyme, made it 35–40% more effective and competitive than the wild-type at nodulating *M. sativa* (Ma et al. 2004). ACC deaminase genes in *M. loti* strains MAFF303099 and R7A are preceded by a *nifA*-dependent (Owens et al. 1972) promoter and thus appear to be expressed only in the symbiotic state (Sullivan et al. 2002; Uchiumi et al. 2004). Indeed, the ACC deaminase genes of *M. loti* strains MAFF303099 were drastically upregulated in bacteroids compared with the level of its transcription in free-living cells (Uchiumi et al. 2004). In contrast, ACC deaminase genes in *B. japonicum* and *R. leguminosarum* possess a σ promoter (Peters and Crist-Estes 1989) with an LRP (leucine responsible regulatory protein) box (Kaneko et al. 2002). Since the promoter structure of σ /LRP was involved in induction of ACC deaminase gene in *R. leguminosarum* and *E. cloacae* (Ma et al. 2003a, b), ACC is probably an inducer of the gene in *B. japonicum* chromosome. The proteome analysis of *B. japonicum* bacteroids has shown that ACC deaminase is one of the major proteins in bacteroids

rather than the free-living cell, suggesting that ACC in host plants might induce the ACC deaminase in rhizobia (Hoa et al. 2004).

An important question is how a decreased level of ethylene enhances nodulation. To address this issue, several models have been proposed depicting the relationship between signal transduction, ethylene sensing and the development of nodulation (Stearns and Glick 2003). Thus, two strategies can be adopted: (1) construct transgenic legumes with altered ethylene sensitivities; the expression of ethylene receptors that cannot bind ethylene confers reduced ethylene sensitivity to heterologous plants in a genetically dominant manner (Bleecker 1999); and (2) engineer rhizobia to enhance nodulation competitiveness on host legumes rather than by single inoculation (Okazaki et al. 2003; Uchiumi et al. 2004). Nodulation competitiveness, the ability of certain rhizobial strain to form nodules in a multistrain environment, has practical importance in agriculture due to the fact that super-nodulating strains often perform poorly under field conditions due to better competing populations of inferior rhizobia in soils. It is, therefore, possible that engineering rhizobia to exhibit high ACC deaminase activity is likely to delay the nodule senescence by reducing ethylene production, and thereby promoting nodule development and nitrogen fixation. Accordingly, nodules with high bacteroid ACC deaminase activity are expected to grow larger and contain more bacteroids that remain active for a longer period of time. For example, the ACC deaminase of *R. leguminosarum* bv. *viciae* 128C53K has been previously reported to be able to enhance nodulation of peas. The ACC deaminase structural gene (*acdS*) and its upstream regulatory gene, a leucine-responsive regulatory protein (LRP)-like gene (*lrpL*) from *R. leguminosarum* bv. *viciae* 128C53K, were introduced into *S. meliloti*, which does not produce this enzyme, in two different ways: through a plasmid vector and by in situ transposon replacement. The resulting ACC deaminase-producing transformed strain showed 35–40% increase in both nodule numbers and biomass in alfalfa (*M. sativa*) plants, likely by reducing ethylene production in the host plants. Furthermore, the genetically modified ACC deaminase-producing *S. meliloti* strain was more competitive in nodulation than the wild-type strain, and perhaps utilizes ACC as a nutrient within the infection threads (Ma et al. 2004). Thus, even if some rhizobial strains lack the ability to decrease ethylene levels in host legumes, the introduction of genes coding for ACC deaminase into these rhizobia may enhance the symbiotic interactions with the cognate host legumes and eventually reduce the ethylene level. This strategy of ethylene reduction in legumes is an interesting area of research that could lead to facilitating the productivity of legumes under stressed conditions. However, how the ACC deaminase activity affects nodulation competitiveness is unclear. The plausible explanation is that the ACC deaminase blocks ethylene biosynthesis locally at the infection sites and cancels the effects of ethylene on nodulation during the mitogenic process (Okazaki et al. 2004). Therefore, it has been suggested that the rhizobia employ more than one strategies, i.e., the ACC deaminase and rhizobio-toxine synthesis to reduce the extent of ethylene biosynthesis by the host legumes and enhance nodule formation.

4.6 Performance of ACC Deaminase Containing Transgenic Plants/Rhizobia

The exciting advances in molecular engineering facilitated the genetic manipulation of organisms for achieving a defined set of goals and objectives. An approach has been extended to understand the mechanism of reduction of ethylene levels in plants through genetic manipulation in genetically engineered legumes or rhizobia, for overexpression of ACC deaminase. Introduction of genes responsible for expression of ACC deaminase in plants has received more attention than rhizobia due to several reasons such as: (1) the ACC deaminase activity is widely reported among autochthonous PGPR species including rhizobia; (2) the degree of success in transforming the ACC deaminase genes into plants has been more successful; and (3) engineered organisms after inoculation face severe competition from indigenous ones, and therefore the chances of survival and proliferation of genetically modified transgenic bacteria in natural soil environments is quite often reduced. Because of all these factors, the plant molecular biologists opt for developing transgenic plants that express the ACC deaminase genes.

Many plant species have been genetically engineered with ACC deaminase expression to protect them against multiple biotic and abiotic stresses. For example, Grichko et al. (2000) expressed bacterial ACC deaminase in tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum*) cv. Heinz 902 under the transcriptional control of two tandem 35S cauliflower mosaic virus promoters (constitutive expression), the rolD promoter from *Agrobacterium rhizogenes* (root-specific expression) or the pathogenesis-related prb-1b promoter from tobacco. Transgenic tomato plants expressing ACC deaminase particularly controlled by the prb-1b promoter accumulate larger amounts of metals within the plant tissues. However, because the tomato plants are unlikely to be used in the phytoremediation of contaminated sites, Nie et al. (2002) expressed ACC deaminase genes in canola (*Brassica napus*) plants and tested their potential to grow in the presence of high levels of arsenate in the soil for metal accumulation in plant tissues. Also, the ability of the plant growth-promoting bacterium *E. cloacae* CAL2 has been tested to facilitate the growth of both non-transformed and ACC deaminase-expressing canola plants for developing a successful phytoremediation strategy. In all cases, transgenic canola expressing ACC deaminase genes accumulated larger amounts of arsenate from the contaminated soil than nontransformed canola plants. Similarly, the expression of *Pseudomonas* sp. 6G5 *acdS* gene under the control of a 35S promoter in tomato plants led to decreased ethylene synthesis and delayed fruit ripening (Klee et al. 1991). Such heterologous expression studies provide a functional demonstration of the role of AcdS to lower ethylene level in plants. In addition, these transgenic plants showed higher tolerance to flooding, heavy metal stress and pathogen attack (Klee et al. 1991; Klee 1993; Stearns and Glick 2003), as expected from the involvement of ethylene in stress responses.

Ethylene inhibits the establishment of symbiosis between rhizobia and legumes. To examine how and when endogenous ethylene inhibits rhizobial infection and

nodulation, transgenic, *L. japonicus* carrying the mutated melon ethylene receptor gene *Cm-ERS1/H70A* that confers ethylene insensitivity and fixes the transgene in the T₃ generation were produced. The resultant transgenic plants showed reduced ethylene sensitivity because of ACC resistance and increased flowering duration, probably due to a dominant negative mechanism. When inoculated with *M. loti*, transgenic plants showed markedly higher numbers of infection threads and nodule primordia on their roots than did either wild-type or azygous plants during the early stage of cultivation period as well as during later stages, when the number of mature nodules had reached a steady state. In addition, transcripts of *NIN*, a gene governing infection thread formation, increased in the inoculated transgenic plants as compared to the wild-type plants. The infection responses of transgenic plants were similar to those of wild-type plants treated with ethylene inhibitors. These results suggest that the endogenous ethylene in *L. japonicus* roots inhibits rhizobial infection at the primary nodulation, probably via *NIN* gene, and suggest that ethylene perception assists negative feedback regulation of secondary nodule initiation (Nukui et al. 2004). Furthermore, in order to examine the regulation of the *acdS* gene encoding ACC deaminase in *M. loti* MAFF303099 during symbiosis with the host legume *L. japonicus*, Nukui et al. (2006) introduced the β -glucuronidase (GUS) gene into *acdS* so that GUS was expressed under control of the *acdS* promoter. The histochemical GUS assay demonstrated the exclusive expression of *acdS* in mature root nodules. Two homologous *nifA* genes, *mll5857* and *mll5837*, were found in the symbiosis island of *M. loti* and were designated *nifA1* and *nifA2*, respectively. Quantitative reverse transcription-PCR demonstrated that *nifA2* disruption resulted in considerably diminished expression of *acdS*, *nifH*, and *nifA1* in bacteroid cells. In contrast, *nifA1* disruption slightly enhanced the expression of *acdS* transcripts and suppressed *nifH* to some extent. These observations indicate that the *acdS* gene and other symbiotic genes are positively regulated by the NifA2 protein, but not by the NifA1 protein, in *M. loti*. The mode of gene expression suggests that *M. loti acdS* participates in the establishment and/or maintenance of mature nodules by interfering with the production of ethylene, which induces negative regulation of nodulation (Nukui et al. 2006). Recently, the role of ACC deaminase of symbionts in nodulation and growth of *Leucaena leucocephala* has been studied (Tittabur et al. 2008). The *acdS* genes encoding ACC deaminase were cloned from *Rhizobium* sp. strain TAL1145 and *Sinorhizobium* sp. BL3 in multicopy plasmids, and transferred to TAL1145. The BL3-*acdS* gene greatly enhanced ACC deaminase activity in TAL1145 compared to the native *acdS* gene. The transconjugants of TAL1145 containing the native or BL3 *acdS* gene could grow in minimal media containing 1.5 mM ACC, whereas BL3 could tolerate up to 3 mM ACC. The TAL1145 *acdS* gene is inducible by mimosine and not by ACC, while the BL3 *acdS* gene was highly inducible by ACC and not by mimosine. The transconjugants of TAL1145 containing the native- and BL3-*acdS* genes formed nodules in greater numbers and sizes, and produced higher root mass on *L. leucocephala* than did TAL1145. Introduction of multiple copies of the *acdS* gene increased ACC deaminase activities of TAL1145 and enhanced its

symbiotic efficiency on *L. leucocephala* (Tittabutr et al. 2008). The *acdS::gus* fusions in strains TAL1145:pUHR353::*gus* expressed in *Leucaena* nodules, although at low levels., which suggests the possibility of increasing ACC deaminase activity in the nodule through multiple copies of *acdS* in the symbiont. Thus, the inoculation with TAL1145 carrying multiple copies of *acdS* could increase nodule number, nodule dry weight and root dry weight of *Leucaena* seedlings after 16 weeks. The increases in nodule number and nodule dry weight due to inoculation with TAL1145:pUHR353 and TAL1145:pUHR354 were detectable even when the plants were harvested and analyzed after 8 weeks. Larger differences in the root dry weights due to high ACC deaminase activity in the symbionts may be observed when the plants are grown for longer periods of time under field conditions. It is difficult to assess the effects of increased ACC deaminase activities on nodule senescence and maintenance using *Leucaena*, which forms indeterminate type of nodules that continue to grow longitudinally producing new meristematic and bacteroid zones. The effects of increased symbiotic ACC deaminase activities may be more visible on plants like beans and soybeans, which produce determinate type of nodules that senesce entirely after a fixed period of nitrogen fixation. It is expected that increased ACC deaminase activities may delay senescence and prolong the nitrogen-fixing period in such nodules, leading to increased growth and yield of the plants. Thus, enhanced ACC deaminase activities in *Rhizobium* bacteroids inside *Leucaena* nodules reduce ethylene biosynthesis and consequently promote nodule development. Reducing ethylene synthesis may also help in nodule maintenance by delaying senescence. These properties, together with enhanced ACC deaminase activities in the nodule, are likely to result in increased N₂ fixation and higher growth of the plant. Besides synthesizing ACC deaminase, rhizobia also facilitate legume growth by providing the plants with other benefits such as siderophores (Wani et al. 2008), phytohormones (Wani et al. 2007; Ahmad et al. 2008; Bajgiran et al. 2008), P solubilization (Sridevi et al. 2007), and metal detoxification (Wani et al. 2007, 2008). Thus, by genetically engineering rhizobial strains to produce ACC deaminase, there is a real possibility of obtaining better strains for use as field inocula to increase the yield of leguminous crops.

4.7 Conclusion

Symbiotic nitrogen fixation process plays a significant role in improving the soil fertility and productivity of low-N soils. Hence, the symbiosis can relieve the requirements for added nitrogenous fertilizer during the growth of leguminous crops. Symbiotic nitrogen fixers in addition to nitrogen fixation, utilize a variety of mechanisms, both direct and indirect, to stimulate the growth of plants and/or to compete in nodulation. Ethylene is a gaseous phytohormone produced by the plants including legumes during normal growth conditions. However, under biotic and abiotic stresses, the synthesis of ethylene increases and adversely affects the legume–*Rhizobium* symbiosis. The rhizobia possessed with ACC deaminase

activity lowers the level of ethylene and consequently improves the overall performance of legumes. Interestingly, the rhizobia that do not contain ACC deaminase are unable to nodulate their cognate legumes to the same extent that they might be able to if they possessed this enzyme. Moreover, it is possible to genetically engineer strains that normally lack ACC deaminase with the gene encoding this enzyme, with the expectation that the transformed strain will nodulate its cognate legume to a greater extent than the nontransformed strain. In this regard, the studies demonstrated that *Rhizobium* (e.g., *Sinorhizobium meliloti* Rm1021), which does not have ACC deaminase activity, can nodulate its host legume (alfalfa) more efficiently when it is transformed with the *acdS* and *lrpL* genes from *R. leguminosarum* bv. *viciae* 128C53K. Thus, by genetically engineering rhizobial strains to produce ACC deaminase, there is a real possibility of obtaining better strains for use as field inocula to increase the yield of leguminous crops. Furthermore, ethylene production can be induced during many environmental stresses, such as infection by pathogens, flooding, heavy metal poisoning, and mechanical wounding. The ACC deaminase containing PGPR including symbiotic nitrogen fixers have been found to be able to help the plants resist the detrimental effects of stress ethylene on plant growth imposed by both biotic and abiotic stresses, besides providing other benefits to legumes. Thus, the ethylene decreasing ability of nodule forming bacteria is interesting and suggestive for further understanding of legume–rhizobia interactions and signaling events of *Rhizobium*–legume symbiosis.

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Chapter 5

Strategies for Crop Improvement in Contaminated Soils Using Metal-Tolerant Bioinoculants

Anju Rani and Reeta Goel

Abstract Heavy metal contamination due to natural and anthropogenic sources is a global environmental concern. Release of heavy metals without proper treatment poses a serious threat to public health because of its persistence, biomagnification and accumulation in food chain. Nonbiodegradability and sludge production are the two major constraints of metal treatment. The bioremediation of soil, sludge, sediments and wastes polluted with heavy metals generally involves the active microbiological processes of biosorption, bioaccumulation, sequestration and efflux. Bioremediation using microbes well adapted to diverse physiological conditions could be utilized for remediation of heavy metal-contaminated sites. The application of proteomics in environmental bioremediation program provides a global view of the protein compositions of the microbial cells and offers a promising approach to understand the molecular mechanisms of bioremediation. In this chapter, attention is paid to highlighting the strategies for crop improvement using metal-tolerant microbes in soils contaminated with heavy metals.

5.1 Introduction

Metals have been an important constituent of the earth's crust from the time it was evolved. Thus, even the early life has arisen in the presence of abundance of metals. Over the ages, all living systems have evolved to use some metals as vital constituents, while they have learned to grapple with some others which are toxic (Choudhury and Srivastava 2001). Environmental pollution by metals became evident when mining and industrial activities increased in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Potentially hazardous levels of heavy metals are being

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dispersed into subsurface sediments and groundwater in a number of metal-contaminated sites and represent a challenge for environment restoration.

5.2 Heavy Metals

The term “heavy metals” refers to metals and metalloids having densities greater than 5 g cm^{-3} and is usually associated with pollution and toxicity, although some of these elements (essential metals) are required by organisms at low concentrations (Adriano 2001). For example, zinc (Zn) is the component of a variety of enzymes (dehydrogenases, proteinases, peptidases) but is also involved in the metabolism of carbohydrates, proteins, phosphate, auxins, in RNA and ribosome formation in plants (Kabata-Pendias and Pendias 2001). Copper (Cu) contributes to several physiological processes (photosynthesis, respiration, carbohydrate distribution, nitrogen and cell wall metabolism, seed production) in plants including disease resistance (Kabata-Pendias and Pendias 2001). The effective functioning of the metabolisms of humans and bacteria is also dependent on these metals (Adriano 2001; Blencowe and Morby 2003; Cavet et al. 2003). However, at high concentrations, these metals exhibit toxic effects on cells (Baker and Walker 1989). In contrast, cadmium (Cd) is not involved in any known biological processes (nonessential metal) and may be quite toxic as it is accumulated by organisms. It is known to: (1) disturb enzyme activities, (2) inhibit the DNA-mediated transformation in microorganisms, (3) interfere in the symbiosis between microbes and plants, and (4) increase plant predisposition to fungal invasion (Kabata-Pendias and Pendias 2001). In humans, it may promote several disorders in the metabolism of Ca and vitamin D leading to bone degeneration and kidney damage (itai-itai disease) (Adriano 2001). The excessive uptake of heavy metals by animals and humans is the result of the successive accumulation of these elements in the food chain, the starting point being the contamination of the soil.

5.3 Origin of the Contamination in Soils

The main problem with heavy metals (such as Cu, Zn and Cd) in soils is that, unlike organic pollutants, they cannot be biologically degraded and, therefore, persist in the environment for longer periods of time. Their presence in soils may be from natural or anthropogenic origins. Natural sources include atmospheric emissions from volcanoes, the transport of continental dusts, and the weathering of metal-enriched rocks (Ernst 1998). However, the major source of contamination is from anthropogenic origin: the exploitation of mines and smelters, the application of metal-based pesticides and metal-enriched sewage sludges in agriculture, combustion of fossil fuel, metallurgical industries and electronics (manufacture, use and disposal), military training, etc., contribute to an increased input of heavy metals in soils (Alloway 1995). Whereas the industrial emissions of metals may be controlled

by the installation of adequate air filters, the main source of contamination for humans remains the ingestion of plants growing in derelict soils. The use of intensive farm management practices, like application of phosphatic fertilizers, sewage sludge input and pesticide treatment, are responsible for the pollution of conventional agricultural soils. Although these practices significantly increase the yields by protecting plants from deleterious pathogens and providing them with all the nutrients necessary for a rapid and sustained growth, they may also add large amounts of heavy metals and organic pollutants to soil which, in turn, may accumulate in plants. For instance, Hamon et al. (1998) have shown that the addition of phosphatic fertilizers increased Cd uptake of wheat (*Triticum aestivum*). However, the risk emerging from heavy metals largely depends on their bioavailability (Adriano 2001).

Mineral rock weathering and anthropogenic sources provide two of the main types of metal to soils. According to Ross (1994), the anthropogenic sources of metal contamination can be divided to five main groups: (1) metalliferous mining and smelting (e.g., arsenic, cadmium, lead, mercury), (2) industry (e.g., arsenic, cadmium, chromium, cobalt, copper, mercury, nickel, zinc), (3) atmospheric deposition (arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, mercury, uranium), (4) agriculture (e.g., arsenic, cadmium, copper, lead, selenium, uranium, zinc), and (5) waste disposal (e.g., arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, mercury, zinc).

5.4 Heavy Metal Toxicity to Plants

Exposure of plants even to minute concentrations of toxic heavy metals may lead to the alteration of many cellular processes and structures (Hall 2000). One of the characteristic effects of metal poisoning, observable at an early stage, is a reduction in cell proliferation and growth (Schützendübel et al. 2001). It has also been associated with the appearance of oxidative stress (Schützendübel and Polle 2002). Accumulation of reactive oxygen species (ROS), leading to an oxidative burst, is thought to increase cellular damage through oxidation of several macromolecules (Hall 2000), such as lipids (Sandalo et al. 2001) and proteins (Romero-Puertas et al. 2002). Some metals, such as Fe^{2+} and Cu^+ might induce oxidative cell damage coupled to their autooxidation, through Fenton-type reactions. However, this type of reaction has not been described for either Cd^{2+} or Hg^{2+} in plants (Schützendübel and Polle 2002), despite the evidence of oxidative stress induction in different plants after exposure to Cd (Lozano-Rodriguez et al. 1997; Dixit et al. 2001) and to Hg (Cho and Park 2000). Other cellular responses observed after addition of heavy metals are changes in thiol-peptide metabolism (Rausser 1991).

Although lead has no defined biological function, it can be accumulated in plant organs (such as roots and shoots) and exhibit toxicity leading to a decrease in biomass and inhibition of chlorophyll biosynthesis (Koeppel 1981). Heavy metals disrupt the physiological process by binding to protein sulfhydryl groups or cause deficiency/substitution of essential metals (Van Assche and Clijsters 1990). Lead,

a strong reactant to protein N and S ligands, was shown to inhibit chlorophyll synthesis (Sengar and Pandey 1996; Tripathi et al. 2005; Rani et al. 2008) as well as electron transport and Rubisco activity (Stiborova et al. 1986) in vitro.

The ability of plants to bioaccumulate metals and possibly other contaminants varies with both the genotypes of plant and the nature of metal contaminants (Naidu et al. 2003). For instance, cadmium, when taken up in excess by plants, inhibits directly or indirectly the physiological processes, such as respiration, photosynthesis, cell elongation, plant water relationships, nitrogen metabolism and mineral nutrition, resulting in poor growth and low biomass (Di et al. 1999; Rani et al. 2008). In follow-up studies with other metals, the higher concentrations of different metals (e.g., cadmium, copper, zinc, lead, etc.), when used either alone or as mixtures, have been shown to significantly reduce the dry matter accumulation, symbiosis and yield of greengram (*Vigna radiata* (L.) Wilczek) (Wani et al. 2007a), chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*) (Wani et al. 2007b) and pea (*Pisum sativum*) (Wani et al. 2008a), grown in metal-treated sandy clay loam soils.

5.5 Mechanisms of Metal Toxicity in Microorganisms

Metal species exert toxicity through numerous biochemical pathways that can be divided into five mechanistic categories. First, toxic metal species can bind to proteins in lieu of essential inorganic ions, thereby altering the biological function of the target molecule. An example is the replacement of Ni for Mg in some redox-active metalloproteins or in DNA, which destroys their function and/or may lead to DNA damage, respectively. Second, toxic metal species can participate in an array of reactions with thiols and disulphides, thereby destroying the biological function of proteins that contain sensitive S groups (Stoys and Bagchi 1995; Zannoni et al. 2007). These reactions frequently require and produce ROS, which are by-products of normal metabolism (Fig. 5.1). Thiol groups are often involved in the binding of

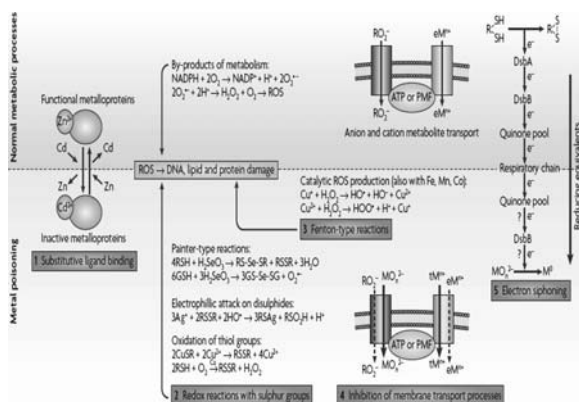


Fig. 5.1 Biochemical mechanisms of microbiological metal toxicity

substrates to specific carriers whose transport mechanism can be impaired by toxic metal species. The destruction of sensitive thiol groups on nascent proteins by metals may also impair protein folding or binding of apoenzymes by cofactors, thereby destructing the normal biological activity of the protein (Harrison et al. 2007). Third, certain transition metals can participate in catalytic reactions, known as Fenton-type reactions, that produce ROS. Collectively, these reactions place the cell in a state of oxidative stress, and increased levels of ROS damage DNA, lipids and proteins through a range of biochemical routes (Geslin et al. 2001). Fourth, toxic metal species must gain entry into cells through transporters or by binding lipophilic carriers, as cell membranes are nonpermeable to these compounds. The transporter-mediated uptake of toxic metals might interfere with the normal transport of essential substrates owing to competitive inhibition. This transport process gains energy from the proton motive force (PMF) or ATP pool (Foulkes 1998). Fifth some metal oxy-anions are reduced by the oxidoreductase DsbB, which draws electrons from the bacterial transport chain through the quinone pool (Borsetti et al. 2007). In effect, certain toxic metal species starve microbial cells by indirectly siphoning electrons from the respiratory chain (Lohmeier-Vogel et al. 2004). The formation of ROS that damage DNA, proteins and lipids also occur in normal metabolic processes; however, the production of ROS is enhanced during metal poisoning which may mediate additional cellular damage.

5.6 Influence of Bacteria on Heavy Metal Bioavailability

Overall toxic effects of heavy metals to soil microorganisms depend on their bioavailability. Although heavy metal bioavailability is mainly dependent on the soil properties (pH and organic matter), bacteria can also directly influence the solubility of heavy metals by altering their chemical properties (Fig. 5.2).

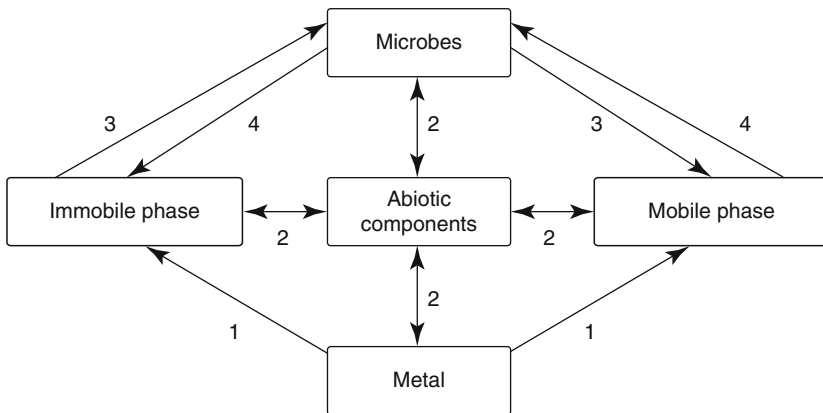


Fig. 5.2 Microbial roles in the environmental mobility of metals

Microorganisms have evolved several mechanisms which can immobilize, mobilize or transform heavy metals. The exploitation of these bacterial properties for the remediation of heavy metal-contaminated sites has been shown to be a promising bioremediation alternative (Lovely and Coates 1997; Lloyd and Lovley 2001).

5.7 Heavy Metal Resistance Systems in Bacteria

Bacteria have developed several efficient systems to detoxify the metals. These mechanisms include: (1) intracellular sequestration, (2) export, (3) reduced permeability, (4) extracellular sequestration, and (5) extracellular detoxification (Rough et al. 1995). Almost all known bacterial resistance mechanisms are encoded on plasmids and transposons (Silver and Walderhaug 1992), and it is probably by gene transfer or spontaneous mutation that bacteria acquire their resistance to heavy metals (Osborn et al. 1997). In Gram-negative bacteria (e.g., *Ralstonia eutropha*), the *czc* system is responsible for the resistance to Cd, Zn and Co. The *czc*-genes encode for a cation-proton antiporter (CzcABC) which exports Cd, Zn and Co (Nies 1995). A similar mechanism, called *ncc* system, has been found in *Alcaligenes xylosoxidans* which is resistant to Ni, Cd and Co. In contrast, the Cd resistance mechanism in Gram-positive bacteria (e.g., *Staphylococcus*, *Bacillus* or *Listeria*) is a Cd-efflux ATPase. The two most well-studied Cu resistance systems are *cop* from *Pseudomonas syringae* pv. *tomato* and *pco* from *Escherichia coli*. The *cop* genes encode for different Cu-binding proteins which allow the sequestration of Cu in the periplasm or in the outer membrane. In contrast, the *pco* system is expected to be an ion-dependent Cu antiporter (Kunito et al. 1998). The bacterial resistance properties can be used for different purposes: in the case of mercury pollution, the insertion of the microbial mercury reductase in a transgenic plant significantly improved the phytoextraction process (Heaton et al. 1998). Another example was the inoculation of heavy metal-resistant bacteria in a contaminated soil which seemed to protect the plants from metal toxicity.

5.8 Heavy Metal Remediation

The contamination of agricultural land and groundwater by heavy metals is essentially linked to human activities. Depending on the extension, depth and kind of the contamination, different remediation approaches have been proposed (Mulligan et al. 2001). In general, three strategies are possible: the containment of the contaminants, their removal from the environment, or their in situ stabilization. Physical containment is the least expensive approach but this leaves the contaminant in place without treatment. As ex situ techniques are expensive, environmentally invasive and labor intensive, in situ approaches are generally preferred. One of these in situ techniques, phytoremediation, uses plants to remove pollutants from

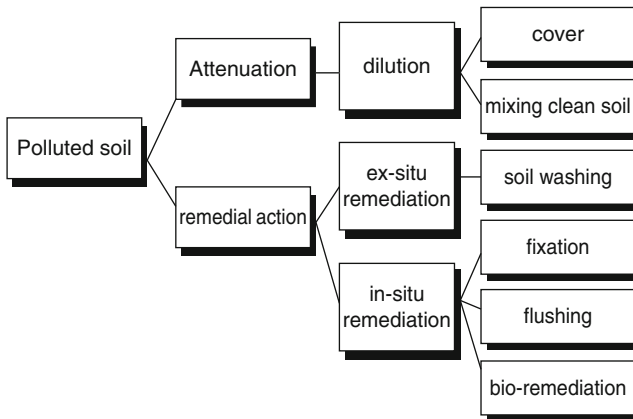


Fig. 5.3 Option for remediation for polluted sites

the environment or to render them harmless (Salt et al. 1995; Flathman and Lanza 1998). These processes either “decontaminate” the soil, or “stabilize” the pollutant within it (Fig. 5.3). Decontamination reduces the amount of pollutants within the soil by removing them, while stabilization does not reduce the quantity of pollutant at a site, but makes use of soil amendments to alter the soil chemistry and sequester or absorb the pollutant into the matrix so as to reduce or eliminate environmental risks (Cunningham et al. 1995). Furthermore, these traditional techniques present significant disadvantages, such as energy requirements, and are very expensive.

5.9 Bioremediation

Many novel approaches to environmental clean-up are being developed or are already in use as alternatives to costly physical methods, such as incineration. Bio-remediation in its different forms is perceived as a relatively economical and nonintrusive approach to remediate polluted environments. The biological treatment utilizes the natural reactions of microorganisms living in the environments and, hence, provides a crucial key technology in the remediation of heavy metal-contaminated soils and waters (Khan et al. 2009). In addition, recent developments in molecular biology have provided insight for enhancing the microorganism’s natural remediation capability as well as improving the current biological treatment (Fig. 5.4).

Several key microbial processes may affect mobilization or immobilization of toxic elements by one or more of the following mechanisms: (1) chelation of elements by metabolites, (2) oxidation–reduction of metals which affect the solubility or their valency, (3) changes in pH which affect the ionic state, (4) biosorption by functional groups on the cell surface, (5) bioaccumulation by an energy-dependent

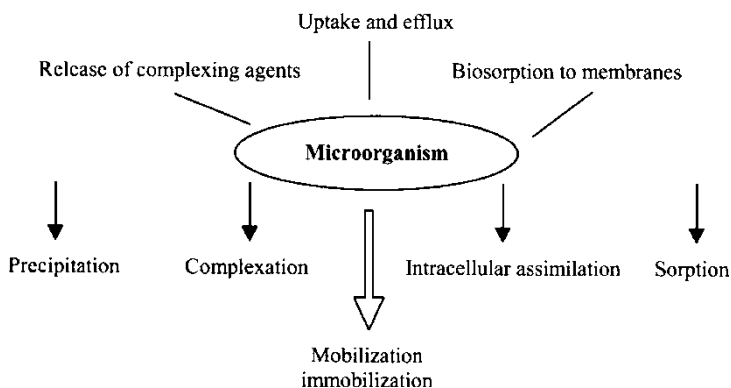


Fig. 5.4 Metal processing mechanisms of microorganisms

Table 5.1 Examples of toxic heavy metals accumulating microorganisms

Organism	Element
<i>Citrobacter</i> sp.	Lead, cadmium
<i>Thiobacillus ferrooxidans</i>	Silver
<i>Bacillus cereus</i>	Cadmium
<i>Bacillus subtilis</i>	Chromium
<i>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</i>	Uranium
<i>Micrococcus luteus</i>	Strontium
<i>Rhizopus arrhizus</i>	Mercury
<i>Aspergillus niger</i>	Thorium
<i>Saccharomyces cerevisiae</i>	Uranium

transport system, (6) immobilization due to formation of stable materials, (7) biomethylation, and (8) biodegradation of organic complex of metals. A wide variety of microorganisms including plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria, fungi, yeast, and algae are known that can interact with metals employing several mechanisms and can transform them to nontoxic or less toxic forms (Poole and Gadd 1989; Wani et al. 2007c, 2008b) (Table 5.1).

5.9.1 Biosorption

Biosorption of toxic metals is based on nonenzymatic processes such as adsorption. Adsorption is due to the nonspecific binding of ionic species to cell surface-associated or extracellular polysaccharides and proteins (Mullen et al. 1989; Volesky 1990). Bacterial cell walls and envelopes, and the walls of fungi, yeasts, and algae, are efficient metal biosorbents that bind charged groups. The cell walls of Gram-positive bacteria bind larger quantities of toxic metals than the envelopes of the Gram-negative bacteria. Biosorbents may be regenerated by treatment with acid

or with certain chelating agents. Besides bacteria, waste fungal biomass derived from several industrial fermentations may also provide an economical source of biosorptive materials. Many species have high cell wall chitin contents which act as an effective biosorbent as do the chitosan and glucans.

Biosorption is defined as a property of certain inactive or dead microbial biomass to bind and concentrate heavy metals from even very dilute aqueous solutions (Vasudevan et al. 2001). The uptake of metal could be active, passive or both in nature. Passive uptake is independent of cellular metabolisms, and metal binds to polyionic cell walls through ion exchange as the process is not affected by physical conditions such as pH and ionic strength. It is a rapid process taking only 5–10 min to complete. The process is also reversible and can involve both living and dead cells. The active process on the other hand is slow and depends on cellular metabolism. It is affected by metabolic inhibitors, uncouplers and temperature. In the active process, the metal complex with specific proteins like metallothionins are contained in vacuole. Both the active and passive mode may occur simultaneously. The passive process is relatively nonspecific with respect to the metal (Pandey et al. 2001).

5.9.1.1 Biosorption by Fungi

Polysaccharides in association with lipids and proteins form the main constituent of fungal cell wall. In filamentous fungi, the outer cell wall layers mainly contain natural polysaccharides (glycans and mannans) while the inner layers contain more of glucosamines (chitin and chitosan) in a microfibrillar structure, which are found to be associated with metal-binding (Vasudevan et al. 2001). Mahesh et al. (2001) investigated Cu^{2+} sorption behavior of three isolated native forms of fungi in a laboratory-scale batch reactor. *Fusarium solani* fungal species tend to remove 90% Cu^{2+} from solution at alkaline pH (8.0–10.0). Metal uptake capacities of some fungi have also been observed by Bagdwal et al. (2003).

5.9.1.2 Biosorption by Algae

Special polysaccharides are present in the algal cell wall. The number and nature of binding sites depends on the chemical composition of the cell wall. In pheophycean members, algin is present which contributes significantly to metal-binding.

5.9.1.3 Biosorption by Bacteria

The anionic nature of bacterial surface enables them to bind metal cations through electrostatic interactions. Because of their thickness and anionic character (which is mainly due to peptidoglycan, teichoic acid and teichuronic acids), the cell walls of Gram-positive bacteria have a high capacity for metal-binding. It has been reported

by Beveridge and Murray (1980) that peptidoglycan is the major cell wall component responsible for metal-binding by *Bacillus subtilis*. In contrast, metal-binding by *Bacillus licheniformis* is predominantly due to teichuronic acid. Three strains of thermotolerant polymer-producing bacteria, *B. subtilis* WD90, *B. subtilis* SH29, and *Enterobacter agglomerans* 5M 38, as well as their bioflocculants, were capable of nickel and cadmium removal. However, the bioflocculant of the three isolates gave higher metal adsorption than the cells due to synthesis of extracellular polysaccharide and other cell wall components (Kaewchai and Praseptsan 2002). In another study, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (CW-96-1) tolerated cadmium up to a concentration of 5 mM, and, 140 h after inoculation, metal-tolerant strain (CW-96-1) removed >99% of the cadmium from solution. Electron micrographs and energy dispersive microanalysis indicated that cadmium was bound to the cell wall as a sulfur complex with a 1:1 stoichiometry (Wang et al. 1997). *Pseudomonas putida* actively accumulates cadmium from the medium, and the resistance mechanism involves both polyphosphate and a series of low molecular weight cysteine-rich cadmium proteins that are induced during different growth phases. Nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) study on the major native cadmium protein (CdBP₁) establishes a definite relationship to cadmium metallothioneins (Higham et al. 1984).

5.9.2 Bioaccumulation

Bioaccumulation has been described for such metals as mercury, lead, silver, cadmium and nickel. Intracellular accumulation of toxic elements is carried out by an energy-dependent transport system (Gadd 1988). Potential mechanisms of toxic metal flux across membranes can be ion pumps, ion channels, carrier mediated transport, endocytosis, complex permeation, and lipid permeation. Permeabilization of cell membranes to toxic elements can result in further exposure of intracellular metal-binding sites and increase passive accumulation. Assessment of heavy metal accumulation in the microbial cells can be done by transmission electron microscopy (TEM). For example, TEM analysis of *P. putida* 62BN demonstrated intracellular and periplasmic accumulation of cadmium (Rani et al. 2009). A high metal concentration may lead to intracellular precipitation of metal (Hughes and Poole 1989). Additionally, cadmium transport via the Mn²⁺ transport system has been reported in many bacteria (Laddaga and Silver 1985; Perry and Silver 1982) and may also contribute to cadmium transport in 62BN. The intracellular and periplasmic cadmium accumulation in *P. putida* 62BN suggested the presence of metal-binding and/or efflux mechanisms inside the cells mediating resistance against metal toxicity. Cytoplasmic (Yoshida et al. 2002) and periplasmic (Naz et al. 2005; Pazirandeh et al. 1998) accumulation of heavy metal ions as a result of metallothioneins expression has been reported in *E. coli*.

Microbial biofilms, natural or engineered, could be used to remediate heavy metal pollution by biochemical modification and/or the accumulation of toxic metal ions (Munoz et al. 2006; Chang et al. 2006). An understanding of metal toxicity in biofilms is crucial to the successful design of bioreactors that are used for bio-mining (Rawlings and Johnson 2007), as well as those reactors that are used for biodegrading organic contaminants that are frequently intermingled with metals (Singh et al. 2006). Moreover, this information might provide insights into the observed vulnerabilities, physiological shifts and species changes of natural aquatic biofilm communities that have been exposed to toxic heavy metals (Lawrence et al. 2004; Vilchez et al. 2007). Multimetal resistance and tolerance in microbial biofilms is a multifactorial property of the adherent population. In general, the decreased susceptibility of biofilms to toxic metal species can be viewed as an emergent property that arises from several interrelated physiological and chemical parameters. Many of these parameters arise from the natural process of phenotypic diversification that is ongoing during biofilm growth. Biofilm formation is a process that gives rise to multiple cell types – each with a range of expression patterns that correspond to the diversity of biofilm microniches – which allows the population to withstand a diverse range of environmental stresses, including metal toxicity.

5.9.3 *Siderophores*

When microorganisms are grown in an iron-deficient medium, they produce specific iron chelators, so-called siderophores, in the medium. They play an important role in the complexation of toxic metals and increase their solubility (Neilands 1983). Siderophores are compounds that possess catecholate, phenolate or hydroxamate as their binding groups. Over the past few years, many siderophore or siderophore-like compounds have been identified from various biological systems. Although siderophores are primarily specific for Fe (III), they can also complex other metals and radionuclides. One way to relieve heavy metals toxicity to plants might involve the use of growth-promoting bacteria. Free-living rhizobacteria exert some beneficial effects on plant development when they are either applied to seeds or incorporated into the soil (Kloepper et al. 1989; Glick et al. 1999). Of the several mechanisms used to facilitate plant growth, siderophore synthesized by microbes including rhizobia (Wani et al. 2007d, 2008c) and species of *Bacillus*, *Pseudomonas* and *Azotobacter* (Wani et al. 2007c; Ahmad et al. 2008) is well documented due to their iron sequestration ability from the soil. Microbial iron siderophore complex can be taken up by plants as an iron source (Wang et al. 1993). The most appropriate approach to prevent plant chlorosis due to high levels of heavy metals should be to provide them with an associated siderophore-producing bacterium that supplements sufficient amounts of iron to the plant (Tripathi et al. 2005; Wani et al. 2008c).

5.10 Tracking the Insights of Bioremediation Using Proteomics/ Genomics

Environmental pollutants in the soil are a major concern worldwide. Bioremediation mediated by microorganisms is a highly promising technology as it is environmentally friendly, safe, effective and inexpensive. However, incomplete biological information regarding the cellular responses in many microbial communities restricts progress in the site-specific mineralization process. The application of proteomics in environmental bioremediation research provides a global view of the protein compositions of the microbial cells and offers a promising approach to understanding the molecular basis of bioremediation. With the combination of proteomics, functional genomics provide an insight into global metabolic and regulatory networks that can enhance the understanding of gene functions (Fig. 5.5).

5.10.1 Proteomic Studies for the Cellular Responses to Cd^{2+} in Microorganism

Compared with the molecular/cellular biological studies of individual genes or proteins one at a time, as has traditionally been done, the global analysis either at

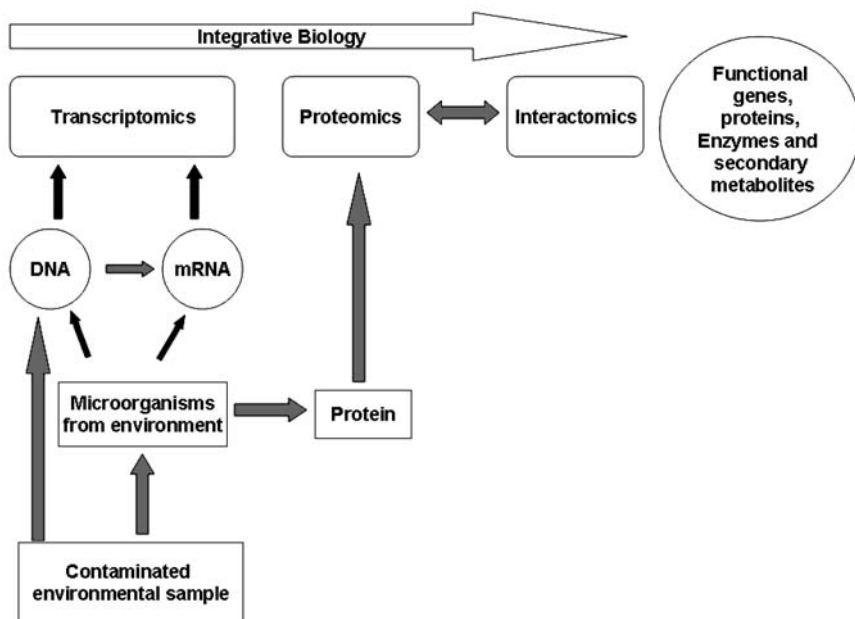


Fig. 5.5 Post-genomic technologies using a systematic biology approach to track the insights of bioremediation

a genomic or at a proteomic level allows for a systematic overview of thousands of genes or their products in a species at the same time (Tyers and Mann 2003; Pandey and Mann 2000; Dutt and Lee 2000; Humphery-Smith et al. 1997). Proteomics can produce more accurate and comprehensive information than genomic studies can provide because protein expressions are regulated not only at transcriptional but also at translational levels, resulting in more details about mature proteins and their interactions than genome-based predictions (Humphery-Smith et al. 1997). Therefore, significant discrepancies between mRNA and protein levels have also been found in several studies (Gygi et al. 1999; Chen et al. 2002; Griffin et al. 2002). It is inevitable that study of the cellular responses to different stresses at the proteomic level will inform us what gene products are actually expressed and their changes (Abram et al. 2008). In this regard, proteomics complements other functional genomics approaches such as microarray-based expression profiles, systematic phenotypic profiles at the cell and organism level, and small-molecule-based arrays. An understanding of the growth conditions governing the expression of the proteome (for example, enzymes and regulatory proteins of heavy metal resistance, energy generation pathways, transport and stress-related proteins) in a specific environment is essential for developing rational strategies for successful bioremediation.

Cadmium (Cd^{2+}) is one of the well-known toxic heavy metal ions. To gain a global understanding of how Cd^{2+} affects cells at the molecular level, various studies were performed. Proteome-wide investigation unequivocally identified 1133 *Shizosaccharomyces pombe* proteins, of which the AACT-based quantitative analysis revealed 106 upregulated and 55 downregulated proteins on the Cd^{2+} exposure. In the most prevalent functional class in the upregulated proteins, 28% of proteins were involved in protein biosynthesis, showing a time-dependent biphasic expression pattern characteristic with rapid initial induction and later repression. Most significantly, 27 proteins, functionally classified as cell rescue and defense, were upregulated for oxygen and radical detoxification, heat-shock response, and other stress responses (Bae and Chen 2004).

Moreover, Pukárová et al. (2001) reported that during cadmium-induced growth arrest of *E. coli* cells, DNA and RNA synthesis is rapidly inhibited while the rates of protein synthesis and proteolysis increase transiently (Ferianc et al. 2000). The protein synthesis includes de novo synthesis of cadmium-induced proteins (CDPs) (Ferianc et al. 2000), which together make up the cadmium stress stimulon (Ferianc et al. 1998). Some CDPs belong to global regulatory networks, which include the SOS, oxidative stress, heat-shock and stringent response networks (Ferianc et al. 1998; VanBogelen et al. 1987). However, only a limited number of the proteins in these regulons are induced during cadmium exposure and the synthesis of these CDPs constitutes a minor fraction of the overall cellular response (VanBogelen et al. 1987). In addition, these general stress responses are only transiently activated during cadmium-induced growth inhibition. When proliferation resumes, these regulons are downregulated and expression reaches a new steady-state level (Ferianc et al. 1998). Other CDPs, however, are specific to cadmium stress. These CDPs retain an elevated production level, relative to the production level of general stress proteins, even in accommodated cells that have resumed growth during

prolonged cadmium exposure. One of these proteins has been identified as the product of ORF *o216* (Ferianc et al. 1998), later renamed *yodA*, a 216 amino acid residue protein, identified on two-dimensional polyacrylamide gels (VanBogelen et al. 1996; Ferianc et al. 1998). N-terminal sequencing has demonstrated that the protein is processed and contains a 24 amino acid signal sequence, suggesting that the mature product is exported from the cytoplasm. YodA, together with two other putative proteins, YrpE of *B. subtilis* (Sorokin et al. 1997) and pXO1-130 of *Bacillus anthracis* (Okinaka et al. 1999), may constitute a new family of stress proteins based on sequence similarity (44.6% identity) and size (YodA, 216; YrpE, 251; pXO1-130, 237 aa). These three proteins were found to also exhibit sequence similarity with the 200 aa residue C-terminal part of the streptococcal adhesin, AdcA (Pukárová et al. 2001), which is a lipoprotein containing a putative metal-binding site (Dintilhac and Claverys 1997). In addition, YodA exhibits weak sequence similarity with the N-terminal part (about 200 aa) of the copper-binding protein amine oxidase, encoded by *maoA* (Ferianc et al. 1998), of both *E. coli* (Azakami et al. 1994) and *Klebsiella aerogenes* (Sugino et al. 1992).

Further, Rab et al. (2006) showed that the bacterium *Rhodobacter capsulatus* B10 in the presence of 150 μ M CdCl₂ induced heat-shock proteins (GroEL and Dnak), *S*-adenosylmethionine synthetase, ribosomal protein S1, aspartate aminotransferase, and phosphoglycerate kinase. Ribosomal protein S1 appeared to be involved in the repair of cadmium-mediated cellular damage. Five cadmium binding proteins, including 2-methylcitrate dehydratase, phosphate periplasmic binding protein, inosine-5'-monophosphate dehydrogenase/guanosine-5'-monophosphate reductase, inositol monophosphatase, and lytic murein transglycosylase, were also identified.

5.10.2 Differential Gene Expression Under Cadmium Stress

In *Caulobacter crescentus* (6M cadmium sulfate), 144 genes were upregulated by at least twofold under cadmium stress. Several groups of annotated genes are given in Table 5.2 (Hu et al. 2005).

5.11 Conclusion

Generally, the concentration of heavy metals in soil has increased during the last few years posing a serious threat to the environment and human health worldwide. However, due to the fact that large areas of land contaminated with metals cannot be economically decontaminated by applying conventional chemical approaches, microbe/plant-mediated approaches can prove to be the best viable and inexpensive alternative for remediation of heavy metal-polluted sites. Remediation of metal-polluted soils using biological systems (both plants and

Table 5.2 Selected genes (and description) upregulated under cadmium stress

Gene	Fold change	Annotation
Efflux pumps (Cluster I)		
CC2721	21.3	Outer membrane efflux protein
CC2722	36	Metal ion efflux membrane fusion protein, contains HlyD domain
CC2723	20	Hypothetical protein
CC2724	22.8	Homologous to <i>nccA</i> and <i>czcA</i>
CC2725	8	Conserved hypothetical protein
CC2726	12.4	Cation transporting P-type ATPase
CC2727	6	Conserved hypothetical protein
Efflux pumps (Cluster II)		
CC3195	3.4	Outer membrane efflux protein
CC3196	2.6	Contains HlyD domain
CC3197	3	Cation/multidrug efflux pump, with AcrB/ AcrD/ AcrF domain
Protect against oxidative stress		
CC1777	18.9	Superoxide dismutase (cofactor, Mn ²⁺) (sod A)
CC3557	2.2	Superoxide dismutase (cofactor, Fe ²⁺) (sod B)
CC1316	3.2	Glutathione <i>S</i> -transferase
CC2434	2.2	Glutathione <i>S</i> -transferase
CC0062	2.4	Thioredoxin-like protein
CC0110	2	Thioredoxin
CC3539	2.3	Thioredoxin
CC2505	2.3	Glutaredoxin-related protein
CC0994	2.5	Peptide methinine sulfoxide reductase
CC1039	2.3	Peptide methinine sulfoxide reductase
CC0141	2.3	Glutathione synthetase
CC0885	3.6	Riboflavin biosynthesis protein (rib D)
CC0886	4.3	Riboflavin synthase, alpha subunit (rib E)
CC0887	4	GTP cyclohydrolase II (rib AB)
CC0888	3.6	Riboflavin synthase, alpha subunit (rib E)
CC0459	4.1	GTP cyclohydrolase I (tetrahydrofolate biosynthesis pathway)
Arsenic resistance		
CC1503	4.8	Arsenic reductase (arsC)
CC1504	4.4	Transmembrane channel protein
CC1505	4.4	Transcriptional regulator (arsR)
CC1506	9.9	Arsenic resistant protein
DNA Repair		
CC1428	6	Deoxyribodipyrimidine photolyase, removes cyclobutane – type pyrimidine dimers in DNA
CC2590	2	Excinuclease ABC, subunit A
Others		
CC0260	2.7	Ribonucleotide reductase, alpha subunit
CC3492	2.2	Ribonucleotide reductase, beta subunit
CC2129	4.5	NADH: flavin oxidoreductase

microbes) is an emerging area of interest and has shown a substantial progress in situ, which needs to be further consolidated through field trials under different agro-climatic zones of the world. Furthermore, with progress in genomics and proteomic studies in many laboratories around the world, we may expect this research area to develop and expand further in the near future, delivering more robust technologies for the bioremediation of metal-contaminated soils. And, hence, the molecular engineering of both microbes and plants with desired genes is likely to help immensely to enhance the efficiency of microbe-mediated or plant-based remediation of contaminated soils. However, to make remediation a successful option for detoxifying contaminated sites, some of the problems, like how the remediation effects will change under field conditions, and how mobilization and transfer of metal to different organs of plants is effected, need to be critically addressed by the scientists before the potential of bioremediation in decontaminating polluted sites or reducing the toxicity of metals can be appreciated.

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Chapter 6

Functional Diversity Among Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria: Current Status

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Abstract Root-colonizing bacteria (rhizobacteria) that exert beneficial effects on plant development via direct or indirect mechanisms have been defined as plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR). These natural bioresources provide essential nutrients to plants and improve growth, competitiveness, and responses to external stress factors by an array of mechanisms under different agro-ecosystems. The PGPR facilitate plant growth by synthesizing or altering: the concentration of phytohormones; asymbiotic and symbiotic N₂ fixation, antagonism against phytopathogenic microorganisms by producing siderophores, antibiotics and cyanide; solubilization of mineral phosphates and other nutrients; and by synthesizing 1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate (ACC) deaminase, which helps to reduce the inhibitory effects of ethylene on plants. And hence, use of such PGPR may be a viable alternative to chemical fertilizers for increasing the productivity of various crops. However, despite their proven ability of growth promotion, PGPR have yet to fulfil their promise and potential as commercial bioinoculants. Understanding functional diversity of PGPR is vital for low-input sustainable production. Recent progress focusing on the principles and mechanisms of action of PGPR is reviewed and discussed.

6.1 Introduction

Growth of plants is influenced by a myriad of abiotic and biotic factors. In agricultural practices, in order to manage the soil environment and consequently to improve crop yields, growers routinely adopt physical and chemical approaches. However, these approaches are not only expensive but their excessive and repeated

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use may also deplete soil fertility. An alternative to these physico-chemical methods is the exploitation of naturally occurring microbes whose application, however, is inexpensive but less common. These microbes thrive well in the region around the root (the rhizosphere) which is relatively rich in nutrients, due to the accumulation of plant photosynthates, released from the roots of different plants. These photosynthates support microbial communities of soils which may exhibit beneficial, neutral, or deleterious effects on plant growth. Beneficial rhizobacteria capable of aggressively colonizing the rhizosphere and facilitating plant growth are often termed plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) (Kloepper and Schroth 1978) or plant health-promoting rhizobacteria (PHPR) according to their mode of action (Sikora 1992). In contrast, deleterious rhizobacteria are presumed to adversely affect plant growth and development through the production of undesirable metabolites (phytotoxins) or through competition for nutrients or inhibition of the other beneficial effects (Sturz and Christie 2003). In order to exert their effect on plants, PGPR must (1) be able to colonize the root, (2) survive and multiply in the rhizosphere or within plant tissues, and (3) facilitate plant growth (Barea et al. 2005). These PGPR have been found to facilitate plant growth in laboratory and greenhouse environments, but responses have been variable in the field. Although many studies have been conducted to identify the specific traits by which PGPR promote plant growth, the majority of them have focused on one or two of these traits. Moreover, the presence of a PGPR trait *in vitro* does not guarantee that a particular isolate is a PGPR. The mechanisms by which PGPR enhance plant growth are not fully understood, but are believed to include: the ability to produce or change the concentration of the plant hormones, such as indoleacetic acid (Ahmad et al. 2008), gibberellic acid (Mahmoud et al. 1984), and cytokinins (Frankenberger and Arshad 1995) and ethylene (Glick 1995; Garcia de Salamon et al. 2001); N₂ fixation (Zaidi 1999; Wani et al. 2007a); antagonism against phytopathogenic microorganisms (Khan et al. 2002) by production of siderophores (Wani et al. 2007b), β -1,3-glucanase (Flaishman et al. 1996), chitinases (Renwick et al. 1991), antibiotics (Shanahan et al. 1992), and cyanide (Wani et al. 2007a); and solubilization of inorganic phosphates and toxic metals (Wani et al. 2007b, 2007c). Due to these properties, these beneficial microbes have become a potential component in management practices to achieve the optimum yield. This chapter surveys the developments in the functional diversity among PGPR that could help to develop a bioinoculant possessing multifaceted activity for use in diverse agro-ecological regions of the world.

6.2 Rhizosphere and Plant Growth Promoting Rhizobacteria

The rhizosphere can be defined as any volume of soil specifically influenced by plant roots and/or in association with root hairs and plant-produced materials (Bringhurst et al. 2001). This space includes soil bound by plant roots, often extending a few millimeters from the root surface, and can include the plant root

epidermal layer (Mahaffee and Kloepper 1997). Plant exudates in the rhizosphere, such as amino acids and sugars, provide a rich source of energy and nutrients for rhizosphere microbes including PGPR, resulting in bacterial populations greater in this area than outside the rhizosphere. Broadly, PGPR can be divided into two major groups according to their relationship with the host plants: (1) symbiotic bacteria, and (2) free-living rhizobacteria (Khan 2005). Somers et al. (2004) have, however, classified PGPR into the following functional groups depending on their inherent activities: (1) biofertilizers (capable of accelerating the accessibility of nutrients to the plant); (2) phytostimulators (capable of facilitating the plant growth usually by synthesizing phytohormones); (3) rhizoremediators (involved in the degradation of organic pollutants); and (4) biopesticides (capable of managing plant diseases by the production of antimicrobial metabolites). Furthermore, based on their localization, PGPR can be: (1) intracellular PGPR (iPGPR) which are bacteria residing inside plant cells, producing nodules and being localized inside those specialized structures (e.g., nodules); and (2) extracellular PGPR (ePGPR) which are those bacteria living outside plant cells and not producing nodules, but enhancing plant growth through production of signal compounds that directly stimulate growth, improve disease resistance, or nutrient status of soil. The ePGPR has further been subdivided into three types, based on the degree of association with plant roots: (1) those living near, but not in contact with the roots; (2) those colonizing the root surface; and (3) those living in the spaces between cells of the root cortex. Of these PGPR, iPGPR are mostly Gram-negative and rod-shaped, with a few bacterial populations being Gram-positive rods, cocci and pleomorphic forms. Generally, iPGPR include the members of rhizobiace, capable of forming nodules on the root systems of leguminous plants. In contrast, some of the agronomically important ePGPR include genera such as *Bacillus* (Ryder et al. 1999), *Pseudomonas* (De Freitas and Germida 1991) *Erwinia* (Nelson 1998), *Enterobacter* (Tannii et al. 1990), *Caulobacter*, *Serratia* (Zhang et al. 1996), *Flavobacterium* (Tannii et al. 1990), *Actinobacter* sp. (Tannii et al. 1990), *Aeromonas* (Inbar and Chet 1991), *Agrobacterium* (Ryder and Jones 1990), *Alcaligenes* sp. (Yuen et al. 1985), *Phyllobacterium* sp. (Lambert et al. 1990), and *Bacillus* (Bai et al. 2002), *Hyphomicrobium*, *Azotobacter*, *Azospirillum*, and *Acetobacter* (Prithiviraj et al. 2003).

6.3 Search for Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria

Microbial communities in general, and PGPR in particular, form an important component of soil and help in predicting the changes in soils, as they affect the physico-chemical properties of soil. These microbes can be identified using physiological and biochemical tests, which require a regular subculturing. The community structure of PGPR in general can be characterized using phenotypic and genotypic approaches. Of these, phenotypic methods include standard plating methods on selective media, community level physiological profiles (CLPP)

using the BIOLOG system (Garland 1996), and phospholipid fatty acid (PLFA) and fatty acid methyl ester (FAME) profiling (Germida et al. 1998). Moreover, the culture-independent molecular techniques that are based on direct extraction of DNA from soil, and 16S-rRNA gene sequence analysis, bacterial artificial chromosome, or expression cloning systems, (Rondon et al. 1999) have allowed the easier identification and determination of the potentials they possess. These approaches can also be used to determine the impact of inoculation of PGPR on the rhizosphere community (Steddom et al. 2002). Yet one of the challenges in developing PGPR for commercial application is ensuring its effective selection and screening procedure, so that the most promising PGPR with multiple traits are identified and raised. However, no efficient high-throughput assays to select the best PGPR are currently available. Various approaches for initial selection and screening of rhizobacterial isolates include host plant specificity, adaptation to a particular soil, and screening assays (Bowen and Rovira 1999). Furthermore, the functional properties associated with PGPR, like root colonization, synthesis of IAA, solubilization of insoluble P, synthesis of ACC deaminase, and antibiotics and siderophores, have also been used to characterize these PGPR. Moreover, the impact of pollutants including heavy metals on these rhizosphere microbes in metal-stressed soils can be assessed using the signature biomarkers such as nucleic acid and fatty acids. The development of methods for direct extraction of nucleic acids and fatty acids from both contaminated and nonpolluted soil samples in combination with recombinant DNA and molecular phylogeny methods have provided a new insight into the identification of specific bacterial strains.

6.4 Mechanism of Growth Promotion by Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria

PGPR can affect plant growth either indirectly or directly (Glick et al. 1999; Antoun and Prévost 2006). The indirect promotion of plant growth occurs when PGPR lessen or prevent the deleterious effects of one or more phytopathogenic organisms by: synthesizing antibiotics; depletion of iron from the rhizosphere; induced systemic resistance; synthesis of antifungal metabolites; production of fungal cell wall lysing enzymes; competition for sites on the root; stimulation of other beneficial symbioses; and by decreasing the toxicity of hazardous substances in contaminated soils. While using direct mechanisms, PGPR promotes the growth of plants by either providing plants with a compound synthesized by the bacterium or facilitating the uptake of certain nutrients from the environment, iron sequestration by siderophores, the production of bacterial volatiles and phytohormones, and lowering the ethylene level in plants. Thus, PGPR functions in three different ways: (1) synthesizing particular compounds for uptake by plants (Zaidi et al. 2003; Zaidi and Khan 2006; Khan et al. 2007); (2) facilitating the uptake of certain nutrients from environment (Lucas García et al. 2004; Çakmakçi et al. 2006); and

(3) protecting plants from diseases (Guo et al. 2004; Pandey et al. 2006; Trivedi et al. 2008). Regardless of the mechanisms of plant growth promotion, PGPR must colonize the rhizosphere around the roots, the rhizoplane or the root itself (Glick 1995). In general, PGPR improves plant growth by synthesizing phytohormones precursors (Wani et al. 2007a, b; Ahmad et al. 2008), vitamins, enzymes, and siderophores (Wani et al. 2008a), as well as antibiotics (Burd et al. 2000; Glick 2001), and by inhibiting ethylene synthesis (Glick et al. 2007), in addition to their ability to fix atmospheric N (N₂ fixers) and to solubilize inorganic P (Khan et al. 2007), and to make these elements accessible to plants (Perveen et al. 2002; Wani et al. 2007a, b; Khan and Zaidi 2007), to mineralize organic phosphate (Ponmurugan and Gopi 2006), and to improve plant stress tolerance to drought, salinity and metal toxicity (Wani et al. 2008b). Biochemical and molecular approaches are providing new insights into the genetic basis of these traits, the biosynthetic pathways involved, their regulation, and their importance for biological control in laboratory and field studies. An overview of the plant growth promotion by PGPR is presented in Fig. 6.1, while the growth-promoting substances synthesized by various PGPR are summarized in Table 6.1.

Use of such microbes possessing multiple traits, including their role in metal resistance/reduction and ability to promote plant growth in metal-contaminated soils also make them one of the most suitable choices for bioremediation. Among other PGPR, the symbiotic nitrogen fixers enhance the growth of legumes by: (1) biological N₂ fixation, (2) increasing the availability of nutrients in the rhizosphere, (3) inducing increases in root surface area, (4) enhancing other beneficial symbioses of the host, (5) reducing or preventing the deleterious effects of phytopathogenic

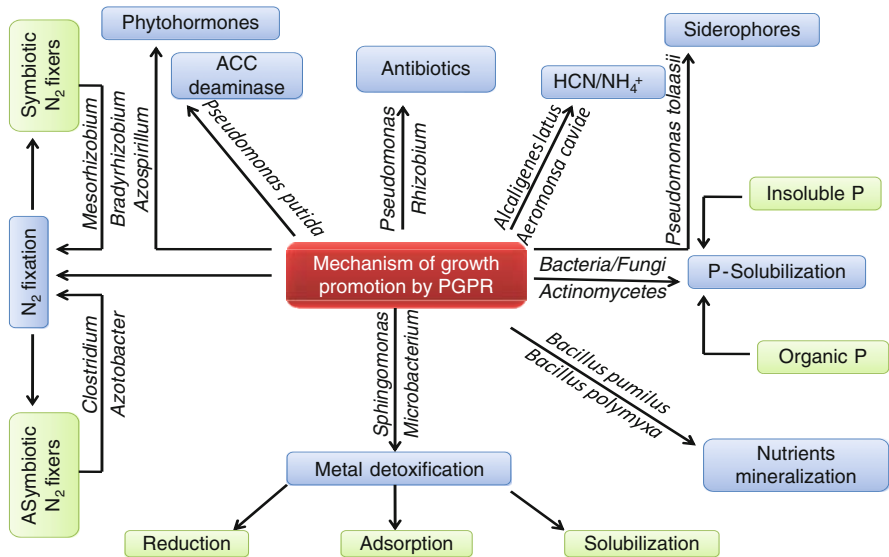


Fig. 6.1 Functional diversity among plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria

Table 6.1 Growth-promoting substances produced by plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria

Organisms	Growth regulators	Reference
<i>Azotobacter</i> , fluorescent <i>Pseudomonas</i> , <i>Bacillus</i>	IAA, siderophore, ammonia, HCN, P-solubilization	Ahmad et al. (2008)
<i>Pantoea dispers</i> strain 1A	P-solubilization, IAA, siderophores, HCN	Selvakumar et al. (2008)
<i>Bacillus</i> spp. <i>Pseudomonas</i> , <i>Bacillus</i>	IAA, siderophore, HCN Siderophores, IAA, P-solubilization	Wani et al. (2007b) Rajkumar et al. (2006)
<i>Brevibacillus</i> sp. <i>Xanthomonas</i> sp. RJ3, <i>Azomonas</i> sp. RJ4, <i>Pseudomonas</i> sp. RJ10, <i>Bacillus</i> sp. RJ31	IAA IAA	Vivas et al. (2006) Sheng and Xia (2006)
<i>Bacillus</i> sp. <i>Brevibacterium</i> sp. <i>Bacillus subtilis</i>	P-solubilization Siderophore IAA, P-solubilization	Canbolat et al. (2006) Noordman et al. (2006) Zaidi et al. (2006)
<i>Variovorax paradoxus</i> , <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. and <i>Flavobacterium</i> (Cd tolerant)	IAA, siderophores	Belimov et al. (2005)
<i>Pseudomonas fluorescens</i>	IAA, siderophore, P-solubilization	Gupta et al. (2005)
<i>Pseudomonas putida</i> <i>Azotobacter</i> , <i>Pseudomonas</i> <i>fluorescens</i>	Siderophore IAA	Tripathi et al. (2005) Ahmad et al. (2005)
<i>Bacillus</i> , <i>Azospirillum</i> sp. <i>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</i> <i>Bacillus</i> , <i>Pseudomonas</i> , <i>Azotobacter</i> , <i>Azospirillum</i>	IAA, P-solubilization IAA, siderophore, HCN P-solubilization, IAA	Yasmin et al. (2004) Bano and Musarrat (2003) Tank and Saraf (2003)
<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp. <i>Pseudomonas</i> sp.	Siderophore IAA, siderophore, P-solubilization	Sharma et al. (2003) Gupta et al. (2002)
<i>Pseudomonas fluorescens</i> <i>Azotobacter chroococcum</i> <i>Kluyvera ascorbata</i>	Siderophore Gibberellin, kinetin, IAA Siderophore	Khan et al. (2002) Verma et al. (2001) Burd et al. (2000)

organisms (Khan et al. 2002), and (6) combination of modes of action. As an example of plant growth promoter, IAA, phytohormone of the auxin series produced by many rhizobia (Abd-Alla 1994; Wani et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c), and its metabolically related precursor, anthranilic acid, can reductively solubilize soil Fe (III), and increase its availability via a mechanism different from that involving siderophores. Further plant growth-promoting substances, siderophores, are specific Fe (III)-chelating agents that make the chelated iron unavailable to pathogenic organisms thereby leading to an increase in plant health. Microbial siderophores are known to regulate the availability of Fe in the plant rhizosphere, and it has been found that competition for iron in the rhizosphere is controlled by the affinity of the siderophores for iron. Interestingly, the binding affinity of

phyto-siderophores for iron is less than the affinity of microbial siderophores, but plants require a lower iron concentration for normal growth than do microbes. Although several rhizobial species are known to produce growth-promoting substances under metal-free environment, the syntheses of these compounds by metal-tolerant rhizobia have been limited. Nevertheless, there has been certain evidence where metals at lower concentrations exert no harmful effect and rather stimulate plant growth promoting activities of rhizobia. For instance, *Bradyrhizobium* (RM8), tolerant to nickel and zinc, *Rhizobium* sp. (RL9), tolerant to zinc and *Rhizobium* sp. (RP5), tolerant to zinc and nickel, produced substantial amounts of IAA (Wani et al. 2008a, c) under metal-stressed conditions. The production of growth promoting substances by metal-tolerant and natural rhizobial strains are presented in Table 6.2.

6.4.1 Plant Growth Regulators

Plant growth regulators (PGRs) are the substances that influence physiological processes of plant at very low concentrations and modify or control one or more specific metabolic events of a plant. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the plant regulators have been defined as “any substance or mixture of substances intended, through physiological action, to accelerate or retard the rate of growth or maturation, or otherwise alter the behavior of plants or their produce.” Such compounds produced by the plant or by PGPR are called plant hormones

Table 6.2 Plant growth-promoting substances synthesized by symbiotic nitrogen fixers

Symbiotic N ₂ fixers	Plant growth-promoting substances	References
<i>Mesorhizobium</i>	IAA, siderophore, ammonia, HCN, P-solubilization	Ahmad et al. (2008)
<i>Bradyrhizobium</i>	IAA, siderophores, HCN	Wani et al. (2008a)
<i>Mesorhizobium</i>	IAA, siderophores	Wani et al. (2008c)
<i>Rhizobium</i> spp.	IAA, siderophores	Sridevi et al. (2008a, b)
<i>Rhizobium</i> spp.	P-solubilization	Sridevi et al. (2007)
<i>Bradyrhizobium japonicum</i>	IAA	Shaharoon et al. (2006)
<i>Rhizobium</i>	HCN, siderophore	Deshwal et al. (2003)
<i>Bradyrhizobium (Arachis)</i>	Siderophore, IAA, P-solubilization	Deshwal et al. (2003)
<i>Rhizobium</i>	P-solubilization, IAA	Tank and Saraf (2003)
<i>Mesorhizobium</i> , <i>Bradyrhizobium</i> sp. (<i>vigna</i>)	Siderophore	Khan et al. (2002)
<i>Rhizobium meliloti</i>	Siderophore	Arora et al. (2001)
<i>Bradyrhizobium</i> , <i>Rhizobium</i>	IAA, HCN, siderophore	Antoun et al. (1998)
<i>Bradyrhizobium</i> , <i>Rhizobium</i>	Siderophore	Duhan et al. (1998)
<i>Rhizobium ciceri</i>	Siderophore	Berraho et al. (1997)
<i>Bradyrhizobium japonicum</i>	Siderophore	Wittenberg et al. (1996)
<i>Rhizobium</i> , <i>Bradyrhizobium</i>	P-solubilization	Abd-Alla (1994)

(Davies 1995; Karadeniz et al. 2006). The phytohormones and other compounds synthesized by PGPR are now reviewed and discussed.

6.4.1.1 Phytohormones

Indoleacetic acid is commonly produced by PGPR by using the rich supplies of substrates exuded from the roots and it releases auxin in the rhizospheres as secondary metabolites. Among the PGPR, N_2 -fixing bacteria in general are known exclusively for their N_2 -fixing ability, yet they are also reported to produce IAA (Table 6.3). For example, species of *Bradyrhizobium*, *Rhizobium* and *Mesorhizobium* produced a substantial amount of IAA under in vitro conditions (Antoun et al. 1998; Wani et al. 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Ahmad et al. 2008). Among other PGPR strains, *Pseudomonas*, *Bacillus*, *Agrobacterium* sp., *Alcaligenes piechaudii* and two strains of *Comamonas acidovorans* secreted IAA at lower levels as compared to deleterious bacteria (Barazani and Friedman 1999; Rajkumar et al. 2006). Bacteria associated with the roots of greenhouse tropical orchids have also been shown to produce IAA as demonstrated by thin layer chromatography (TLC) and by biotests (Tsavkelova et al. 2005). In another study, numerous bacterial isolates recovered from wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) rhizosphere demonstrated the production of auxins (ranging from 1.1 to 12.1 mg l⁻¹) under in vitro conditions. However, when the medium was supplemented exogenously with tryptophan, it significantly enhanced the auxin biosynthesis which was confirmed by high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) analysis (Khalid et al. 2004).

6.4.1.2 Biosynthesis of Indole Acetic Acid

Indole-3-acetic acid and its analog are the primary active auxin in most plants. They are synthesized from tryptophan, primarily in leaf primordial, young leaves and developing seeds. Auxin plays an important role in the development of roots including root initiation, cell enlargement and cell division (Fig. 6.2). It has been shown that free IAA is easily converted into esterified IAA with sugar or amide-linked IAA, and that such conjugated forms are the forms in which IAA is stored in plants. Two kinds of genes that are involved in the formulation of conjugated IAA and the hydrolysis of IAA have been identified (Bartel and Fink 1995). However, the biosynthetic process of IAA in plants at the molecular level have not yet been characterized due to several reasons: (1) levels of IAA in intact cells are low, (2) indole compounds are nonenzymatically degraded, (3) bacterial contamination can complicate assays of enzymatic activity, and (4) compartmentalization of cells is disrupted under in vitro conditions. Indoleacetic acid is also important for the microbes that interact with plants, and the biosynthesis of IAA has been assayed mainly for plant-associated bacteria. At the molecular level, two pathways of IAA production have been identified: (1) the indole-3-pyruvic acid pathway, reported in PGPR, *Enterobacter cloacae*, *Rhizobium* and *Bradyrhizobium*, and the (2) indole

acetamide (IAM) pathway, which is often found in tumor-forming bacteria, such as *Pseudomonas syringae* pv. *savastanoi* and *Agrobacterium*, for which genes are plasmid-borne.

E. cloacae, isolated from the cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*) rhizosphere, has shown the secretion of IAA in the culture medium by the indole-3-pyruvic acid pathway (Koga et al. 1991). Interestingly, the cloned *E. coli* possessing IAA genes of *E. cloacae* produced large amounts of IAA, even though three different enzymes in the indole-3-pyruvic acid pathway are involved. Moreover, the gene (*ipdc*) transformed from *E. cloacae* did not encode tryptophan aminotransferase, regarded as the enzyme that catalyzes the rate-limiting step in the IAA synthesis. The gene encoded indole pyruvate decarboxylase, whose detection has been very difficult. The IAM pathway was first reported in *P. syringae* pv. *savastanoi*, which induces the production of tumorous outgrowths on olive (*Olea europaea*) and oleander (*Nerium oleander*) plants. The pathway depends on the products of two genes, *iaaM* and *iaaH*. The *iaaM* gene encodes tryptophan 2-monooxygenase, which catalyzes the conversion of L-tryptophan to IAM, while *iaaH* encodes IAM hydrolase, which catalyzes the conversion of IAM to IAA. Induction of tumor formation by *P. syringae* pv. *savastanoi* on its host plants requires the overproduction of IAA. This pathway has also been reported for other tumor-forming bacteria and *Erwinia herbicola* pv. *gypsophilae* (Clark et al. 1993).

6.4.2 Siderophores

Iron plays an important role in various biochemical and physiological processes, such as respiration, photosynthetic transport, nitrate reduction, chlorophyll synthesis, and N₂ fixation (Robinson and Postgate 1980). Iron also acts as a cofactor or is required for proper functioning of enzymes and proteins (e.g., peroxidase, POX, superoxide dismutase, nitrogenase, glutamate synthase, ribonucleotide, diphosphate reductase, aconitase, cytochromes, ferredoxin, and flavoproteins) that facilitate electron transport, oxygen transport and other life-sustaining process. It exists in aerobic soil and water environments in the Fe³⁺ state, most insoluble at physiological pH (Crowley et al. 1987). A level of at least 1 M iron is required for optimum growth, and if greater than 1 M, it is an iron-stressed condition (Ownley et al. 2003). The limitation of iron can inhibit growth, decrease genetic materials and inhibit sporulation, and can also change the cell morphology. The environmental restrictions and biological imperatives, therefore, require that microorganisms form this specific nutrient, which is, though, abundant but essentially unavailable (Leeman et al. 1996). Generally, all aerobic and facultative anaerobic prokaryotes and some plants produce low molecular weight compounds to provide themselves with iron. The low molecular mass (0.5–1.5 kDa) ferric-specific iron-chelator compounds, often called siderophores (iron bearers) (Nielsen and Sorensen 2003), are produced by PGPR. More than 500 different siderophores have been identified from microorganisms, and some bacteria produce more than one type of siderophores.

Table 6.3 Plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria used in bioremediation

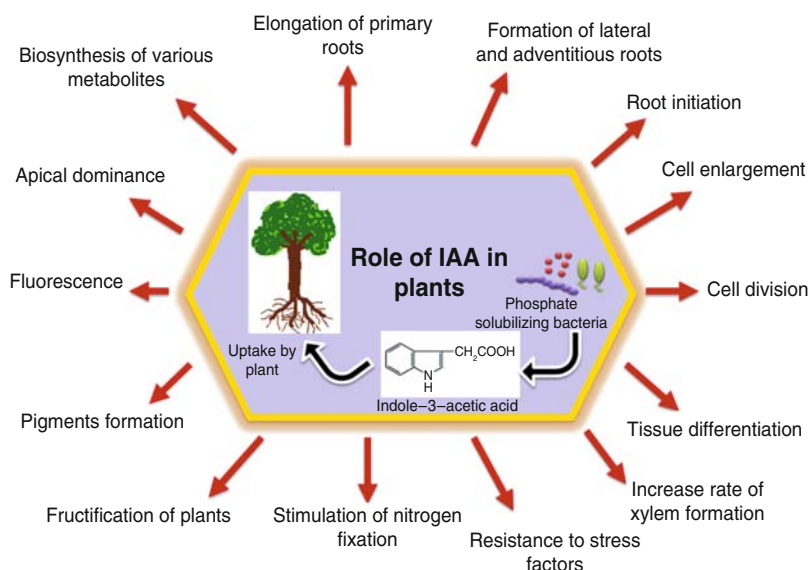
Bacteria	Plant	Heavy metals	Conditions	Role of PGPR	References
<i>Methylobacterium oryzae</i> , <i>Berkholderia</i> sp.	<i>Lycopersicon esculentom</i>	Ni, Cd	Gnotobiotic and pot culture experiments		Madhaiyan et al. (2007)
<i>Bacillus megaterium</i> HKP-1	<i>Brassica Juncea</i>	Pb, Zn	Experiments in greenhouse	Protected plant from metal toxicity	Wu et al. (2006a)
<i>Bacillus subtilis</i> SJ-101	<i>Brassica Juncea</i>	Ni	Experiments in growth chamber	Facilitated Ni accumulation	Zaidi et al. (2006)
<i>Xanthomonas</i> sp. RJ3, <i>Azomonas</i> sp. RJ4, <i>Pseudomonas</i> sp. RJ10, <i>Bacillus</i> sp. RJ31	<i>Brassica napus</i>	Cd	Experiment in pots	Stimulated plant growth and increased cadmium accumulation	Sheng and Xia (2006)
<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp, <i>Bacillus</i> sp.	Mustard	Cr (VI)	Pot experiment	Stimulated plant growth and decreased Cr (VI) content	Rajkumar et al. (2006)
<i>Ochrobactrum</i> , <i>Bacillus cereus</i>	Mungbean	Cr (VI)	Experiment in pots	Lowers the toxicity of chromium to seedlings by reducing Cr (VI) to Cr (III)	Faisal and Hasnain (2006)
<i>Brevibacillus</i>	<i>Trifolium repens</i>	Zn	Pot experiment	Enhanced plant growth and nutrition of plants and decreased zinc concentration in plant tissues	Vivas et al. (2006)
<i>Variovox paradoxus</i> , <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp, <i>Flavobacterium</i>	<i>Brassica juncea</i>	Cd	Experiment in Petri dishes	Stimulating root elongation	Belimov et al. (2005)
<i>Pseudomas fluorescens</i>	Soybean	Hg	Experiment in greenhouse	Increased plant growth	Gupta et al. (2005)
<i>Ochrobactrum intermedium</i>	Sunflower	Cr (VI)	Experiment in pots	Increased plant growth and decreased Cr (VI) uptake	Faisal and Hasnain (2005)
<i>Kluyvera ascorbata</i> SUD165 <i>K. ascorbata</i> SUD165	Indian mustard Canola, tomato	Ni, Pb, Zn	Experiments in growth chamber	Both strains decreased some plant growth inhibition by	Burd et al. (2000)

(continued)

Table 6.3 (continued)

Bacteria	Plant	Heavy metals	Conditions	Role of PGPR	References
				heavy metals, No increase of metal uptake with either strain over noninoculated plants	
<i>Brevundimonas</i> Kro13	None	Cd	Culture media	Sequestered cadmium directly from solution	Robinson et al. (2001)
<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp.	Soybean, mungbean, wheat	Ni, Cd, Cr	Experiment in pots	Promotes growth of plants	Gupta et al. (2002)

(continued)

**Fig. 6.2** Role of IAA in plant growth promotion

When grown under iron-deficient conditions, many microbes will synthesize and excrete siderophores in excess of their own dry cell weight to sequester and solubilize iron. Most of the siderophores are water-soluble and can be secreted extracellularly or produced inside (intracellularly). Generally, most siderophore transport systems are highly specific for certain siderophores, although some broad-range siderophore-recognition systems have been described based on ligand-exchange mechanisms (Bultreys et al. 2003).

6.4.2.1 Siderophore Production by Microorganisms

The siderophore production in iron-stress conditions confers upon these organisms an added advantage, resulting in exclusion of pathogens due to iron starvation. Siderophore production by rhizobial strains has been considered as a potential way to improve nodulation and N₂ fixation in iron-deficient conditions (O' Hara et al. 1988; Khan et al. 2002), and, hence, favors the persistence of rhizobia in iron-deficient soils (Lesueur et al. 1993). In a study, strains of *Mesorhizobium*, showed the production of siderophores in Chrome Azurol S (CAS) agar medium while the supernatants of this strain yielded salicylic acid and 2,3-dihydroxybenzoic acid (DHBA) as phenolate-type siderophores. Addition of ferric iron to the culture medium, though, increased growth yield, but decreased the synthesis of siderophores (Berraho et al. 1997). Similarly, other bradyrhizobial and rhizobial strains infecting greengram (*Vigna radiata* L. Wilczek), pigeonpea (*Cajanus cajans*) and pea (*Pisum sativum*) have shown the production of siderophores using CAS agar plate and CAS solution assay (Wani et al. 2008a, 2008b). The predominant form of siderophores secreted by these strains included hydroxamate and catechol. Similarly, nitrogen-fixing iron-stressed *A. vinelandii* in continuous culture formed DHBA, 2-*N*,6-*N*-di-(2,3-dihydroxybenzoyl)-*L*-lysine (DHBL) and a chromophoric yellow-green fluorescent peptide (YGFP) (Fekete et al. 1983).

6.4.2.2 Chemical and Biological Properties of Siderophores

Broadly, siderophores have been classified into four groups: (1) hydroxamate, (2) phenol catecholates, (3) carboxylate, and (4) salicylic acid (2-hydroxy benzoic acid). Generally, PGPR produce both hydroxamate and catecholate siderophores (Witter and Luther 1998). Different types of siderophores produced by PGPR strains are presented in Fig. 6.3. Of these, hydroxamate siderophores are generally referred to as pseudobactin- (Fig. 6.4) or pyoverdine-type siderophores (Meyer et al. 1997). Each pyoverdin has three Fe binding ligands, one of which is always a α -dihydroxy aromatic group derived from quinoline located in the chromophore. The other two are located in the peptide chain and are hydroxamic acids derived from ornithine either acylated *N*-hydroxyornithine or cyclized *N*-hydroxyornithine, or one hydroxamic acid derived from ornithine plus a β -hydroxyaspartic acid residual. A catecholate siderophore complex consists of three catecholamide groups ligating the metal ion by six oxygen atoms. The catecholamide groups are linked to a trilactone ring or they are connected by a backbone of alkyl chain beginning at a tertiary carbon or a nitrogen atom. The oxygen atoms possess a high electron density, which exhibit a high affinity for protons when deprotonated at pH values above 6.5. In addition, because Fe (III) is a strong Lewis acid it readily donates protons to other atoms, such as the polarizable oxygen atoms of the catechol moiety. This electrostatic interaction gives catecholate siderophores a greater affinity for Fe (III) compared to their hydroxamate counterparts.

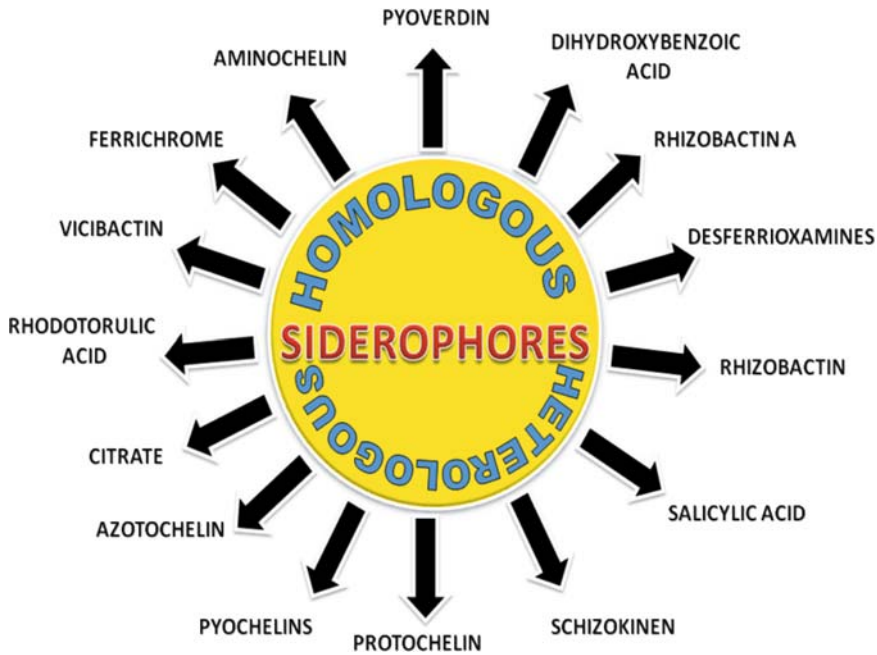


Fig. 6.3 Types of siderophores

Even though the major function of siderophores is to obtain iron from insoluble hydroxides or from iron adsorbed onto solid surfaces, they can also extract iron from various other soluble and insoluble iron compounds. For instance, they can extract iron from ferric citrate, ferric phosphate, Fe-transferrin, ferritin or iron bound to sugars, plant flavone pigments and glycosides, or even from artificial chelators like EDTA and nitrilotriacetate by Fe (III)/ligand-exchange reactions. Siderophores are thus not only directly involved in iron solubilization, but can indirectly make iron available to both microbes and plants. The efficiency of siderophores in microbial metabolism is based mainly on three facts: (1) siderophores consisting of hydroxamate, catecholate or α -hydroxycarboxylate ligands contain the most efficient iron-binding ligand types in nature and satisfy the six coordination sites on ferric ions; siderophores also increase the stability due to its chelating effects; (2) regulation of siderophore biosynthesis is an economic means of spending metabolic energy, but it also allows the production of high local concentrations of siderophores in the vicinity of microbial cells during iron limitation, while over-production of siderophores by host-adapted bacterial strains leads to increased virulence; and (3) besides their ability to solubilize iron and to function as external iron carriers, siderophores exhibit structural and conformational specificities to fit into membrane receptors and/or transporters (Stintzi et al. 2000) and are involved in various biological processes (Fig.6.5). Moreover, the siderophore-producing strains stimulate the N_2 -fixing efficiency of the rhizobial strains (Duhan

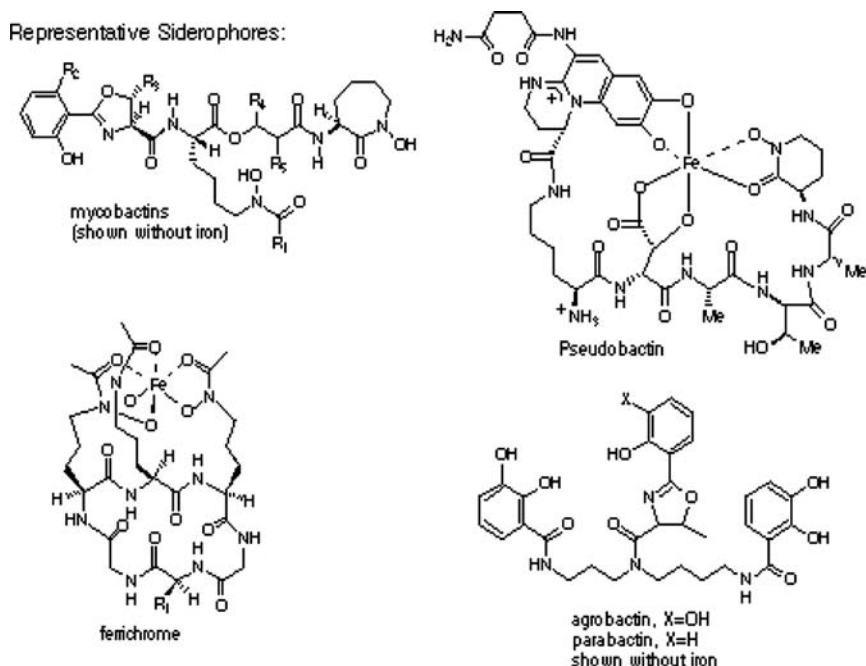


Fig. 6.4 Representative siderophores

et al. 1998). Furthermore, of the 12 isolates of *Rhizobium meliloti* isolated from the medicinal plant, *Mucuna pruriens*, only two isolates (RMP3 and RMP5) inhibited the growth of phytopathogens (*Macrophomonia phaseolina*). Further, a marked enhancement in percentage seed germination, seedling biomass, nodule number and nodule weight of *M. phaseolina*-infected groundnut (*Arachis hypogaea*) plants inoculated with the strains RMP3 and RMP was observed, suggesting the growth promoting activities of siderophores (Arora et al. 2001). Among other PGPR, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (GRC1), isolated from potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) rhizosphere, produced several plant growth-promoting substances, including a siderophore. The siderophore was identified as hydroxymate and, when *P. aeruginosa* was used in field trials, enhanced growth and yield of Indian mustard (*Brassica juncea*) (Pandey et al. 2005).

6.4.3 Mineral Phosphate Solubilizing Activity

Phosphorus (P) is an essential plant nutrient whose deficiency restricts crop yields severely. Most tropical and some subtropical soils are acidic, and strong P-sorption combined with low inherent P stocks lead to widespread P deficiency (Gaume 2000). Even where inorganic and organic P-forms are abundant in soils, their

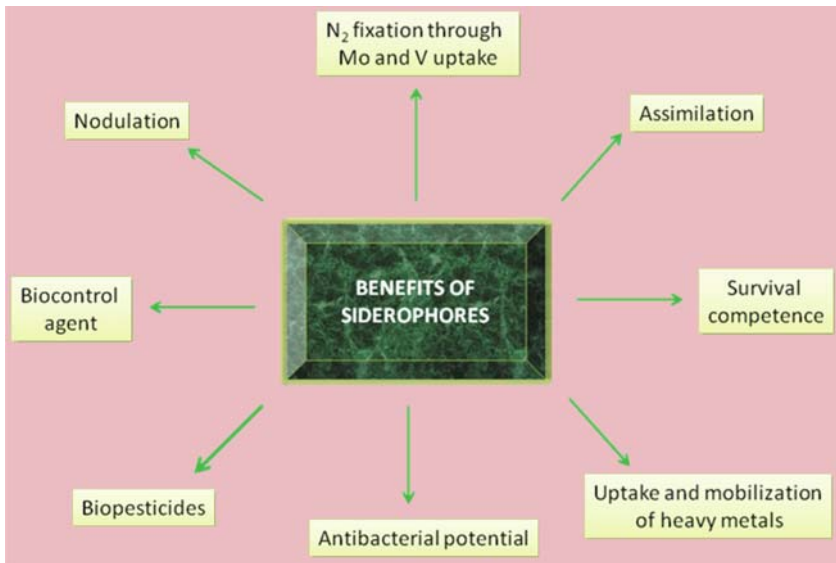


Fig. 6.5 Biological functions of siderophores

concentration in the soil solution is in the micromolar range (Frossard et al. 2000). These low levels of P are mainly due to high reactivity of soluble P soil elements (Lindsay et al. 1989). Therefore, substantial amounts of manufactured water-soluble P (WSP) fertilizers such as superphosphate are commonly applied to correct P deficiencies. Most developing countries import these fertilizers, which are often in limited supply and represent a major outlay for resource-poor farmers. It is, therefore, imperative to explore alternative P sources. In this context, the PGPR-possessing mineral phosphate-solubilizing (MPS) activity provides an inexpensive and sustainable alternative to chemical P fertilizers (Pradhan and Sukla 2005; Khan et al. 2007). The microbial solubilization of soil P in liquid medium has often been due to the excretion of organic acids (Maliha et al. 2004) which can either directly dissolve the mineral P or can chelate both Fe and Al ions associated with P (Omar 1998). However, no definite correlation between the acids produced by PGPR and amounts of P solubilized are reported (Asea et al. 1988). Such PGPR strains possessed with mps activity, when used either alone or as composite cultures, have shown a substantial increase by supplying both P and other essential nutrients to plants.

6.4.4 Growth Modulation Enzyme

The PGPR also increase the growth of plants through the synthesis of specific enzyme, 1-aminocyclopropane- 1-carboxylate (ACC) deaminase, which induce

physiological changes in plants. Ethylene is a plant hormone that is involved in the regulation of many physiological processes, such as leaf senescence, leaf abscission, epinasty, and fruit ripening (Arshad and Frankenberger 2002). Also, ethylene regulates nod factor signaling and nodule formation and has primary functions in plant defense systems. Besides its physiological role in different developmental stages of plants, ethylene is also considered as a stress hormone, whose synthesis in plants is increased substantially by a number of biotic and abiotic stresses. At higher concentrations, ethylene, however, inhibits growth and development of plants (Grichko and Glick 2001). However, ACC deaminase synthesized by PGPR (Belimov et al. 2005; Safronova et al. 2006; Madhaiyan et al. 2006; Rajkumar et al. 2006; Mellado et al. 2007) alleviates the stress induced by ethylene-mediated impact on plants by hydrolyzing ACC, the immediate precursor of ethylene in plants to NH_3 and α -ketobutyrate (Glick et al. 1998; Penrose and Glick 2001; Reed et al. 2005; Safronova et al. 2006), and consequently reduce the ethylene levels in plants. The bacteria utilize the NH_3 evolved from ACC as a source of N and thereby restrict the accumulation of ethylene within the plant, which otherwise inhibits plant growth (Belimov et al. 2002). Thus, the decreased levels of ethylene in turn allow the plants to grow better (Madhaiyan et al. 2007; Zahir et al. 2008). It has been observed that plants that are inoculated with PGPR containing ACC deaminase are dramatically more resistant to the deleterious effects of stress ethylene that is synthesized as a consequence of stressful conditions such as flooding (Grichko and Glick 2001), heavy metals (Burd et al. 1998; Grichko et al. 2000), presence of phytopathogens (Wang et al. 2000), drought, and high salt contents (Mayak et al. 2004a, b). In most of these cases, it has been reported that the PGPR-containing ACC deaminase significantly lowered the level of ACC in the stressed plants, thereby limiting the amount of stress ethylene synthesis and hence damage to the plant. Therefore, the use of such plant growth-promoting bacteria containing ACC deaminase may prove useful in developing strategies to facilitate plant growth in stressed soil environments. And, hence, it may be possible to productively cultivate a variety of crop plants under stressed conditions without genetically manipulating plants, provided these plants are grown in the presence of a suitable PGPR.

6.4.5 Antibiotics Production by Plant Growth Promoting Rhizobacteria

PGPR also promotes the growth of plants by secreting antimicrobial compounds, induction of systemic resistance (ISR), and production of pathogen-related (PR) proteins (Compant et al. 2005). Antibiotic production by biocontrol PGPR is perhaps the most powerful mechanism against phytopathogens (Bashan and de-Bashan 2005), and the first clear-cut experiment demonstrating the role of PGPR in suppression of plant disease through antibiotic production was reported by Tomashow and Weller (1988). These antibiotics may be antitumor, antiviral, antimicrobial, antihelmenthic, and cytotoxic (Fernando et al. 2005). The antibiotics

can also contribute to microbial competitiveness besides their role in suppressing the growth of plant root pathogens. The PGPR strains that produce these compounds are, therefore, of considerable interest as biological control agents (Thomshaw et al. 2003) and provide an alternative to chemical pesticides. Several antimicrobial compounds belonging to polypeptides, heterocyclic nitrogenous compounds, and lipopeptides groups active against phytopathogens have been reported (Thomshaw and Webler 1995). In addition, plants can acquire local and systemic resistance to diseases through various biological agents, including necrotizing pathogens, nonpathogens, and soil-borne rhizosphere bacteria and fungi (Van Loon et al. 1998). This type of resistance, known as induced systemic resistance, is mediated by a jasmonate/ethylene sensitive pathway (Van Loon et al. 1998). Induction of systemic resistance has been established as a new mechanism by which plants defend themselves against pathogen attachment. Various reports confirm the induction of systemic resistance by PGPR. For instance, PGPR strains, i.e., *P. putida* (strain 89B-27), *S. marcescens* (strain 90-166), *Flavomonas oryzae* strain (INR-5), and *Bacillus pumilus* (strain INR-7), have significantly reduced populations of the striped cucumber (Zehnder et al. 1997). Furthermore, the combined inoculation of PGPR (*Bacillus* and *Pseudomonas*) and *Rhizobium* sp. increased the production of defense-related enzymes, i.e., L-phenylalanine ammonia lyase (PAL), POX and polyphenol oxidase (PPO), in coinoculated pigeonpea plants which in turn decreased the dry weight of mycelium and fusaric acid production by fusarial wilt of pigeonpea, suggesting that the combined use of PGPR and rhizobia for induction of systemic resistance against fusarial wilt in pigeon pea (Dutta et al. 2008).

Antibiosis and antagonistic activities of PGPR recovered from wheat (*T. aestivum*) and rice (*Oryza sativa*) seeds, corn (*Zea mays*) plants, and potato have been suggested as possible mechanisms of growth inhibition of various phytopathogens (Lodewyckx et al. 2002; Rosenblueth and Martínez-Romero 2006). For instance, *P. fluorescens* capable of synthesizing 2,4-diacetyl phloroglucinol (DAPG) has shown the production of antimicrobial compounds in planta conditions. Similarly, production of antibiotics phenazine, pyocyanine and DAPG by *Pseudomonas* spp. associated with induced systemic resistance (ISR) activity in sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) against red rot disease has been reported (Viswanathan and Samiyappan 2004). However, the bacterial strains varied in their capability to produce the metabolites. The purified compounds tested for their antifungal activity completely arrested the conidial germination and mycelial growth of red rot pathogen (*Colletotrichum falcatum*), suggesting that the metabolites played an important role in antagonism/ISR. Moreover, the suppressive ability of PGPR even against nematodes is reported (Sturz and Kimpinski 2004). Similarly, *Bacillus lentimorbus* and *Bacillus cereus* isolated from coffee (*Coffea canephora*) demonstrated inhibitory effects against coffee rust pathogen (*Hemileia vastatrix*) and significantly enhanced the coffee production. The pathogen suppression was suggested to be due possibly to the synthesis of a significant amount of fungal cell wall lysing enzymes, antibiosis, competition, and ISR in host (Shiomi et al. 2006). Recently, PGPR bioformulations (*Pseudomonas* and *Bacillus*)

were tested for their efficacy against blister blight (*Exobasidium vexans*) disease in tea (*Camellia sinensis*) under field conditions for two seasons. Among the bioformulations tested, foliar application of *Pseudomonas fluorescens* Pf1 at 7-day intervals consistently reduced the disease incidence of blister blight for two seasons, almost comparable with that of chemical fungicide. In addition to disease control, it also increased tea yield significantly compared to the untreated control. Defense enzymes, such as peroxidase, polyphenol oxidase, phenylalanine ammonia lyase, chitinase, β -1,3-glucanase, and phenolics were found more in *P. fluorescens* Pf1-treated plants compared to control. This finding revealed the probable influence of plant growth promotion and induced systemic resistance (ISR) in enhancing the disease resistance in tea plants against blister disease by PGPR bioformulations (Saravanakumar et al. 2007).

6.4.6 Hydrogen Cyanide Production

Cyanide is yet another secondary metabolite produced during the early stationary growth phase (Knowles and Bunch 1986) by several PGPR, notably *Pseudomonas* spp. and *Bacillus* (Wani et al. 2007b; Ahmad et al. 2008), *Chromobacterium* (Faramarzi and Brand 2006), and *Rhizobium* spp. (Wani et al. 2008a, 2008b, 2008c) by oxidative decarboxylation pathway using glycine, glutamate, or methionine as precursors (Castric 1977; Curl and Truelove 1985). The cyanide so released by microbial communities in solution acts as a secondary metabolite and confers a selective advantage on the producer strains (Vining 1990). Although cyanide is a phytotoxic agent capable of disrupting enzyme activity involved in major metabolic processes, its role as a biocontrol substance is overwhelming (Voisard et al. 1989; Devi et al. 2007). Hydrogen cyanide (HCN) effectively blocks the cytochrome oxidase pathway and is highly toxic to all aerobic microorganisms at picomolar concentrations. However, producer microbes, mainly pseudomonads, are reported to be resistant (Bashan and de-Bashan 2005).

6.4.7 Production of Lytic Enzymes

A variety of other microbial compounds are involved in the suppression of phytopathogenic growth leading thereby to the reduction in damage to plants. These microbially synthesized compounds include defense enzymes, such as chitinase, β -1,3-glucanase, peroxidase, protease, and lipase (Bashan and de-Bashan 2005; Karthikeyan et al. 2006). Chitinase and β -1,3-glucanase degrade the fungal cell wall and cause lysis of fungal cell. Furthermore, chitin and glucan oligomers released during degradation of the fungal cell wall by the action of lytic enzymes act as elicitors that elicit various defense mechanisms in plants (Karthikeyan et al. 2005). Such enzymes produced by *Pseudomonas stutzeri* have

demonstrated the lysis of the pathogen *Fusarium* sp. (Bashan and de-Bashan 2005). Peroxidase represents another component of an early response in plants to pathogen attack and plays a key role in the biosynthesis of lignin which limits the extent of pathogen spread (Bruce and West 1989). In bean, rhizosphere colonized by various bacteria induced PO activity (Zdor and Anderson 1992). In a study, a rapid increase in PO activity was recorded in coconut (*Cocos nucifera* L.) treated with a mixture of *P. fluorescens*, *T. viride* and chitin which contributed to induced resistance against invasion by *Ganoderma lucidum*, the causal agent of *Ganoderma* disease (Karthikeyan et al. 2006). These findings suggest that PGPR possessing the ability to synthesize hydrolytic enzymes can effectively be utilized for managing the plant diseases and can help to reduce the pesticide usage.

6.5 Performance of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria in Metal-Contaminated Soils

The PGPR have largely been used as growth-promoting agents in conventional agronomic practices; substantial emphasis is being placed on them in order to also exploit their bioremediation potential. Contaminated soils are often nutrient poor or sometimes nutrient deficient, due to the loss of beneficial microbes. However, such soils can be made nutrient rich by applying metal tolerant microbes, especially the PGPR, which would provide not only the essential nutrients to the plants growing in the derelict soils but also play a major role in detoxifying heavy metals (Mayak et al. 2004a) and thus helping plants to grow better (Glick 2003; Wani et al. 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). For example, PGPR *Kluyvera ascorbata* SUD165 isolated from metal-contaminated wetland near Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, when applied to soils amended with nickel, zinc, lead, and chromate, have shown to increase the growth of canola (*Brassica rapa*) while protecting the plants from nickel toxicity (Burd et al. 1998). Similarly, nickel-resistant *K. ascorbata* protected tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum* L.), Indian mustard (*Brassica campestris*) and canola plants when grown in soils supplemented with nickel, lead and zinc (Burd et al. 2000). Moreover, the growth-promoting rhizobacteria, *Variovorax paradoxus*, *Rhodococcus* sp. and *Flavobacterium* sp., stimulated root elongation of Indian mustard seedlings either in the presence or absence of toxic cadmium (Belimov et al. 2005), suggesting that these bacterial strains could be developed as inoculants to improve growth of the metal-accumulating Indian mustard in the presence of toxic cadmium concentration, and for the development of plant inoculant systems useful for phytoremediation of polluted soils. Similarly, the canola plants inoculated with *Enterobacter cloacae*, when grown in the presence of arsenates, grew to a significantly greater extent than nontransformed canola plants (Nie et al. 2002). In yet other studies, *Ochrobacterium intermedium* and *Bacillus cereus* protected green-gram plants against chromium toxicity (Faisal and Hasnain 2006), while inoculation of *Ochrobacterium intermedium* improved the overall growth of sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*), when grown in metal-amended soils (Faisal and Hasnain

2005) as also reported for other crops (Chaudri et al. 2000; Wani et al. 2008b). The increase in the growth of plants grown in derelict soils by applying metal-tolerant rhizobacteria was attributed to the ability of rhizobacterial strains to mitigate the toxic effects of metals, besides providing plants with sufficient amounts of growth-promoting substances. Recent examples of PGPR affecting growth and development of plants in metal-affected soils are presented in Table 6.3. The remediation of heavy metal-contaminated sites using rhizobacteria is an exciting area of research, since these organisms can easily and inexpensively be mass produced. Therefore, the molecular engineering of both PGPR and plants with desired genes would help immensely to enhance the efficiency of growth-promoting rhizobacteria mediation or plant-based remediation of contaminated soils and, consequently, could lead to restoration of polluted soils for cultivation.

6.6 Conclusion and Future Prospects

Form the above discussion, it is evident that PGPR offer an environmentally sound and sustainable approach to increase soil fertility and, in turn, the crop productivity. In recent times, the understanding of the complex environment of the rhizosphere, functional diversity among PGPR, mechanisms of their action, and, of course, methods of development of the inoculants and their formulation and delivery system has increased considerably. We therefore hope to see new and exciting PGPR products with multiple traits in the commercial markets for ultimate transfer to the agrarian communities. However, there are several limitations to the use of PGPR for commercial use. Chief among them is inconsistent performance of PGPR under field conditions. Researchers, therefore, need to develop the PGPR inoculants with persistent plant growth-promoting activities and should also suggest ways as to how variations in soil type, management practices (e.g., agrochemical use, rotations), and indeed the effect of weather on the efficacy of PGPR could be minimized. With the advancement in the understanding of the mechanisms adopted by PGPR, it will become possible to enhance their capacity to stimulate plant growth by modifying/manipulating promising traits of PGPR by introducing genes responsible for the biosynthesis of desirable metabolites into other microbial communities. Such genetically engineered PGPR endowed with multiple growth-promoting traits could lead to improve colonization and growth-promoting efficiency, and in turn the sustainable plant productivity, while maintaining soil health and reducing the environmental pollution caused by the use of agro-chemicals. Further work focusing on the functional diversity, precise mode of action, and ecophysiology of these agronomically beneficial microbes would assist in unleashing their full promise as potential bio-inoculants for maintaining soil fertility and, consequently, the sustainability of crops in diverse agro-ecosystems.

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Chapter 7

Plant Growth Promoting Rhizobacteria and Sustainable Agriculture

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Abstract The diverse groups of bacteria in close association with roots and capable of stimulating plant growth by any mechanism(s) of action are referred to as plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR). They affect plant growth and development directly or indirectly either by releasing plant growth regulators (PGRs) or other biologically active substances, altering endogenous levels of PGRs, enhancing availability and uptake of nutrients through fixation and mobilization, reducing harmful effects of pathogenic microorganisms on plants and/or by employing multiple mechanisms of action. Recently, PGPR have received more attention for use as a biofertilizer for the sustainability of agro-ecosystems. Selection of efficient PGPR strains based on well-defined mechanism(s) for the formulation of biofertilizers is vital for achieving consistent and reproducible results under field conditions. Numerous studies have suggested that PGPR-based biofertilizers could be used as effective supplements to chemical fertilizers to promote crop yields on sustainable basis. Various aspects of PGPR biotechnology are reviewed and discussed.

7.1 Introduction

Sustainability in agricultural systems without compromising the environmental quality and conservation is one of the major concerns of today's world. The excessive use of agro-chemicals (fertilizers and pesticides) is posing serious threats

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to the environment. The gradual reduction in the use of chemicals in agriculture without affecting yield or quality of the crop produce can only be possible with a new generation of technologies. Furthermore, the long-term sustainability of agricultural systems depends most likely on effective handling of the internal/indigenous resources of agro-ecosystems. During the last couple of decades, the new biotechnologies have opened new vistas for enhancement of agriculture productivity in a sustainable manner. Advances in understanding of soil microbiology and biotechnology have made possible exploitation of soil microorganisms for improving crop productivity and, in turn, have offered an economically attractive and ecologically viable supplement to reduce external inputs to some extent.

The plant rhizosphere is a remarkable ecological environment as myriad microorganisms colonize in, on, and around the roots of growing plants. Distinct communities of beneficial soil microorganisms are associated with the root systems of all higher plants (Khalid et al. 2006). These rhizobacteria are considered as efficient microbial competitors in the root zone, and the net effect of plant–microbe associations on plant growth could be positive, neutral, or negative. Such bacteria inhabiting plant roots and influencing plant growth positively are often referred to as plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) (Kloepper et al. 1986; Arshad and Frankenberger 1998; Zahir et al. 2004). These bacteria, after inoculation, rapidly colonize onto seeds and roots in response to exudation and, thus, affect plant growth.

A complex matrix of organic and inorganic constituents of soil, particularly rhizosphere, creates a unique and dynamic environment for the microorganisms which affect plants and other associative microorganisms. Many microorganisms are highly dependent for their survival on preformed substrates exuded by plant roots (Frankenberger and Arshad 1995; Glick et al. 1998; Khalid et al. 2006). In turn, the soil microflora inhabiting the rhizosphere can cause dramatic changes in plant growth and development by producing plant growth regulators (PGRs) or biologically active substances, or by altering endogenous levels of PGRs, and/or by facilitating the supply and uptake of nutrients and providing other benefits. A diverse array of bacteria, including species of *Rhizobium*, *Bradyrhizobium*, *Pseudomonas*, *Azospirillum*, *Azotobacter*, *Bacillus*, *Klebsiella*, *Enterobacter*, *Xanthomonas*, *Serratia* and many others, have been shown to facilitate plant growth by various mechanisms.

Over the years, the PGPR have received worldwide importance and acceptance for agricultural benefits. These microorganisms are the potential tools for sustainable agriculture because they not only ensure the availability of essential nutrients to plants but also enhance the nutrient use efficiency. Several authors have reported significant increases in growth and yield of agricultural crops in response to microbial (PGPR) inoculants both under greenhouse and field conditions (Kennedy et al., 2004; Khalid et al. 2004a, 2006; Gravel et al. 2007; Kumar et al. 2007; Zhuang et al. 2007; Arshad et al. 2008; Banchio et al. 2008; Contesto et al. 2008; Figueiredo et al. 2008; Mubeen et al. 2008; Naiman et al. 2009). Beside promoting plant growth, PGPR also enhance efficiency of fertilizers, mitigate abiotic stresses, manage plant pathogens, and cause the degradation of xenobiotic compounds (Glick 2003, 2004; Huang et al. 2004; Khan 2005; Arshad et al. 2007; Saleem

et al. 2007; Zhuang et al. 2007; Ahmad et al. 2008; Amor et al., 2008; Dell'Amico et al. 2008; Lebeau et al., 2008; Masoud and Abbas 2009; Kohler et al. 2009).

Many promising microorganisms have been isolated and marketed as biofertilizers; however, their effects on crop yields fluctuate from crop to crop, place to place, and from season to season, depending on the survival of the introduced microorganisms on seed, roots, and in soil (Poi and Kabi 1979; Chanway and Holl 1992; Nowak 1998; Khalid et al. 2004a; Hafeez et al. 2006). To make effective utilization of microbial inoculants, accurate and reliable methods for monitoring the fate of applied PGPR in the rhizosphere/rhizoplane are required to enhance their efficacy under field conditions. Scientists have used multidisciplinary approaches to understand the adaptation of PGPR to the rhizosphere, including their mechanisms of action and root colonization, production of determinants, and biodiversity, etc. They are trying to manipulate the rhizosphere so that PGPR perform better and help to increase food production for mankind on a sustainable basis. To achieve this successfully, we need to know the players and to understand their interactions with each other and with the growth substrate, in addition to abiotic factors which otherwise have drastic effects on PGPR as well as on plant growth under diverse field conditions. In this chapter, the potential mechanisms of action of PGPR, reasons for inconsistency in their performance, and formulation of effective biofertilizers to be used as the supplement to chemical fertilizers, are critically reviewed and discussed.

7.2 Mechanisms of Action

PGPR affect growth and development of plants by direct or indirect mechanisms (Table 7.1). The direct mechanisms include N₂-fixation, mobilization of nutrients via production of phosphatases, siderophores, or organic acids, and production of phytohormones and enzymes (Lucy et al. 2004; Khalid et al. 2004a, b; Gray and Smith 2005; Çakmakçi et al. 2006; Tsavkelova et al. 2007). Indirectly, the bacteria may exert a positive influence on plant growth by lessening certain deleterious effects of a pathogenic organism by inducing host resistance to the pathogen or by knocking out the pathogen from root surfaces or by producing chitinases or other pathogen-suppressing substances (Raj et al. 2003; Guo et al. 2004; Van Loon and Glick 2004; Van Loon 2007). Although scientists have reported both direct and indirect methods of growth stimulation by PGPR, but there is no clear separation between these two mechanisms. Certain bacteria possess multiple traits to affect plant growth where one trait may dominate the other one (Shaharoon et al. 2006a, Shaharoon et al. 2008; Hafeez et al. 2006). A bacterium influencing plant growth by releasing PGRs can also play a role in controlling plant pathogens and diseases, and vice versa. So, plant response to PGPR is a complex phenomenon, and recent advances in research at the molecular level have provided a sufficient basis to understand these mechanisms more precisely. The major mechanisms of PGPR action involved in the improvement of plant growth and development are discussed in the following sections.

t1.1 **Table 7.1** Possible mechanism(s) of action of PGPR for plant growth promotion

t1.2	Plants	PGPR	Suggested mechanism(s) of action	References
t1.3	<i>Lactuca sativa</i> L. cv. Tafalla	<i>Pseudomonas mendocina</i> Palleroni	ACC deaminase activity	Kohler et al. (2009)
t1.4	<i>Oryza sativa</i>	<i>Methylobacterium</i> sp. strain NPFM-SB3	Indole-3-acetic acid, cytokinins	Senthilkumar et al. (2009)
t1.5	<i>Solanum tuberosum</i>	<i>Bacillus</i> sp.	Auxins	Ahmed and Hasnain (2008)
t1.6	<i>Arabidopsis thaliana</i>	<i>Phyllobacterium brassicacearum</i> STM196, <i>Pseudomonas putida</i> UW4, <i>Rhizobium leguminosarum</i> bv. <i>viciae</i> 128C53K, <i>Mesorhizobium loti</i> MAFF303099	ACC deaminase activity	Contesto et al. (2008)
t1.7	<i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i> L.	<i>Rhizobium tropici</i> (CIAT899), <i>Paenibacillus polymyxa</i> (DSM 36), <i>Rhizobium</i> , <i>P. polymyxa</i> strain Loutit (L), <i>Bacillus</i> sp.	Indole acetic acid, cytokinin, N ₂ -fixation	Figueiredo et al. (2008)
t1.8	<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.	<i>Pseudomonas</i> spp., <i>Burkholderia caryophylli</i>	ACC deaminase activity, chitinase	Shaharoon et al. (2007b, 2008)
t1.9	<i>Cicer arietinum</i> L.	<i>Serratia oderifera</i> (J118), <i>Pantoea dispersa</i> (J112) and <i>Enterobacter gergoviae</i> (J107)	ACC deaminase, P-solubilization	Shahzad et al. (2008)
t1.10	<i>Malus domestica</i> Borkh	PGPR strains (OSU-142, OSU-7, BA-8 and M-3)	Indole acetic acid, cytokinin	Aslantas et al. (2007)
t1.11	<i>Brassica rapa</i>	<i>Pseudomonas putida</i> UW4	ACC deaminase activity	Cheng et al. (2007)
t1.12	<i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i>	<i>Pseudomonas fluorescens</i> , <i>P. fluorescens</i> subgroup G strain 2, <i>P. marginalis</i> , <i>P. putida</i> subgroup B strain 1 and <i>P. syringae</i> strain I	Indole acetic acid	Gravel et al. (2007)
t1.13	<i>Apios americana</i>	<i>Pseudomonas fluorescens</i> TDK1	ACC deaminase activity	Saravanakumar and Samiyappan (2007)
t1.14	<i>Pisum sativum</i>	<i>Pseudomonas putida</i> biotype A, A7' <i>Acinetobacter calcoaceticus</i> , M9, <i>P. fluorescens</i> , AM3	ACC deaminase, ethylene	Shaharoon et al. (2007a)
t1.15	<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.	<i>Bacillus pumilus</i>	Auxin, siderophore	Hafeez et al. (2006)
t1.16	<i>Rubus niveus</i>	<i>Bacillus</i> sp.	N ₂ -fixation, P-solubilization	Orhan et al. (2006)
t1.17	<i>Zea mays</i> L., <i>Vigna radiata</i>	<i>Pseudomonas</i> spp.	ACC deaminase activity, chitinase activity	Shaharoon et al. (2006a, b)

(continued)

Table 7.1 (continued)

Plants	PGPR	Suggested mechanism(s) of action	References	
<i>Zea mays</i> L.	<i>Azotobacter chroococcum</i> , <i>Bacillus megaterium</i> , <i>Bacillus mucilaginosus</i>	N ₂ -fixation, P- solubilization, K- solubilization	Wu et al. (2005)	t1.18 t1.19
<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.	PGPR	Indole-3-acetic acid	Khalid et al. (2004a, b)	t1.21
<i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i> , <i>Capsicum annum</i>	PGPR	Auxins	Garci'a et al. (2003)	t1.22
<i>Brassica rapa</i> , <i>Vigna radiata</i>	<i>P. putida</i> GR12-2 and an IAA-deficient mutant	Indole-3-acetic acid	Patten and Glick (2002)	t1.23
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i>	<i>Arthrobacter mysorens</i> 7, <i>Flavobacterium sp. L30</i> , <i>Klebsiella mobilis CIAM880</i>	Indole-3-acetic acid, ethylene	Pishchik et al. (2002)	t1.24
<i>Pinus pinea</i>	<i>Bacillus</i> spp.	Gibberellins	Probanza et al. (2002)	t1.25
<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.	<i>Rhizobium</i> , <i>Azospirillum</i>	Indole-3-acetic acid	Biswas et al. (2000)	t1.26
<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.	<i>Rhizobium leguminosarum</i> (strain E11)	Indole-3-acetic acid	Dazzo et al. (2000)	t1.27
<i>Vigna radiata</i>	<i>P. putida</i> GR 12-2 (wild type), GR12-2/acd36 (ACC deaminase minus mutant), GR 12-2/aux1 (IAA over producers)	Indole-3-acetic acid, ethylene	Mayak et al. (1999)	t1.28
<i>Vigna radiata</i>	<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp.	Biocontrol	Sindhu et al. (1999)	t1.29
–	<i>Paenibacillus polymyxa</i>	cytokinins	Timmusk et al. (1999)	t1.30
<i>Cucumis sativus</i>	<i>P. putida</i> , <i>Serratia marcescens</i>	Biocontrol	Wei et al. (1996)	t1.31

7.2.1 Fixation, Mobilization and Uptake of Nutrients

Nutrients are one of the extremely important factors which influence growth, yield, and quality of different crops. Soil microorganisms can provide nutrients to plants either through the fixation of atmospheric N₂ or by enhancing nutrient mobilization/uptake through their biological activities, such as mineralization and through siderophore, organic acid and phosphatase production, etc.

Biological N₂ fixation by rhizobia and associative diazotrophic bacteria is a spontaneous process and one of the widely studied mechanisms by which plants benefit from the interacting partners. The bacteria benefit the plants by fixing N₂ in exchange for fixed carbon either provided directly to the bacteria or indirectly by

releasing carbon as root exudates. A range of bacteria participates in interactions with different plants, significantly increasing their vegetative growth and grain yields. However, obtaining maximum benefits on farms from diazotroph PGPR biofertilizer requires a systematic strategy designed to fully utilize all these beneficial factors, allowing crop yields to be maintained or even increased while fertilizer applications are reduced (Kennedy et al. 2004). Numerous studies have shown that different species of bacteria fix atmospheric N_2 and consequently affect growth and yield of various crops (Sindhu et al. 2002; Bai et al. 2003; Orhan et al. 2006; Afzal and Bano 2008; Khaleqzaman and Hossain 2008; Figueiredo et al. 2008). In addition to biological N_2 -fixation, PGPR are also known to affect the nutrient availability to the plant through acidification and redox changes or by producing iron chelators and siderophores, and/or mobilizing the metal phosphates (Burd et al. 2000; Römkens et al. 2002; Abou-Shanab et al. 2003). Several reports have suggested that PGPR can stimulate plant growth through their P-solubilizing activity (Khan et al. 2007; Wani et al. 2007; Afzal and Bano 2008). Furthermore, Wu et al. (2005) reported increased assimilation of nutrients, such as N, P, and K, in plants, in response to inoculation with P-solubilizer (*Bacillus megaterium*) and K-solubilizer (*Bacillus mucilaginosus*). Likewise, Orhan et al. (2006) reported that inoculation with a phosphate-solubilizing *Bacillus* strain M3 significantly improved P, Fe, and Mn contents of the leaves of raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*), suggesting that *Bacillus* M3 alone or in combination with some other strains had the potential to increase the nutrition of raspberry plants, in addition to growth and yield.

7.2.2 Production of Plant Growth-Regulating Substances

Plant growth-regulating substances are naturally occurring organic compounds that influence various physiological processes in plants, such as cell elongation and cell division. They perform these functions at concentrations far below the levels at which nutrients and vitamins normally affect plant processes. It is now well established that the majority of soil microorganisms can produce plant growth-regulating substances, including phytohormones (auxins, gibberellins, cytokinins, ethylene, and abscisic acid) and enzymes (Frankenberger and Arshad 1995; Glick 1995; Khalid et al. 2006), which is considered as one of the major mechanisms of plant growth promotion by PGPR. Production of PGRs by microorganisms is affected by the presence of suitable substrate(s)/precursor(s) as well as type and concentration of exudates. The inocula in the presence of a specific physiological precursor of a PGR and/or inocula that produce physiologically-active concentrations of a phytohormone can be highly effective in promoting plant growth and enhancing consistency and reproducibility (Frankenberger and Arshad 1995; Arshad and Frankenberger 1998, 2002).

Microflora capable of producing PGRs in vitro predominates in the rhizosphere of plants. However, the type and amount of growth-regulating substances released by such microorganisms are variable. The quantitative or qualitative variations in

plant growth-promoting substances in turn lead to the differences in plant responses to the PGPR inocula. Several studies have reported the ability of various PGPR to produce auxins in vitro and in vivo (Almonacid et al. 2000; Khalid et al. 2004a, b; Gravel et al. 2007). Similarly, plant-associated phototrophic purple bacterium (Serdyuk et al. 1995) and *Methylobacterium* sp. (Senthilkumar et al. 2009) have been reported to be capable of producing cytokinins in vitro. Different bacterial species such as *Proteus mirabilis*, *P. vulgaris*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, *Bacillus megaterium*, *B. cereus*, *Escherichia coli* and many more have been reported to synthesize plant growth-promoting substances, including auxin, gibberellin, cytokinin and abscisic acid (Tuomi and Rosenquist 1995; Karadeniz et al. 2006; Tsavkelova et al. 2007). Soil microbiota is also known to produce the gaseous phytohormone ethylene in vitro and in vivo (Weingart et al. 1999; Akhtar et al. 2005).

Some PGPR can influence plant growth by altering the synthesis of endogenous phytohormones through the production of specific enzymes. Among these enzymes, bacterial 1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate (ACC) deaminase plays a significant role in the regulation of a plant hormone, ethylene, and thus the modification of the growth and development of plants (Arshad and Frankenberger 2002; Glick 2005). Bacterial strains with ACC deaminase can at least partially eliminate the stress-induced ethylene-mediated negative impact on plants by converting the germinating seed/root's ACC into α -ketobutyrate and ammonia (Glick et al. 1998). Since then, numerous species of Gram-negative and Gram-positive bacteria have been reported to produce ACC deaminase (Belimov et al. 2005; Pandey et al. 2005; Sessitsch et al. 2005; Blaha et al. 2006; Madhaiyan et al. 2006; Stiens et al. 2006; Shaharoon et al. 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Shahzad et al. 2008).

7.2.3 Biological Control

Soil-borne pathogens are one of the major limiting factors for low crop productivity due to their inhibitory effects on plant health. In modern agronomic practices, a huge amount of chemicals (insecticide/fungicide) are used to offset various pathogens inflicting severe losses to crop yields. Although these chemicals are vital for controlling the pathogens on the one hand, on the other hand they can drastically affect the microbial diversity and functional properties of natural microbial communities of soils, leading thereby to imbalanced agro-ecosystems (Singh et al. 2005; Vig et al. 2006; Mubeen et al. 2008). It is therefore important to discover the most viable and economical means for effective disease management in an environment-friendly manner. Currently, biopesticides are receiving worldwide attention and considered important for the sustainability of the agricultural system. Furthermore, the WTO guideline that suggests that only residue-free agricultural produce can be exported has further created a great interest and demand for the use of biopesticides in crop protection systems. In recent times, PGPR have emerged as potential candidates with wide scope for inducing systemic resistance in crop plants

against many pathogens (Jeun et al. 2004; Nakkeeran et al. 2005; Khalequzaman and Hossain 2008; Mirik et al. 2008; Masoud and Abbas 2009). Various species of bacteria including *Pseudomonas fluorescens*, *P. putida*, *P. cepacia*, *P. aeruginosa*, *Bacillus* spp., *Rhizobium* and many other PGPR exhibit biological control activity and inhibit pathogens by synthesizing chitinase, and by production of hydrogen cyanide, protease, siderophores, and cellulase, and/or indirectly by promoting plant growth and health through any mode of action (Zahir et al. 2004; Hafeez et al. 2006; Narayanasamy 2008).

7.2.4 Multiple Mechanisms of Action

Some PGPR can stimulate plant growth through multifarious activities. Although PGPR have been reported to influence plant growth by an array of mechanisms, the specific traits by which PGPR facilitate plant growth, yield, and nutrient uptake were limited to the expression of one or more of the traits expressed simultaneously in a given environment of plant–microbe interaction. A PGPR can promote plant growth by improving plant nutrition, modifying root growth architecture, and by plant responses to external stress factors, simultaneously (Egamberdiyeva and Hflich 2004; Dey et al. 2004; Saleem et al. 2007; Shaharoon et al. 2006a, b, 2007a, b, 2008). However, one trait may dominate the other one of the same PGPR when exposed to certain environmental conditions. For instance, Dey et al. (2004) reported more than one mechanism of PGPR responsible for growth promotion. They suggested that, besides ACC deaminase activity, expression of one or more of the traits such as suppression of phytopathogens, solubilization of tricalcium phosphate, production of siderophore and/or nodulation promotion by the PGPR might have simultaneously contributed to the enhancement of growth, yield, and nutrient uptake of peanut (*Arachis hypogaea*). Similarly, Shaharoon et al. (2006a, b) reported plant growth promotion by PGPR employing multiple mechanisms, such as ACC deaminase activity, chitinase activity, and root colonization. Furthermore, Hafeez et al. (2006) attributed increase in plant growth to multiple traits (such as production of IAA, and siderophores and P-solubilization) of PGPR. We have also found that PGPR expressing dual traits, such as ACC deaminase and nitrogenase activity or ACC deaminase with phosphatase activity performed better at enhancing growth and yield of wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) and maize (*Zea mays*) than PGPR possessing a single trait (Arshad et al., unpublished data).

7.3 Application of PGPR in Agriculture

PGPR are commonly used as inoculants for improving the growth and yield of agricultural crops. They represent an essential and large component of biofertilizer technology to improve the productivity of agricultural systems in the long run

(Zahir et al. 2004; Khalid et al. 2006; Naiman et al. 2009). Many PGPR have shown great promise as potential inoculants for agriculture uses and environmental protection, and can play very critical roles in maintaining the sustainability of agroecosystems. However, the current use of PGPR in agriculture is poor despite numerous reports on their fair performance under laboratory conditions.

PGPR possess the ability to colonize and establish an ongoing relationship with plants, resulting in better root growth, more biomass, and a substantial increase in crop yields. In this context, significant effects of PGPR have been observed on various agricultural crops, including legumes, cereals, and noncereals, and other environmentally important plant species. Furthermore, the impact of PGPR on root development with the consequent advantage on increasing water and nutrient use efficiencies has also been observed (Zahir et al. 2005; Ahmad et al. 2008; Arshad et al. 2008). The potential uses and benefits of PGPR in the improvement of overall performance of plants are discussed in the following sections.

7.3.1 Effect of PGPR on Plant Growth

The potential of PGPR for improving growth and yields of various crops has been extensively documented (Table 7.2). However, most of the studies have been conducted under controlled environments rather than under natural field conditions. Results of these studies have demonstrated clearly that PGPR carry abundant potentials to enhance growth and yield of target crops. However, the selection of a functionally effective PGPR strain is very critical, and the plant responses are often variable depending upon the bacterial strain, plant genotypes, and experimental sites. It has also been claimed that the PGPR isolated from a particular crop or ecological zone are more effective in producing consistent results if reapplied to the same crop and reused in the same ecological zone (Chanway and Holl 1992; Nowak 1998). This might be due to a greater adaptability of the introduced PGPR in the given rhizosphere, while inconsistency in the responses of same crop to same PGPR could be attributed to (1) the poor quality of inocula, (2) short shelf life of PGPR, (3) lack of standard delivery systems, and/or (4) failure in maintaining a required density of PGPR onto seeds or roots. Moreover, the nature and composition of the material used as a carrier for a PGPR also plays a significant role in producing its impact on the inoculated plants.

Another important aspect of these trials is that the effects of PGPR have been investigated under different fertilizer doses, which has been shown to affect the efficiency of PGPR, leading to inconsistent performance under different agroecosystems (Shaharoon et al. 2008). Considering the acute demand for food supply, it is wise to make efforts to improve crop production by using PGPR, over and above what is achievable with optimum chemical fertilizers. It is also pertinent that most of the investigations have been focused on diazotrophs, which were tested under different N application rates. It could be very useful if selected PGPR were tested under different rates of all the three major nutrients (N, P, and K)

Table 7.2. Plant responses to inoculation with PGPR

PGPR	Plants	Comments	References
12.1			
12.2			
12.3	<i>Azospirillum brasilense</i> Az1 and Az2, <i>P. fluorescens</i> Pf	The inoculation increased aerial and root biomass and grain yield by 12, 40 and 16%, respectively, over uninoculated control	Naiman et al. (2009)
12.4	<i>A. brasilense</i> , <i>Pantoea dispersa</i>	Inoculation increased the concentration of citric, ascorbic and succinic acids in green fruit of sweet pepper compared to noninoculated control	Amor et al. (2008)
12.5	<i>Bacillus</i> sp.	Bacterial inoculation caused increment in the growth of the plants compared to the noninoculated treatments	Ahmed and Hasnain (2008)
12.6	<i>P. fluorescens</i> , <i>B. subtilis</i> , <i>Sinorhizobium melliloti</i> , <i>Bradyrhizobium</i> sp.	Only <i>P. fluorescens</i> and <i>Bradyrhizobium</i> sp. showed significant increases in shoot length, shoot weight, number of leaves and node, and root dry weight, in comparison to control plants or plants treated with other PGPR. Essential oil yield was also significantly increased relative to noninoculated plants, without alteration of oil composition	Banchio et al. (2008)
12.7	<i>Phyllobacterium brassicacearum</i> STM196, <i>P. putida</i> UW4, <i>R. leguminosarum</i> bv. <i>viciae</i> 128C53K, <i>Mesorhizobium loti</i>	Root hairs of seedlings inoculated with the ACC deaminase strains were significantly longer	Contesto et al. (2008)
12.8	<i>Rhizobiumtropic</i> (CIAT899), <i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i> L. <i>Paenibacillus polymyxa</i> (DSM 36), <i>Rhizobium</i> , <i>P. polymyxa</i> strain Loutit (L), <i>Paenibacillus, Bacillus</i> sp.	Beans coinoculated with <i>R. tropici</i> (CIAT899) and <i>P. polymyxa</i> (DSM 36) had higher leghemoglobin concentrations, nitrogenase activity and N ₂ fixation efficiency and thereby formed associations of greater symbiotic efficiency. Inoculation with <i>Rhizobium</i> and <i>P. polymyxa</i> strain Loutit (L) stimulated nodulation. PGPR also stimulated specific-nodulation (number of nodules per gram of root dry weight) and increased accumulated N	Figueiredo et al. (2008)

t2.9	<i>Bacillus</i> strains	<i>Capsicum annuum</i>	Stem diameter, root elongation, root dry weight, shoot dry weight and yield were increased in response to inoculation in the field experiment by 7.0–20.5, 7.0–17.0, 4.5–23.5, 16.5–38.5, and 11.0–33.0%, respectively	Mirik et al. (2008)
t2.10	<i>Pseudomonas</i> spp.	<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.	Inoculation significantly increased growth, yield and nutrient use efficiency of wheat	Shaharouna et al. (2008)
t2.11	<i>Serratia odorifera</i> (J118), <i>Pantoea dispersa</i> (J112), <i>Enterobacter gergoviae</i> (J1107)	<i>Cicer arietinum</i> L.	The PGPR in the presence of P-enriched compost resulted in a highly significant increase in fresh biomass (84%), number of pods plant ⁻¹ (97%), grain yield (79%) and number of nodules plant ⁻¹ (87%) compared to uninoculated control	Shahzad et al. (2008)
t2.12	PGPR strains OSU-142, OSU-7, BA-8 and M-3)	<i>Malus domestica</i> Borkh)	Inoculation with OSU-142, OSU-7, BA-8 and M-3 PGPR increased average shoot length by 59.2, 18.3, 7.0 and 14.3% relative to the control and fruit yield by 116.4, 88.2, 137.5 and 73.7%, respectively. Bacterial inoculation increased shoot diameter from 7.0 to 16.3% compared to control	Aslantas et al. (2007)
t2.13	<i>P. fluorescens</i> , <i>P. fluorescens</i> subgroup G strain 2, <i>P. marginalis</i> , <i>P. putida</i> subgroup B strain 1 and <i>P. syringae</i> strain 1)	<i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i>	<i>Pseudomonas putida</i> was shown to improve fruit yields in rock-wool and in organic medium. The production of IAA was shown as a possible mechanism for plant growth stimulation by the bacterium. In addition, roots of tomato seedlings grown in the presence of increasing concentrations of IAA were significantly longer when seeds were treated with <i>P. putida</i>	Gravel et al. (2007)
t2.14	<i>B. megaterium</i> , <i>B. subtilis</i> , <i>Pseudomonas corrugate</i>	<i>Zea mays</i> L.	All three bacterial inoculants resulted in an increment in grain yield of maize up to 122, 135 and 194%, respectively, compared to respective control. The overall beneficial effects of bacterial inoculations contributed to the colonization and survival of the introduced bacteria, and to stimulation of the indigenous microflora in the rhizosphere	Kumar et al. (2007)

(continued)

Table 7.2 (continued)

	PGPR	Plants	Comments	References
12.15				
12.16	<i>B. subtilis</i> BEB-1Sbs (BS13)	<i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i>	Yield per plant, fruit weight and length were increased significantly by the <i>Bacillus subtilis</i> BEB-1Sbs (BS13) treatment when compared to the control	Mena-Violante and Ojalde-Portugal (2007)
12.17				
	<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp., <i>Burkholderia caryophylli</i> <i>B. pumilus</i> 8 N-4	<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.	Both PGPR containing ACC deaminase positively influenced growth and yield of wheat Inoculation of the wheat variety Orkhon with PGPR <i>B. pumilus</i> 8 N-4 (originated from Mongolia) resulted in the maximum increase in plant biomass, root length, and total N and P contents in plants. The isolate was also capable of producing auxin and siderophore	Shaharouna et al. (2007b) Hafeez et al. (2006)
12.20	Cyanobacterial strains	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.	Significant increases in grain and straw yield were observed when rice seedlings were inoculated with four cyanobacterial strains either applied alone or in combination with chemical fertilizer. In addition, a saving of 25 kg N ha ⁻¹ was attained through cyanobacterial fertilization	Jha and Prasad (2006)
12.21	<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp.	<i>Zea mays</i> L., <i>Vigna radiata</i>	Significant increases in plant height, root weight and total biomass were observed in response to inoculation with PGPR containing ACC deaminase. Similarly, inoculation significantly improved grain yield of maize in the presence of nitrogenous fertilizers. Effect of PGPR was also positive on nodulation of mung bean (<i>Vigna radiata</i>)	Shaharouna et al. (2006a, b)
12.22	<i>Pseudomonas</i> , <i>Azotobacter</i> , <i>Azospirillum</i>	<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.	Significant positive effects of inoculation on germination and growth of wheat were observed	Shaukat et al. (2006)
12.23	<i>A. chroococcum</i> , <i>B. megaterium</i> , <i>B. mucilaginosus</i>	<i>Zea mays</i> L.	The application of PGPR significantly increased the plant growth and resulted in the highest biomass and seedling height. Inoculation not only increased the nutritional assimilation of plant (total N, P, and K), but also improved soil properties, such as organic matter content and total N in soil	Wu et al. (2005)

12.24	<i>Pseudomonas</i> spp.	<i>Arachis hypogaea</i> L.	Seed inoculation with PGPR containing ACC deaminase resulted in a significantly higher pod yield than the control, in pots, during rainy and post-rainy seasons. PGPR also significantly enhanced pod yield (23–26, 24–28, and 18–24%, respectively), haulm yield and nodule dry weight over the control under field conditions	Dey et al. (2004)
12.25	<i>B. licheniformis</i> CECT 5106, <i>B. pumilus</i> CECT 5105	<i>Quercus ilex</i> ssp. <i>ballota</i>	Only <i>B. licheniformis</i> promoted the growth of <i>Q. ilex</i> seedlings. Furthermore, <i>B. licheniformis</i> inhibited fungal growth as revealed by ergosterol/chitin analysis	Domenech et al. (2004)
12.26	PGPR isolates	<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.	Peat-based seed inoculation with selected PGPR strains capable of producing auxins exhibited stimulatory effects on grain yields of tested wheat cv. in pot (up to 14.7% increase over control) and field experiments (up to 27.5% increase over control); however, the response varied with cv. and PGPR strains. It was concluded that the strain which produced the highest amount of auxins in nonsterilized rhizosphere soil also caused maximum increase in growth and yield of both the wheat cultivars	Khalid et al. (2004a)
12.27	PGPR	<i>Quercus ilex</i> ssp. <i>ballota</i> , <i>Pinus pinea</i>	All strains significantly increased stem length, neck diameter and shoot dry weight of the inoculated plants	García et al. (2003)
12.28	<i>Enterobacter cloacae</i> , <i>P. putida</i> , <i>P. fluorescens</i>	<i>Brassica rapa</i>	Inoculation significantly enhanced root elongation of canola under gnotobiotic conditions	Penrose and Glick (2003)
12.29	Rhizobacteria	<i>Brassica juncea</i>	A significant increase in growth was observed in the inoculated seedlings. The PGPR were also capable of producing IAA	Asghar et al. (2002)
12.30	<i>P. putida</i> Am2, <i>P. putida</i> Bm3, <i>Alcaligenes xylosoxidans</i> cm4, <i>Pseudomonas</i> sp. Dp2	<i>Brassica juncea</i> L.	Significant increase in root elongation of phosphorus-sufficient seedlings of rapeseed in a growth-pouch culture experiment was observed in response to inoculation	Belimov et al. (2002)

(continued)

Table 7.2. (continued)

	PGPR	Plants	Comments	References
t2.31				
t2.32				
t2.33	<i>P. putida</i> GR12-2 and an IAA-deficient mutant	<i>Brassica rapa</i> , <i>Vigna radiata</i>	Primary roots of canola seeds treated with wild-type strain were 35–50% longer than the roots from seeds treated with the IAA-deficient mutant and the roots from uninoculated seeds. Exposing mung bean cuttings to high levels of IAA by soaking in a suspension of the wild-type strain stimulated formation of many adventitious roots	Patten and Glick (2002)
t2.34	<i>Arthrobacter mysorens</i> 7, <i>Flavobacterium</i> sp. L30, <i>Klebsiella mobilis</i> CIAM880	<i>Hordeum vulgare</i>	All the PGPR actively colonized barley root system and rhizosphere, and significantly stimulated root elongation up to 25%	Pishchik et al. (2002)
t2.35	<i>B. licheniformis</i> CECT 5106, <i>B. pumilus</i> CECT 5105	<i>Pinus pinea</i>	Both <i>Bacillus</i> strains promoted the growth of <i>P. pinea</i> seedlings	Probanza et al. (2002)
t2.36	<i>Rhizobium</i> , <i>Azospirillum</i>	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.	Inoculation with diazotrophs had significant growth-promoting effects on rice seedlings	Biswas et al. (2000)
t2.37	<i>R. leguminosarum</i> (strain E11)	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.	Growth-promoting effects of inoculation on rice seedlings were observed under axenic conditions	Dazzo et al. (2000)
t2.38	<i>Azotobacter</i>	<i>Zea mays</i> L.	Inoculation with strains efficient in IAA production had significant growth-promoting effects on maize seedlings	Zahir et al. (2000)
t2.39	<i>P. putida</i> GR 12-2 (wild-type), GR12-2/acd36 (ACC deaminase minus mutant), GR 12-2/aux1 (IAA over producers)	<i>Vigna radiata</i>	Only the wild-type strain produced longer roots	Mayak et al. (1999)

instead of N only. Moreover, the soil fertility status should also be considered while using PGPR along with specific doses of N, P, and K fertilizers. Therefore, the proper understanding of mechanism(s) of action of chosen PGPR can substantially help in obtaining consistent responses in terms of improved growth and yield of bioprimed plants/crops. If all these factors are considered properly, the agriculture industry can draw significant benefits from the PGPR-based biotechnological approaches. Another aspect which requires urgent attention is the quality improvement of the agricultural produce following PGPR inoculation. Since PGPR exert their influence through different mechanism(s), it is very likely that they can affect quality of the produce; unfortunately, most of the studies have reported the effects of PGPR on growth and yield of inoculated plants in quantitative terms, but very little is known about the quality parameters of produce modified by the PGPR inoculations. Future efforts should, hence, be directed to assess how the quality of food produce is influenced by PGPR, besides their role in growth and development of plants.

7.3.2 PGPR in Stress Agriculture

Agricultural crops are exposed to many stresses that are induced by both biotic and abiotic factors. These stresses invariably affect plant growth and yield of crops depending on the type and intensity of stress. Under stress conditions, such as salinity, drought, waterlogging, heavy metals and pathogenicity, the production of ethylene in plants at substantially accelerated rates is a very common feature, which adversely affects the root growth and, consequently, the development of the plants. As described earlier (see Sect. 2.2), certain PGPR lower ethylene synthesis by metabolizing ACC (an immediate precursor of ethylene biosynthesis in higher plants) into α -ketobutyrate and ammonia, and, thus, mitigate the negative impact of both biotic and abiotic stresses on plants (Saleem et al. 2007). Recently, several authors have documented profound effects of inoculation with PGPR containing ACC deaminase on plant growth under stress conditions (Table 7.3).

In the present scenario of several biotic and abiotic stresses to which agriculture is confronted, the role of PGPR containing ACC deaminase could be crucial for sustainable crop production. However, some beneficial aspects of these PGPR under salinity, drought, waterlogging, biocontrol, temperature, and nutritional stresses, and in the cut-flower industry and in nodulation in legumes have not been thoroughly exploited. Glick (2006) reported that transgenic tomato (*Lycopersicon lycopersicum*), canola (*Brassica napus*), and tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) plants that express ACC deaminase exclusively in their roots behaved physiologically similarly to nontransformed plants treated with ACC deaminase-containing PGPR, both in the presence and absence of various stresses. Consequently, there is no apparent advantage to the use of ACC deaminase transgenic plants compared to treating the roots of the plants with ACC deaminase-containing PGPR. However, genetic modification of all plant species is not possible due to many limitations, such as proprietary rights and international trade agreements on genetically

Table 7.3 Effect of PGPR on plant growth under various abiotic and biotic stresses

	Plant species	PGPR	Plant responses under stress	References
t3.1				
t3.2	<i>Lactuca sativa</i> L. cv. Tafalla	<i>Pseudomonas mendocina</i> Palleroni	The inoculated plants had significantly greater shoot biomass than the control plants at low and high salinity levels. At the highest salinity level, the water content was greater in leaves of plants treated with <i>P. mendocina</i> . The plants also showed higher concentrations of foliar K and lower concentrations of foliar Na under high salt conditions	Kohler et al. (2009)
t3.3				
t3.4	<i>Sorghum bicolor</i> , <i>Zea mays</i> L.	<i>Pseudomonas</i> spp.	Inoculation with PGPR containing ACC deaminase significantly improved fresh biomass under water-deficient field conditions	Arshad and Khalid (2008)
t3.5	<i>Pisum sativum</i> L.	<i>Pseudomonas</i> spp.	The inoculation partially eliminated the effects of water stress on growth, yield and ripening of <i>P. sativum</i> L., both in pot and field trials	Arshad et al. (2008), Zahir et al. (2008)
t3.6	<i>Brassica rapa</i>	<i>P. putida</i> UW4	Induced salt tolerance of plants by lowering the synthesis of salt-induced stress ethylene and promoted the growth of canola in a saline environment	Cheng et al. (2007)
t3.7	<i>Aptios americana</i>	<i>P. fluorescens</i> TDK1	The PGPR strain enhanced the saline resistance in the plants and increased yield as compared to strains lacking ACC deaminase activity	Saravanakumar and Samiyappan (2007)
t3.8	<i>Zea mays</i> L.	Unidentified PGPR	Significantly increased plant growth under salinity stress conditions	Nadeem et al. (2006, 2007)
t3.9	<i>Vitis vinifera</i> L.	<i>Burkholderia phytofirmans</i> PsJN	Inoculation enhanced plant growth and physiological activity at both ambient (26°C) and low (4°C) temperatures. Inoculation also increased root growth and plantlet biomass. Moreover, the bacterium significantly improved plantlet cold tolerance compared to that of the nonbacterized control, which was more sensitive to exposure to low temperatures	Barka et al. (2006)

t3.10	<i>Solanum tuberosum</i>	PGPR	PGPR were capable of antagonizing at least one of the two potato pathogens <i>Ralstonia solanacearum</i> and <i>Rhizoctonia solani</i>	Rasche et al. (2006)
t3.11	<i>Pisum sativum</i>	<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp.	Inoculation with bacteria counteracted the Cd-induced inhibition of nutrient uptake by roots	Safronova et al (2006)
t3.12	<i>Brassica napus</i>	PGPR	Increases (up to 31%) in root elongation of inoculated rape seedlings compared to the control plants were observed. Inoculation with the isolates was found to increase root dry weight (ranging from 8 to 20%) and shoot dry weight (ranging from 6 to 25%) of rape in cadmium-amended soil in pot experiments. The bacterial isolates were also able to colonize and develop in the rhizosphere soil of rape after root inoculation	Sheng and Xia (2006)
t3.13	<i>Brassica juncea</i> L.	<i>Varivorax paradoxus</i> ,	Plant growth was improved in Cd ²⁺ -supplemented media in response to inoculation	Belimov et al. (2005)
t3.14	<i>Pisum sativum</i>	<i>Rhodococcus</i> sp. <i>Varivorax paradoxus</i> 5C-2	Inoculated plants gave more seed yield (25–41%), seed number and seed nitrogen accumulation than uninoculated plants under moisture stress and watering conditions	Dodd et al. (2005)
t3.15	<i>Chamaecytisus proliferus</i>	<i>P. fluorescens</i>	The bacterium showed positive effect in antagonizing the growth of <i>Fusarium oxysporum</i> and <i>Fusarium proliferatum</i> in the growth medium.	Donate-Correa et al. (2005)
t3.16	<i>Mimosa pudica</i>	<i>Burkholderia</i> sp.	The bacterium exhibited antagonistic activity against <i>Rhizoctonia solani</i> and <i>Sclerotinia sclerotiorum</i>	Pandey et al. (2005)
t3.17	<i>Phragmites australis</i>	<i>Pseudomonas asplenii</i> AC	Inoculation resulted in normal plant growth under high levels of Cu ²⁺ and creosote	Reed et al. (2005)
t3.18	<i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i>	<i>Achromobacter piechaudii</i>	Inoculation significantly increased the fresh and dry weights of tomato seedlings grown in the presence of NaCl salt concentration up to 172 mM. The bacterium also significantly increased the fresh and dry weights of both tomato and pepper seedlings exposed to transient water stress	Mayak et al. (2004a, b)

(continued)

Table 7.3 (continued)

	Plant species	PGPR	Plant responses under stress	References
t3.19	<i>Glycine max</i>	<i>B. subtilis</i> NEB4, NEB5, <i>B. thuringiensis</i> NEB17, <i>Bradyrhizobium japonicum</i>	Coinoculation exhibited consistent and significant increases in nodule number, nodule weight, shoot weight, root weight, total biomass, total nitrogen, and grain yield at low (25, 17, and 15°C) root zone temperatures	Bai et al. (2003)
t3.22	<i>Brassica juncea</i> L.	<i>Pseudomonas</i> sp., <i>Alcaligenes</i> sp., <i>Variovorax paradoxus</i> , <i>B. pumilus</i> , <i>Rhodococcus</i> sp.	The bacteria were tolerant to Cd ²⁺ toxicity and stimulated root elongation of rape seedlings in the presence of 300µM CdCl ₂ in the nutrient solution	Belimov et al. (2001)
t3.23	<i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i>	<i>P. putida</i> UW4, <i>Enterobacter cloacae</i> CAL2, <i>P. putida</i>	Inoculated plants showed substantial tolerance to flooding stress	Griehko and Glick (2001)
t3.24	<i>Brassica juncea</i> L., <i>Lycopersicum esculentum</i> Mill	<i>Kluyvera ascorbata</i>	Toxic effects of heavy metals (Ni ²⁺ , Pb ²⁺ and Zn ²⁺) were not pronounced in inoculated plants	Burd et al. (2000)
t3.25	<i>Cucumis sativus</i>	<i>P. putida</i> UW4	The bacterial strains were effective in biocontrol of <i>Pythium ultimum</i>	Wang et al. (2000)
t3.26	<i>Solanum tuberosum</i>	<i>Burkholderia phytofirmans</i> PsJN	PGPR helped potato plants in maintaining normal growth under heat stress	Bensalim et al. (1998)

modified crops and restrictions in the use of genetically modified microorganisms or plants. The use of PGPR containing ACC deaminase activity along with other traits, such as the ability to synthesize nitrogenases, phosphatases, and chitinases could prove to be a cost-effective and environment-friendly strategy to ensure sustainable agriculture.

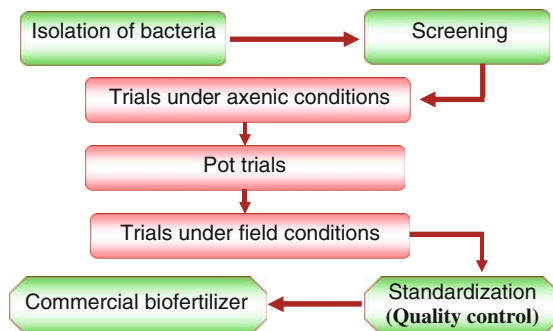
7.3.3 PGPR for Bioremediation

Recently, the application of PGPR in association with plants has been expanded to remediate contaminated soils (Khan et al. 2009). The addition of PGPR increases the removal of pollutant most likely by enhancing germination, and by stimulating plant growth including root biomass and survival of plants, in soils that are heavily contaminated (Huang et al. 2004; Reed et al. 2005; Safronova et al. 2006; Arshad et al. 2007). Some rhizobacteria can enhance phytoremediation by promoting plant growth through the synthesis of siderophores, phytohormones, enzymes, and antibiotics (Pattern and Glick 1996; Burd et al. 2000; Khalid et al. 2006; Arshad et al. 2007; Wani et al. 2008a), and/or through stimulation of certain metabolic pathways, such as nitrogen fixation and the uptake of N, P, S, Mg, Ca, and other nutrients (Belimov and Dietz 2000). Similarly, PGPR can increase the tolerance of plants to contaminants; the PGPR–plant system cannot survive in comparatively extreme environments such as with high concentrations of heavy metals (Wani et al. 2008a). Although microbial communities in polluted soils have been studied, little is known about the composition of microbial community in the plant rhizosphere growing on highly polluted soils. Usually, rhizosphere soil is more conducive to remediation due to high concentrations of nutrients exuded from the roots and dense bacterial populations. Many workers have reported bioremediation of both organic (Narasimhan et al. 2003; Huang et al. 2004, 2005; Villaceros et al. 2005; Muratova et al. 2005) and inorganic contaminants in the environment by using PGPR (Hallberg and Johnson 2005; Kao et al. 2006; Umrania 2006; Burd et al. 2000; Kamnev et al. 2005; Abou-Shanab et al. 2006; Wu et al. 2006; Zaidi et al. 2006; Sheng and Xia 2006; Wani et al. 2008b).

7.4 Formulations of Effective Biofertilizers

A number of steps are involved in developing effective PGPR-based biofertilizers for achieving consistent results in terms of crop productivity under field conditions (Fig. 7.1). The most critical steps involved in the development of biofertilizers include isolation of bacterial strains from the same habitat and/or crop followed by screening of PGPR under axenic conditions by conducting repeated trials. The strains showing better results under controlled conditions should be tested further for their performance under natural conditions by conducting pot and field trials.

Fig. 7.1 Steps involved in the development of an effective biofertilizer product



Finally, the PGPR strain selected for biofertilizer formulation should be investigated thoroughly to maintain its quality. Quality of biofertilizers is one of the most critical factors which determine their success or failure and acceptance or rejection by end users, the farmers. The functionality of selected PGPR must be defined well before using it as a candidate for biofertilizer formulation, which could be achieved by employing biochemical and molecular tests in the laboratory and then determining correlations between PGPR traits with the growth promotion of inoculated plants under axenic and natural conditions. However, there is no established basis for acceptance of a formulation as an effective biofertilizer. Since PGPR based biofertilizers contain living entities, which are very sensitive to environmental conditions, the consistency in effectiveness cannot be as good as observed in the case of chemical fertilizers. However, maintaining a particular population of a selected PGPR strain could help in enhancing the consistency of biofertilizer effects. A strict control over quality is the only answer to avoid failure of biofertilizers in different agronomic regions of the world.

The production of biofertilizer and its acceptance by farming communities are closely linked. For their use to expand globally at the farmers' end, quality management is essential and must be performed consistently in order to supply contaminant-free bioproducts to the users. For this, skilled personnel are required who know how to work with these materials and be able to respond to the modern conditions of agricultural production. In addition, they should be well aware of the sustainability and environmental protection measures. Furthermore, proper guidelines for the production and commercialization of biofertilizers should be framed in order to popularize the use of such bioagents for maintaining the sustainability of agro-ecosystems across the globe.

7.5 Conclusion

Enhancement in the use of PGPR is one of the newly emerging options for meeting agricultural challenges imposed by the still-growing aggregate demand for food. Moreover, this biotechnology is also likely to ensure conservation of our environments.

However, before PGPR can contribute to such benefits, scientists must learn more about them and explore ways and means for their better utilization in the farmers' fields.

Future research should focus on managing plant–microbe interactions, particularly with respect to their mode of actions and adaptability to conditions under extreme environments for the benefit of plants. Furthermore, scientists need to address certain issues, like how to improve the efficacy of biofertilizers, what should be an ideal and universal delivery system, how to stabilize these microbes in soil systems, and how nutritional and root exudation aspects could be controlled in order to get maximum benefits from PGPR application. Biotechnological and molecular approaches could possibly develop more understanding about PGPR mode of actions that could lead to more successful plant–microbe interaction. Efforts should also be directed towards the use of PGPR to reduce pesticide applications. In brief, PGPR biotechnology provides an excellent opportunity to develop environment-friendly biofertilizer to be used as supplements and/or alternatives to chemical fertilizers.

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Chapter 8

Soil Health – A Precondition for Crop Production

Niharendu Saha and Biswapati Mandal

Abstract Soil health is an assessment of ability of a soil to meet its range of ecosystem functions appropriate to its environment. Soil health is generally used to measure the competence of soil to sustain plant and animal productivity, determine structural and functional diversity of microbes, maintain or enhance water and air quality, and support human health and habitation. Direct assessment of such parameters is a herculean task. As biological attributes are indicators of soil health, they are used for the diagnosis of soil health. A comprehensive methodology integrating those indicators for soil health diagnosis is discussed. Further, the impact of soil health on crop production, quality improvement, production sustenance, and human, animal and environmental health is reviewed and discussed. In addition, the influence of soil management practices, like tillage, application of pesticides, fertilization, organic amendments, etc., on soil health is discussed. Inclusion of farmers and their experiences in the whole exercise of soil research are advocated for development of handy and farmer-friendly soil diagnosis protocols.

8.1 Introduction

Soil is the vital nonrenewable natural resource base. It is under competitive demand for increased crop production to feed the ever-growing population. This has led to intensification of agriculture with extensive use of chemicals, exploitation of surface and ground water for irrigation, and adoption of mechanization. The rapid pace of development in agriculture during recent years has resulted in an overall deterioration in soil-based ecosystems. The most important of such effects are the depletion of soil organic matter (SOM) and loss of biodiversity in the soil.

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This leads to an overall deterioration of soil health resulting in damage to essential ecosystem functions, sustainability of agricultural production, and soil resilience capacity (Buresh et al. 1997; Doran and Zeiss 2000). The attendant problems are evident from the gradual decline in the rate of responses to external inputs and also deterioration in the quality of the product, as often observed even with the best possible management practices. The more the degree of intensification, the more is the severity of the problem (Abrol et al. 2000). Soil degradation and concomitant decline in soil health are often emphasized as constraints to crop productivity (Askegaard et al. 2004; Dick and Gregorich 2004; Wang et al. 2003). As a result, soil health has emerged as the key for assessing soil condition in the context of land management and sustainable crop production (Doran 2002; Karlen et al. 2004; Schjonning et al. 2004).

What does one mean by the term soil health? Does it include the soil with good bioavailability of plant nutrients? Does it embody the soil with good aggregate, proper aeration and high water-holding capacity? Or does it mean the empowerment of ecosystem processes leading to soil functioning for better crop production? The concept of Doran et al. (1996) and Gregory et al. (2002) includes all the attributes as mentioned and extends to ensure human, animal, plant and environment health. More than that, soil health is the specific condition of soil resulting from soil quality. As the term 'health' is normally associated with living entities, in this chapter, the soil's biotic component, particularly microbiological attributes, will be used for soil health diagnosis. The healthy condition of soil is vital both for production and for environmental sustainability (Karlen et al. 2003a, 2003b; Carter et al. 2004). Direct measurement of soil health is difficult, so indicators are used. The attributes which are most sensitive to management are considered to be the best indicators. Larson and Pierce (1991) proposed a minimum dataset (MDS) which was later on modified by Doran and Parkin (1994), who included biological properties in it, which is also supported by Schjonning et al. (2004).

Soil health assessment using physical and chemical indicators is sometimes misleading as it takes a longer time to exhibit a perceptible change in chemical and physical properties owing to the great buffering capacity of soil (Norfleet et al. 2003). So, the measurement of the biological component of soils in the first instance will be more suitable to assess soil health. Whenever there is any aberration in the soil system, soil organisms receive the stresses and respond immediately, and meaningfully, as they have a higher surface to volume ratio. In most cases, changes in populations of soil organisms or their activities can be detected much earlier than any change occurring in the physico-chemical properties of soil. This leads to being able to show improvement or degradation of soil health (Pankhurst et al. 1997), but there is inadequate available information on this aspect (Dick 1992; Heyer et al. 2003). Thus, many researchers have emphasized that biological indicators should be used to assess soil health (Elliot et al. 1996). Some of the biological indicators include microbial biomass C and N, dehydrogenase activity, acid and alkaline phosphatase activity, urease activity, arylsulphatase activity, soil respiration and ergosterol concentration, microbial diversity, and functional groups of soil fauna, etc. (Karlen et al. 1992; Hseu et al. 1999). Indicators influencing soil biological

health, however, vary according to the locations and the production systems involved (Karlen et al. 1994). Wylie (1994) concluded that it is not possible to develop a single list of biological indicators that could be suitable for all purposes and management practices. However, a few good biological indicators for assessing soil health for different production systems have already been constructed and are ready to use in soil health diagnosis (Anonymous 2005).

Microbe-mediated processes like decomposition, fixation, solubilization, filtration, remediation- and suppression of pathogens make the soil healthy and fertile. Soils with rich microbial diversity also protect crop from losses due to unpredictable climatic conditions of inundation, flood, and drought, etc. Experimental evidence showed microbial indicators like diversity, biomass and enzyme activities supporting higher biological yield and quality of crude protein and oil content (Anonymous 2005). So, identifying and quantifying the biotic component of soil for assessing aggradation or degradation of soil health for different production systems and subsequent mitigation options are a precondition for successful crop production.

8.2 Soil Health Concept

Soil is a wonderful gift of nature to humankind whose good health is essential for societal existence. But the high demographic pressure including nonagricultural operations and intensive cultivation is imposing tremendous stresses on soils. Some of the common stresses affecting soils are presented in Table 8.1. These are ultimately manifested in declined productivity of crops even under best possible management practices, and make soil “sick”, so that it cannot respond efficiently to fertilization and other inputs. To arrest this deterioration, the general recommendation is to measure the nutrient status of soil and subsequently correct the nutrient deficiency, as well as control pest and disease incidents and involve other conservative steps. Routine measurement of such attributes of soils and recommendations for soil testing is not currently a problem, but on long-term basis it could be misleading and result in decreased productivity. Mere tests of soil for a few

Table 8.1 Common soil stress and related degradation processes

Stress	Degradation process
1. Heavy load due to vehicular traffic	1. Crusting, compacting, structural decline
2. Poor internal drainage, slow surface drainage	2. Soil wetness and anaerobiosis
3. Intensive cropping	3. Chemical degradation, nutrient imbalance, soil organic matter depletion, and habitat destruction
4. Intensive use of agrochemicals and monoculture	4. Biological degradation, acidification, reduction in soil biodiversity
5. Monoculture	5. Reduction in belowground diversity, infestation of soil-borne crop associated diseases, layer specific nutrient depletion, structural deterioration, etc.

parameters inadequately address the problems of farmers, and, hence, the health of soil (fertility) under intensive agriculture cannot be properly judged. So, to address such problems associated with the deficiencies in agricultural practices, vital forces and processes should be identified and quantified. The vital forces and the associative processes conferring good living conditions to soil leading to healthy crop production may be termed as soil health.

Various researchers have expressed their views differently regarding soil health (Kinyangi 2007). Keeping pace with social priorities and increasing understanding of soil science, the concept of soil health has consistently changed (Warkentin 1995). Generally, the modern concept about soil health is mainly based on various functions that soil performs in any ecosystem. Based on the functional approach, Anderson and Gregorich (1984) defined soil health as “the sustained capability of a soil to accept, store and recycle water, nutrient and energy”. Larson and Pierce (1991) further defined soil health as “the capacity of a soil to function within its ecosystem boundaries and interact positively with the environment external to that ecosystem”. Later on, Acton and Gregorich (1995) stressed environmental concerns by defining soil health as “the soil’s capacity or fitness to support crop growth without resulting in soil degradation or otherwise, harming the environment”. A more detailed definition was developed by Soil Science Society of America (1995) as “the capacity of a specific kind of soil to function, within natural or managed ecosystem boundaries, to sustain plant and animal productivity, maintain environmental quality and promote plant, animal and human health”. This definition is similar to that of Doran et al. (1996), who defined soil quality as the “capacity of a soil to function, within ecosystem and land use boundaries, to sustain biological productivity, maintain environmental quality, and promote plant, animal and human health”.

8.3 Soil Health Indicators and Criteria for Selection

Direct measurement of vital soil forces is next to impossible, so indicators are used to attain the goals. These indicators may be defined as measurable soil properties that influence the capacity of the soil to perform a specific function (Acton and Padbury 1993; Andrews and Moorman 2002). Attributes that are most sensitive to management and having low ecological redundancy are most desirable as indicators. In general, appropriate indicators include ecosystem process, the soil’s physical, chemical and biological properties and processes, and a component of existing soil databases. Such indicators should also be sensitive to variation in management practices and climate, be easily measurable and reproducible, accessible to many users and applicable to field conditions, able to measure changes in soil function both at plot and landscape, and should lead to management decisions (Bouma 2002; Menge 2003).

The productivity of agricultural soils is known to depend greatly upon the activities of diverse microbial communities (Giller et al. 1997). But recently, soil

biodiversity is being threatened by agricultural intensification, particularly by land use change which is projected to have the largest global impact on soil biodiversity by the year 2100. This is more acute in tropical agriculture. Functional diversity, the key to ecological strategy to bring sustainability to production, is largely affected by long-term cultivation. Such cultivation leads to a decline in diversity and, hence, to poor soil health. Similarly, genetic diversity, particularly the diversity among microbes like mycorrhizal fungi (Boggs et al. 2003; Boddington and Dodd 2000), symbiotic nitrogen-fixing rhizobia (McGarth et al. 1998; Coutinho et al. 1999), and denitrifiers and nitrifiers (Cavigelli and Robartson 2000; Bruns et al. 1999) are also affected by high input agricultural activities. As functional diversity provides sustainability to agro-ecosystems and the genetic diversity imparts stability to species (Hooper et al. 2000), they create the environment around themselves in such a way that other organisms can live only in the conditions thus created. These parameters can be included as indicators in soil health studies (Pompili et al. 2006; Saito 2007). However, high diversity is not always essential to run ecosystems because sometimes microorganisms fail to perform a specific function. Moreover, under unpredictable ecosystems (e.g., flood, drought, inundation, etc.), high microbial diversity is deemed necessary for imparting resistance against those stresses and resilience. In fact, some European countries are now including those parameters in routine soil monitoring programs (Nielsen and Winding 2002). For smallholder farmers, these tools need to be simple measures of soil health, such as consistency, color and workability. For extension and policy personnel, they provide basic information needed to arrive at management decisions. For researchers, there is a need to conduct detailed tests while controlling variations in order to develop meaningful assessments of soil fertility (Kang et al. 2005).

8.4 Significance of Soil Health Indicators

Soil biological parameters are early indicators of soil degradation and contamination (Visser and Parkinson 1992). A biological indicator is defined as “an organism, part of an organism, product of organism (e.g., enzyme), collection of organisms or biological processes which can be used to obtain information on the status of all or part of the environment” (Pankhurst et al. 1997).

Agricultural practices such as tillage, crop rotation, fertilization, and irrigation are generally known to have a significant effect on physico-chemical properties of soil; less is known about the associated changes in soil organisms and soil biochemical properties, and how such changes influence plant production and sustainability (Heyer et al. 2003). The activity of soil biota brings out nutrient transformation in soils and underpins a number of fundamental soil properties such as fertility and structure (Filip 2002; Osinski et al. 2003). Therefore, changes in soil organism activity are indicative of, and extremely sensitive to, changes in soil health (Nielsen and Winding 2002; Anderson 2003). Despite their small volume in the soil, microorganisms play a role in the cycling of elements by

decomposing organic residues. The organic residues are converted to biomass or mineralized to CO_2 , H_2O , mineral N, P, and other nutrients by these soil residents. Mineral nutrients immobilized in microbial biomass are subsequently released by mineralization. In addition to the effect on nutrient cycling, microorganisms also affect the physical properties of soil. For example, production of extracellular polysaccharides and cellular debris by microorganisms helps in improving soil structure and stabilizing soil aggregates. Thereby, they also affect WHC, infiltration rate, crusting, erodibility, and susceptibility to compaction. Thus, populations of soil organisms and/or biochemical processes mediated by them are potentially sensitive bioindicators of changes in soil health (Arshad and Martin 2002). Many researchers have, therefore, stressed the importance of identifying biological indicators (Doran and Parkin 1994; Elliot et al. 1996). In some instances, changes in an organism's populations or soil biotic activities could precede detectable changes in the physico-chemical properties of soil, thereby providing an early sign of improvement or warning of soil degradation. So, monitoring of soil quality includes the assessment of biomass C and N, respiration measurement, mineralization rate, soil enzyme activities, microbial diversity, and functional groups of soil fauna. Indicators influencing soil health, however, vary according to the locations, production system, and management practices adopted (Table 8.2). Therefore, it is not possible to develop a single list of biological indicators which could be suitable for all purposes and management practices (Wylie 1994). However, microbial biomass carbon (MBC) is almost universally accepted as a biological indicator irrespective of production system and management practice (Anonymous 2005). The microbial biomass C is used as a sensitive indicator of changes in soil processes due to changes in management practices and cropping systems, because it has a much faster turnover rate than the total SOM and, hence, is the most labile C pool in soils (Jenkinson 1981; Paul 1984). Moreover, nutrient availability and productivity of agro-ecosystems depend on the size and activity of microbial populations; a strong link between soil microbial biomass, soil fertility, and soil health is reported (Hart and Brookes 1996; Kandeler and Eder 1993).

Microbial quotient ($\% C_{\text{mic}}/C_{\text{org}}$) can be used as an indicator of changing soil processes under different cropping sequences and management practices and is a

Table 8.2 Microbial/biochemical indicators identified for different soil types and cropping systems (Adapted from Anonymous 2005)

Soil type	Cropping system	Identified indicators
Clay loam	Rice–rice	Dehydrogenase enzyme activity, organic carbon
Sandy loam	Groundnut–redgram	Organic carbon, microbial biomass carbon (MBC)
Sandy loam	Rice–lentil	Dehydrogenase enzyme activity, organic carbon
Sandy loam	Sorghum–castor	MBC
Sandy loam	Jute–rice–wheat	Dehydrogenase enzyme activity
Sandy clay loam	Rice–rice	Dehydrogenase enzyme activity and microbial biomass nitrogen
Silty clay loam	Rice–field pea	MBC
Sandy loam	Rice–wheat	Organic carbon, alkaline phosphatase enzyme activity, and potentially mineralizable nitrogen

more useful measure than either MBC or total carbon assessed individually (Dilly and Munch 1998), and it also helps in comparing soils with different organic matter contents. Entry et al. (1996) suggested that microbial biomass C and the $C_{mic}:C_{org}$ ratio are poor predictors of annual crop yield but may be an accurate indicator of soil health and a good predictor of long-term crop yield. Furthermore, Insam and Haselwandter (1989) reported that the respiratory quotient ($\mu\text{g CO}_2\text{-C h}^{-1}\text{mg}^{-1}$ MBC) could be used as an indicator of soil development, substrate quality, ecosystem development, and ecosystem stress.

Enzyme activities are an important index of the biological activity of a soil because they are involved in the dynamics of soil nutrient cycling and energy transfer (Table 8.4). Enzymatic processes are closely associated with soil fertility as they mediate the conversion of unavailable forms of nutrients to forms that are readily assimilable by plants and microbes (Sarkar et al. 1989). Moreover, enzyme activity depends not only on nutrient status and availability but also on the turnover of N, P, and other nutrients in soils. As enzymes do not react readily to environmental changes as do the microbes, enzyme activity is considered a more stable indicator of biological processes (Bandick and Dick 1999).

8.5 Approaches Used to Diagnose Soil Health

8.5.1 Methodology for Selection of Master Indicators

8.5.1.1 Data screening, Representative Variables and Redundancy

Data are reduced to meaningful manageable size, i.e., to a MDS of soil quality indicators, through a series of uni- and multivariate statistical methods. Both parametric (randomized block design) as well as nonparametric statistics (Kruskal–Wallis χ^2) are used to identify indicators with significant treatment differences. Only variables with significant differences between treatments are chosen for the next step in MDS formation. To select a subset from a large dataset, principal component analysis (PCA) for each statistically significant variable is performed, assuming that principal components receiving high Eigen values and variables with high factor loadings best represent system attributes, and examining only the principal components that explain at least 5% of the variation in the data up to 85% of the cumulative variation. Within each principal component, only highly weighted factors, i.e., those with absolute values within 10% of the highest weight, are retained for the MDS. To reduce redundancy and rule out spurious groupings among the highly weighted variables within each principal component, multivariate correlation coefficients are run to determine the strength of the relationships among variables. Well-correlated variables are considered redundant and candidates for elimination from the dataset. Conversely, any uncorrelated, highly weighted variables are considered important and, therefore, retained in the MDS (Andrews et al. 2004).

8.5.1.2 MDS Validation and Indicator Transformation (Scoring)

Multiple regressions and hierarchical cluster analysis are run using the final MDS components as the independent variables and each management-goal attribute (e.g., yield, sustainable yield index, protein yield, etc.) as a dependent variable. These regressions and cluster analysis serve to check the MDS representation of management system goals. After determining the variables for the MDS, every observation of each MDS indicator is transformed for inclusion in the SHI methods (e.g., linear scoring technique). In this technique, indicators are ranked in ascending or descending order depending on whether a higher value is considered “good” or “bad” in terms of soil function. For ‘more is better’ indicators, each observation is divided by the highest observed value such that the highest observed value received a score of 1. For ‘less is better’ indicators, the lowest observed value (in the numerator) is divided by each observation (in the denominator) such that the lowest observed value receives a score of 1. (Anonymous 2005).

8.5.1.3 Indicator Integration Into Indices

After transforming MDS into scoring, they are integrated into soil health indices following additive SHI (ADD SHI) and a weighted, additive SHI (WTD SHI). The additive index is a summation of the scores from the MDS indicators. From this summed score, the ADD SQI treatment means and standard deviations are calculated. In the weighted additive index after transformation, the MDS variables for each observation are weighted using the PCA results. The percentage, standardized to unity, provides the weight for variables chosen under a given PC. The weighted MDS variables scores for each observation are then summed and the treatment means and standard deviations are calculated. For all the indexing methods, SHI scores for the management treatment are compared using a two-way ANOVA. Higher index scores are assumed to mean better soil quality.

8.6 Soil Health and Its Importance

Soil contains soil organisms which perform different functions and facilitate crop production and value addition. In addition, they detoxify all the nuisance stuffs dumped into soil to make the earth clean and fit for living organisms. The multifaceted activities of soils are discussed in the following section.

8.6.1 Crop Production

Healthy soil fosters fertility which in turn increases crop production (Table 8.3). The health of soil can affect not only the productivity but also the quality of produce

Table 8.3 Yield of Kharif rice and sustainability yield index for 18 years of cultivation with organic and inorganic sources of nutrients

Treatment	Soil health index (additive linear index)	Yield (kg ha ⁻¹)	Sustainable yield index
Control	2.783	1,493 ^b	0.234 ^c
N ^a	2.688	2,000 ^b	0.616 ^d
NP	3.188	2,560 ^e	0.684 ^f
NPK	3.628	3,240 ^f	0.638 ^b
NPK + FYM	3.726	3,320 ^b	0.669 ^e
Mean	–	2,523	0.568
SE (m)	–	169.34	–

^aRecommended dose of fertilizer (Adapted from Anonymous 2005)

^{b-f}Values indicate the mean of three replicates. Mean values followed by different letters are significantly different within rows or column at $P \leq 0.05$ according to Tukey test.

and the sustainability of land (Acton and Gregorich 1995; Doran 2002; Wander et al. 2002; Carter et al. 2004). Under healthy soil conditions, numerous nutrient cycles influenced by microbes operate simultaneously in soil. Soil thus contributes nutrients uninterruptedly to the nutrient pool of soil ensuring balanced plant nutrition. Moreover, healthy soil conserves nutrients and releases them more or less synchronously with the demand of growing crops. Thus, nutrient use efficiency and nutrient conversion ratio remain favorable for reasonable production. Well-managed soils harbor a wide spectrum of microorganisms performing a variety of activities including synthesis of phytohormones, antibiotics, growth regulators, siderophores, etc., which directly or indirectly affect crop productivity. Under good soil health, internal soil defensive mechanisms remain constantly strong and vital to combat soil-borne diseases. Thus, crop loss due to diseases can be minimized and consequently yield is increased.

8.6.2 Crop Quality

Lack of balanced nutrition is the most important reason for poor quality produce in unhealthy soil. Under intensified agriculture practices where soil health is in a miserable condition, the fundamental ratio of N:P:K has shifted from 2:1:1 to different imbalance ratios in different regions. Thus, production may be increased for a while but crop quality does not increase with the productivity. Production, productivity and quality of agricultural produce largely depend on the state of soil, microbial status and their specific functions leading to consistent soil health. The influence on crop quality is triggered by the specific biochemical reaction of microbes. For example, polyunsaturated fatty acid, Omega 3 fatty acid content in oil, essential amino acid in proteins, inulin and fructan in carbohydrates (Saha et al. 2007), and antioxidant and antiaging agents like β -carotene, lycopene, etc., are the quality attributes of agricultural produce. Experimental evidence showed that microbial indicators like diversity, biomass and enzyme activities have supported higher biological yield and certain qualities like protein and oil content

of crops (Anonymous 2005), and the quality under organically managed soil has been found to be superior to conventionally managed soil.

8.6.3 Production Sustainability

The sustainability of any production system depends on the stability of that system. Stability, on the other hand, of an ecosystem encompasses functional resistance, i.e., the capacity of the system to endure stresses imposed and to carry out all the essential ecosystem services during the entire period of stress leading to good production and functional resilience (Seybold et al. 1997, 1999). The two basic ecosystem attributes measure soil health and impart sustainability in agricultural production system. Healthy soil with strong lifeline activities capable of resisting all unusual situations emerging from indiscriminate agricultural practices maintains a satisfactory level of production. The influence of soil health on sustainability of agricultural production is more appropriate in unpredictable agro-ecosystems like drought, flood, inundation, and contaminated soils. Narrow ecological associations, such as legume–rhizobia symbiosis and sustainability of legume production are highly dependent on soil health (Table 8.3).

8.6.4 Human Health

The nutritional health and well being of humans are entirely dependent on plant foods either directly or indirectly (Leo et al. 2002). Plant foods provide almost all essential vitamins and minerals, carbohydrate, protein, fat, and a number of other health-promoting phytochemicals like antioxidants and antiaging substances. Healthy soil provides a conducive environment for plants to grow better so that plants can synthesize all the basic molecules which, through the food chain enter the human system and get metabolized for carrying out particular biochemical reactions. Generally, micronutrient concentrations are low in cereals and fortification of multi-micronutrients in food stuffs causes antagonistic effects on the micronutrients. Sustainable soil management leading to improving the bioavailability of micronutrients in order to improve crop nutritional quality is the best alternative. The clinical health of humans is also dependent on quality plant food to some extent. The antioxidant and antiaging molecules like β -carotene and lycopene, and cardiovascular disease-inducing agents like, triglycerides in oilseed crops, etc., are largely influenced by balanced nutrition. Organically produced food generally contains higher amounts of antioxidant and antiaging agents and lower magnitude triglycerides, indicating that soil health under an organic system is perfectly good.

8.6.5 *Animal Health*

The modern soil health concept encompasses sound animal health as one of its components. Healthy soil is essential for producing nutrient-rich fodder for healthy animals in any farming system. Under good soil conditions, a micronutrient like iodine content in fodder crops increases, which might result in better growth of animals, higher iodine content of animal products such as meat and milk, and indirectly affect human health. Soil management practices has led to exhaustion of micronutrients in a given area and, hence, water derived from this area may cause micronutrient deficiency which could be reflected in animal health (Lee et al. 1999; Ellison 2002; Vaarst et al. 2003).

8.6.6 *Environmental Health*

Soils via microbes perform myriads of ecosystem services including decomposition, transformation, detoxification, infiltration, bioremediation, fixation, emission, solubilization, disinfection (antibiosis), commensalisms, proto-cooperation, symbiosis, predation, and resistance and resilience against different stresses; these collectively represent the lifeline activities of healthy soil. If soil is healthy, lifeline activities remain in resonance. Farming methods and activities sometimes disrupt the rhythm and, thus, soil becomes sick. Unhealthy soil cannot sequester carbon but rather triggers CO₂, methane, and other greenhouse gas emissions which in turn affects ecosystems. For instance, high concentrations of greenhouse gasses have caused an increase in global temperature that has threatened both food security and shelter. Changes in land use contribute about 14% of the total human-generated emissions of greenhouse gases, and much of this land development is for agricultural purposes (Rosenzweig and Hillel 1998). But healthy soil can prevent global warming by sequestering carbon in the soil as a way to slow down the concentration of CO₂ in the air, thus slowing the rate of climate change. Indiscriminate use of fossil fuel-based inputs may lead to a gradual decline in nutrients and WHC of soils. Thus, a plant nutrient is either leached down to pollute groundwater or emitted out to pollute air. Due to poor WHC along with poor carbon sequestration, desertification is now a phenomenal development of unhealthy soils in different parts of the globe, particularly in the sub-Saharan region of Africa. Reports suggest that soil influences environmental quality and the overall functioning of the biosphere by functioning as a living filter, through which water is cycled and xenobiotics are altered (Karlen et al. 2001). Consequently, the manner in which soils are managed has a tremendous impact on the environment and its inhabitants. This fact is supported by archaeological evidence showing that soil degradation was responsible for the extinction and collapse of the Harappa civilization in India, Mesopotamia in Asia, and the Mayan culture in Central America (Olson 1981).

8.7 Problems in Agricultural Practices

8.7.1 Lack of Good Soil Husbandry

The rise and fall of many civilizations in the world was associated with the soil husbandry followed by the citizens of the nations (Ponting 1992). Poor land care by the inhabitants was one of the serious causes of ruin of the great Harappan civilization of ancient Indian Subcontinent (Olson 1981). In contrast, the glorious Egyptian Civilization was due to good stewardship of soils of the Nile basin. In ancient times, the soil was treated as 'Mother' and any agricultural activities in the soil were started with the worship of the land. Soil is now considered as the machinery for crop production. Soils are extracted in all possible ways without paying due care. Round the year cultivation resulting in soaring cropping intensity allows little rest to the land to recover its deficits in its health status. Thus, soil health further deteriorates. Previously, soil was routinely fed with organic matter from diverse sources, but the overnight magical effect turns the farmers towards proponents of chemical fertilizers in present day agriculture. The avoidance of organics, particularly in the post-green revolution era, has damaged soil health including structural aberrations leading to a hostile habitat for microbes, poor aeration, WHC, and nutrient retention capacity. Soils, thus, become sick. The health of soil, hence, requires greater attention as to how the fertility could be restored in degraded lands.

8.7.2 Agricultural Intensification and Inappropriate Cropping System

The increasing demands for food to satisfy the need of the ever-expanding human population has led to intensification of agricultural practices with extensive use of chemicals, exploitation of surface and ground water for irrigation, and adoption of mechanization. These practices have resulted in severe adverse effects on the physical, chemical, and biological properties of soil. The most important of such effects is the depletion of SOM and loss of microbial diversity which together lead to damage to the essential ecosystem functions, the sustainability of agricultural production system and to soil resilience capacity (Buresh et al. 1997; Doran and Zeiss 2000).

A particular cropping system in any area has its own history. After being tested for a long time, it has been agronomically accepted not only for its good economic return but also for its role in maintaining soil health. In a traditional cropping system, legumes have been the farmers' choice. But recently, with the introduction of vegetables (particularly hybrid vegetables), the space for the legumes is shrinking, leading to poor soil health. Vegetable cultivation round the year degrades soil

aggregates into talc-like powder which facilitates fertile topsoil erosion, higher leaching of nutrients to ground water, as well as to eutrophication of water bodies. And, hence, fertilizer use efficiency declines, production decreases, and human, animal and environmental health are affected.

8.7.3 Blanket Application of Agrochemicals

From the very beginning of the green revolution, farmers have been desperately and indiscriminately using fertilizers and pesticides. Moreover, new molecules of biologically active metabolites, growth regulators, and hormones are being frequently used in high input agriculture. All those chemicals are foreign bodies to soil interacting differently with the soil's inherent entities and creating hostile environments leading to poor soil health. In this context, genetically modified inputs like seed and biocontrol agents are in the queue to join modern agricultural activities. Though confusing, they may have a long-term soil health hazard problem directly or indirectly (US National Research Council, 2000; Nordlee et al. 1996).

8.7.4 Reduction in Agricultural Biodiversity/Monoculture

Practicing a very few restricted cropping systems and/or monocultures over the years results in decreases in aboveground plant biodiversity as well as a sharp decline in belowground biodiversity including the organisms antagonist to plant pathogens. The production system thus becomes vulnerable to harmful soil organisms and the soil becomes sick. Emergence of nematode diseases as one of the important problems in recent years is a fallout of such soil sickness.

8.7.5 Heavy Vehicle Traffic and Indiscriminate Use of Sewage Sludge

Low energy-based conventional bullock-driven agricultural operations are almost absent in modern agriculture. They have been substituted by the introduction of energy-intensive heavy vehicles, like tractors, power tillers, combined harvesters, etc. The operation of such machines in agricultural practices results in soil compaction leading to destruction of microhabitats, reduction of soil biological entities, decline in nutrient transformation, poor aeration, and poor drainage. The long-term effects of such operations in agricultural soils causes soil health to deteriorate.

Due to the low capacity of sewage treatment plants, agricultural soils receive raw effluent emerging from different industrial or agrochemical sources. Raw sewage

water contains organic and inorganic pollutants, such as heavy metals, as well as human and plant pathogenic organisms. The discharge of heavy metals into the soil or the use of sewage sludges in agronomic practices as a source of irrigation leads to loss in soil fertility, disturbances in microbial equilibrium, and eventually makes the soil unsuitable for cultivation (Khan et al. 2009).

8.7.6 Lack of Appropriate Soil Testing and Diagnostic Protocol

Routine soil testing measures the status of soil nutrients and a few physical properties of the soils. Such analysis of soil is done to find out the nutrient deficiency in soils which further help to design the nutrient strategy for the deficient soils. The current concept of fertilizer application is directed to feed the plants but not the soil. Thus, underestimating the contribution of soil and its role in consistently supplying nutrients to plants is important. Moreover, even though soil microflora drives the key processes of soil, no serious attempt has yet been made to assess the functional diversity of microbes impacting on soil health. Furthermore, laboratory-based indicators for assessing soil are not easily available to farmers and ready to use soil health indicators at the field level are poorly developed.

8.7.7 Insufficient Awareness Among Farmers About Soil Health

Farmers are the central figures of any soil health management program. They are the stewards of soil health. But, presently there is a gap between skills and knowledge acquired by individual farmers, while at the community level there is inadequate awareness about modern scientific innovations. Effective participation of farmers in combined learning and experimental research for soil health assessment and management is still lacking. Approaches adopted to motivate farmers, such as state of the art information and how to make maximum use of modern agronomic tools are not sufficiently available to agrarian communities.

8.7.8 Lack of Proper Legislation and Contractual Farming

Unlike air, water and sound pollution, no systematic and proper guidelines for assessing soil health is currently in action in many countries experiencing soil deterioration. Although the European Union has initiated legislation to protect soil health, no governmental initiative regarding soil health protection is in action

in developing countries. Furthermore, since no legal institutions are available in almost all countries to police over the misuse and abuse of soil, no ethics are followed in the use of soil for specific purposes. Licensees of contractual farms try to extract all possible benefits from the leased land within the stipulated contract period without considering soil as a nonrenewable resource. So, a piece of healthy land turns sick by the time it is returned to the licensor. This is a common picture in contractual farming systems. Moreover, farmers in some countries, like India, sell the top soil to brick factories or to contractors for land fill and other nonagricultural purposes after the crop harvest. Thus healthy soil, generated over a decade or more, is destroyed with the stroke of a spade.

8.7.9 Government Policy

Government subsidies often help perpetuate unsustainable practices. Subsidies often stimulate greater use of chemicals, despite their environmental and public health risks. Rice farmers in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea use just over one-half of all insecticides applied to rice worldwide yet produce only 2% of the world's crops. The reason is that large government price support makes it profitable to increase insecticide use even when the resulting production gains are small (Vorley and Keeney 1998). This is equally true for India which indiscriminately uses highly subsidized nitrogenous fertilizer. Besides encouraging harmful practices, farm subsidy programs often fail to reward good stewardship. They tend to emphasize a handful of major crops and put resource-conserving crop rotations at a financial disadvantage (Faeth and Westra 1993). Farmers receive no government incentives for sustainable practices such as growing alfalfa or *dhaincha* (*Sesbania rostrata*).

8.8 Soil Health Management

8.8.1 Crop Rotation and Organic Amendments

Crop rotation is a viable strategy for increasing SOM for the establishment of healthy, fertile, and productive soil. Crop rotation fulfils nutrient demand from different depth of soil, thus reducing nutrient mining and hardpan by root penetration (Corseilius et al. 2001). For example, rotations that include cereals leave a significant amount of leftover stubbles after harvest. By including these crops in vegetable rotations, a grower can reduce the incidence of potentially devastating soil-borne diseases and outbreaks of phytopathogenic nematodes (FAO 2008). Rotations can also check weeds and insect pests that use the weeds as alternative hosts for perpetuation. The practice of crop rotation with legumes can thus improve

Table 8.4 Soil health index (SHI) value for different management at various experimental sites

Treatment/site	AAU	ANGRAU	BHU	CRIDA	CRIJAF	CRRI	OUAT	BCKV
Control	2.27	0.92	1.63	0.95	1.04	2.77	0.31	2.78
N ^a	2.60	–	1.48	–	1.38	2.91	0.35	–
NP	2.59	–	–	1.02	1.66	3.21	0.78	–
NPK	2.79	0.97	1.52	–	1.87	3.10	0.81	2.69
NPK + FYM	2.84	2.00	1.87	1.27	2.10	4.00	1.13	3.63

^aRecommended dose of fertilizer (Adapted from Anonymous 2005)

soil quality, protect top fertile soil erosion, and improve SOM status, which in turn improves productivity and consistency in production system,. Furthermore, the appropriate land management, such as fertilization combined with crop rotation and reducing 1-year-old fallows, would be useful ways to improve or maintain soil fertility (Jia et al. 2005).

Deliberate and routine carbon sources are essential to achieving good soil health in agricultural production systems (Majumder et al. 2008; Mitchell et al. 2000). Special care is needed to select carbon sources that will ensure short-term productivity while building long-term soil health. Farm yard manure (FYM) is considered as an organic amendment to improve soil health in different production systems. In a case study, the soil health index was computed from a minimum dataset in an integrated nutrient management system with FYM as sole organics: the soil health index was superior to conventional farming with chemical fertilizers (Table 8.4). However, as there is no definite protocol for FYM preparation, quality varies tremendously. Thus, compost, phosphocompost, and vermicompost with relatively long-lasting and strong persistence of carbon prepared under defined protocols have fair scope to be used as organics for better soil health. Furthermore, concentrated organics, like edible and nonedible oil cakes, rice bran, pulse bran, etc., can be used for improving soil health. In situ stubble incorporation in combination with cellulolytic microorganisms and green manuring are of great practical importance for maintaining soil health under rice-based cropping systems (Bhattacharya 2004). Such organic amendments add significant amounts of carbon to soil and are generally associated with rich microbial diversity in protected and conserved ecosystems for carrying out lifeline activities of soil.

8.9 Cover crops and Tillage Conservation

Cover cropping (also called green manuring) is a wise prescription for a soil health management program (Leo et al. 2002). Cover crops can provide a practical and economical means for supplying organic matter, enhancing soil fertility, suppressing weed growth, attracting beneficial insects, spiders and predatory mites, and reducing nitrate leaching losses to the groundwater (FAO 2008). Soils differing in fertility as well as health properties routinely receive these inputs compared to conventionally managed soil (Mitchell et al. 2000).

The beneficial effect of the tillage systems (no till and low till farming) are based on the premise that minimizes the disturbance to the soil leading to an increase in the retention of water, nutrients, and the topsoil itself (Pretty 1995; Leo et al. 2002). In tillage conservation, crops are grown with minimal cultivation of the soil. When the amount of tillage is reduced, the stubble or plant residues are not completely incorporated, and most or all remain on top of the soil rather than being ploughed or disked into the soil. The new crop is planted into this stubble or into small strips of tilled soil. Weeds are controlled with cover crops or herbicides rather than by cultivation. Fertilizer and lime are either incorporated earlier in the production cycle or placed on top of the soil at planting (FAO 2008). The tillage encourages soil flora and fauna under the protected habitat to bring out the biogeochemical processes leading to optimization of carbon turnover and bioavailability of nutrient elements in the soil (Mitchell et al. 2000). Natural processes involved in conservation farming include insect tunnels made by the movement of earthworms (drillosphere) and arthropods, and root tunnels created after the decomposition of leftover root debris make the soil porous and a loose fit for root ramification of the next crop with a good stand. Successful cultivation of relay cropping of legumes and/or mustard with winter rice is an example of no till farming in different parts of India.

8.9.1 Agricultural Diversification

There is a relationship between aboveground and belowground diversity. After the green revolution, there has been a dramatic reduction in crop diversity which in turn has had a negative impact on belowground microbial diversity. The soil foodweb and its internal regulatory system have been badly disrupted. Furthermore, soil becomes vulnerable to diseases and pests and, consequently, production declines. This can be repaired by agricultural diversification. Growing a variety of crops will ensure rich belowground diversity which in turn revitalizes soil health and also provides a buffer against both ecological and economical problems. This can be achieved by the following.

8.9.1.1 Selection of Right Cropping System

Cropping system as a whole has a great influence on soil health (Johnson et al. 2003). A production system causing deterioration in an agroecosystem is recommended to be omitted to minimize further deterioration. A system which leaves more residues and produce more exudates (rhizodeposition) can sequester higher carbon in the soil. For example, a cereal-based cropping system which retains stubble and huge root biomass and debris is preferred in degraded and fragile ecosystems for restoration of soil health. In addition, double-cropping rice practice also helps to maintain soil carbon and, thus, soil health (Mandal et al. 2008). In a

rice–rice system, kharif rice may be coupled with lentil as a relay crop, and winter rice followed by a green manuring crop to revitalize the soil internal regulatory system with a huge supply of easily accumulative carbon. Moreover, farmers can harvest a third crop with minimal investment and disturbance to the soil.

8.9.1.2 Tailoring of Existing Cropping System

The cropping system may affect soil health by modifying soil microbial community structure leading thereby to a negative impact on soil fertility and, hence, crop yields (Kowalchuk et al. 2002; Mandal et al. 2008). Immediately after identifying the crops severely damaging soil biological health, it must be eliminated and a new cropping system be developed by incorporating suitable means for repairing the damage. For this, the following options may be explored. In rice–potato–sesame, sesame (*Sesamum indicum* L.) may be replaced by cowpea, whereas in rice–vegetable–vegetable, late cauliflower may be replaced by bean. The basis of replacement of sesame by cowpea is (1) sesame is susceptible to *Macrophomina* spp. causing low yield, so (b) to arrest this, a new crop such as cowpea may be introduced, as legumes have a special role in N-economy. However, in rice–vegetable–vegetable, late cauliflower may be replaced by bean because (1) early cauliflower followed by late cauliflower may impair the soil health by increasing inocula density of cauliflower associated soilborne pathogens, and (2) a cauliflower–cauliflower system causes seasonal glut in the market that hardly helps farmers to earn a remunerative price.

8.9.1.3 Farming System Diversification

Crop diversification alone cannot bring stability to soil health. Rather, farming system diversification is necessary for overall improvement of soil health. Integrating animal and plant production has been considered as a wise policy to maintain a higher biotic diversity in sustainable farming. Agriculture and its allied activities, i.e., horticulture, agroforestry, organic farming, animal husbandry, fishery, poultry, etc., can benefit each other. Fish cum rice cultivation can be readopted in some specific rice growing areas for sustainable rice production and farm income. Resources can be properly recycled under diverse activities in mixed farming. Thus, resource utilization becomes optimum under mixed farming systems which in turn impart sustainability to any production system (Leo et al. 2002).

8.9.2 Organic Husbandry

This is a holistic production management system that promotes and enhances agro-ecosystem health, including biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological

activities. Organic production systems are based on specific and precise standards of production which aim to achieve optimal agro-ecosystems which are socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable. The primary goal of organic agriculture is to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals, and people. Organic agriculture manages locally available resources to optimize competition for food and space between different plant and animal species. The manipulation of the temporal and spatial distribution of biodiversity is the main productive input of organic farmers. Organic practices such as crop rotation, cover crops, organic fertilizers, and minimum tillage increase the diversity and richness of indigenous soil life which in turn impact essential ecosystem services.

8.9.3 Soil-Based Fertilizer and Development of Farmer's Friendly Indicator

There is a conspicuous gap between nutrient demand and addition. This is mostly due to nonconsideration of crop nutrition with crop demand. Thus, a net nutrient deficit increases day by day. The nutrient imbalance in soil has, thus, caused a poor growth in agricultural production necessitating soil testing and fertilizer recommendation on the basis of the test values. Such nutritional analysis of soils will help to design balance fertilization for various crops and will also help to take measures against environmental pollution. Farmers have a vested interest in soil health, and, hence, its maintenance has been the top priority for them. Farmer interest in soil health may have been encouraged by their desire to examine and validate the management practices they use in their own farm. Thus, they need familiar soil characteristics easy to interpret by themselves as soil indicators. The working knowledge of farmers obtained through experience will help researchers to articulate their experience with research findings to design farmer-friendly indicators. The soil taxonomies and intricate methods for fertility management should be taken into consideration while developing handy soil health indicators.

8.9.4 Legislation for Soil Health Protection

Attempts should be made to enact legislation for protecting soil against its abuse and misuse. Selling of top soil for other nonagricultural activities should be treated as a punishable offence. In addition, government-endorsed drafts of agreement between licensor and license in regard to the status quo of soil health in contractual farming systems should be followed. And, at the time of return of the land to the licensor, if the soil health has deteriorated, the licensee should be liable to pay extra at certain rates to rejuvenate it.

8.10 Conclusion

Food demand for rapidly increasing the global human population is expected to expand substantially over the next decades, which in turn could make them food insecure. The excessive inputs and unethical activities in agriculture in developing countries are some of the reasons why fertile land is degrading rapidly and destroying ecosystems. Due to these problems, soil resource inventory and monitoring have gained momentum. And, as a consequence, the concept of soil health has generated awareness among agriculturists regarding the importance of soil in maintaining plant productivity and environment quality. There is a need to better understand relationships between the status of soil health indicators and fluctuating soil functions. In this context, state of the art research is needed in order to find and develop proper indicators, applicable at the farmer scale. The technology thus developed would be likely to help in setting up effective and ready to use protocols which may guarantee to generate the necessary baseline soil data in order to develop appropriate MDS encompassing all aspects of agro-ecosystem performance. In this regard, innovative use of geographical information systems and remote sensing will significantly improve the acceptance of soil health information by stakeholders. Laboratory-based indicators so far developed definitely have a substantive role in the scientific and more precise monitoring of terrestrial ecology. But sometimes such parameters lose their relevancy to the farmers and, hence, there is an urgent need to develop handy, meaningful and farmer-friendly sets of indicators.

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Chapter 9

Recent Advances in Biopesticides

Parvez Qamar Rizvi, Rummana A. Choudhury, and Arshad Ali

Abstract Consistent and injudicious applications of pesticides leads to the development of resistance in insects, destruction of beneficial organisms, and increases in residual problems, thereby posing a threat to human health and its ecological partners in the living biome. The need of the hour is to develop an eco-friendly approach to combat insect pests that should be able to regulate pest populations by exploring naturally occurring products, including extracts of plants and animals, microbes, parasitic nematodes and insects, and certain minerals. This call for viable alternatives has led the scientific community to engage in unveiling the potential of biopesticides. Currently, some strains of *Bacillus thuringiensis*, nuclear polyhedrosis virus, fungi, and nematode parasites are commercially available. Exploiting the benefits of biopesticides as biocontrol agents appears to be a more promising approach, assuming that issues of phytopathogens and environmental problems caused by synthetic pesticides can be resolved. This chapter emphasizes the experiences and progress made in the potential and promise of biopesticides in the global scenario.

9.1 Introduction

For many years, the use of synthetics and chemical pesticides has dominated the scene of pest control. Their intensive use, misuse, and abuse have caused various ecological and environmental problems, the resurgence of various insect and mites pests, contaminated food commodities, have adversely affected non-target organisms, and have also progressively increased occupational poisoning cases in developing countries. This tirade against their use has led agriculture to envision a new

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stride forward in the wake of biotechnological and other innovative developments so as to open up new vistas of scientific advancement, which requires sustained efforts and will certainly reap long-term benefits.

As a viable substitute to these conventional environmentally-unfriendly chemical pesticides, eco-friendly alternatives of crop-pest control by either biological agents or specifically designed synthetic anti-insect compounds are receiving greater attention. Though the initial acceptance of biopesticides was slow, owing to their non-availability in sufficient quantities, poor shelf life, lack of standard products, and collection/multiplication/application constraints, due to the organic food movement, the development and standardization of biopesticides have accelerated dramatically. Currently, the total world production of biopesticides is over 3,000 tons annually, which is increasing at a rapid rate. India has a vast potential for biopesticides as it utilizes more than 100,000 tons of pesticides each year. Most (80%) of the pesticides are used on cotton (45%), rice (30%), and vegetables (5%), the remaining crops receiving only 20% as their share (<http://www.molecular-plant-biotechnology.info/industrial-microbiology/advantages-and-limitations-of-biopesticides-and-chemical-pesticides.htm>).

Classical biological control involving *Bacillus thuringiensis* (*Bt*), nuclear polyhedral virus (NPV), *Trichoderma harzianum*, *Saccharopolyspora spinzosa* and *Pseudomonas* species have proved effective in checking pest infestations, along with pathogens like *Metarhizium anisopliae*, *Beauveria bassiana* and entomopathogenic nematodes such as *Steinernema carpocapse*, which has received much recognition. Great success in the reduction of populations rather than their elimination is also advocated in the cases of plant-feeding insects and pathogens as weed biocontrol agents (e.g., plant rusts) in rangelands, forests, and other natural habitats. Furthermore, a very critical approach is necessary towards the use of genetic engineering in agriculture in order to improve the properties of the biological control agents, and towards engineering crop plants to be resistant to pests using the recombinant DNA technology, which produces several transgenic crops with built-in resistance to insect pest and weeds. There is also a need to develop strategies based on the bio-chemical and ecological behavior of the pests. Thus, to complement and eventually substitute synthetic pesticides with biopesticides would represent an economically beneficial and ecologically sound alternative.

9.2 Shade of Biopesticide

Biopesticides are certain types of pesticides derived from natural materials such as animals, plants, bacteria, or some minerals. For example, garlic (*Allium sativum* L.), mint (*Mentha arvensis*), canola (*Brassica napus*) oil, and baking soda all have pesticidal activity and are considered biopesticides. However, as defined by Sudakin (2003), the term “biopesticide” encompasses a broad array of microbial pesticides, bio-chemicals derived from microorganisms and other natural sources, and processes involving the genetic incorporation of DNA into agricultural commodities that confer protection against pest damage (plant-incorporated protectants). According to Zechendorf (1995), the scope of biopesticides includes substances

such as plant extracts, hormones, pheromones, and toxins of organic origin. Copping and Menn (2000) defined the term biopesticides to encompass many aspects of pest control such as microbial, entomophagous nematodes, plant-derived pesticides, secondary metabolites from microorganisms, pheromones, and genes used to transform the crops to express resistance to pests. More recently, the encouragement of natural enemies (parasitoids, predators, microbes, etc.) and the use of transgenic crop varieties, pheromones, growth regulators, and plant-derived materials in pest management have been considered to constitute the biopesticide umbrella. At the end of 1998, there were approximately 175 registered biopesticide active ingredients and 700 products, which increased to 195 active ingredients and 780 products in 2001. Data on microbial biopesticide agents from Agriculture and Agri-food Canada (Kabulak and Gazdik 2005) and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) indicate that more than 200 products are being sold in the United States, compared to only 60 comparable products in the European Union. In the UK, only 5 microbial products are currently being sold, compared to 10 in Germany, and 15 each in France and the Netherlands.

9.3 Types of Biopesticides

9.3.1 Microbial Pesticides

Of the nearly 1 million known species of insects, about 15,000 are considered pests and about 300 require some form of control. Fortunately, most insect pests have pathogenic microorganisms associated with them. Entomopathogens have been highlighted as controlling agents of insect pests for over a century, and include species of bacteria, fungi, viruses, algae, and protozoa as the active ingredient. These pathogenic organisms are isolated from diseased insects during naturally occurring epidemics. Over 400 species of fungi and more than 90 species of bacteria which infect insects have been reported. These microbial control agents have a range of properties that make them desirable for integrated crop management (Hajek 2004). To achieve a double pay-off of better systems of environmental risk evaluation, and an effective and more sustainable microbial control, attention is required for the better understanding of phylogeny of microbial natural enemies (Rehner and Buckley 2005), their biogeography and factors determining bio-diversification of gene flow (Bidochka and Small 2005), and assessment of their background levels in agricultural and natural ecosystems (Mensink and Sheepmaker 2007).

9.3.1.1 Bacteria

Among bioagents, bacteria are the most potent. On the basis of their pathogenicity, entomopathogenic bacteria are divided into four groups: (1) obligate pathogens (e.g., *Bacillus popilliae*), (2) crystalliferous spore-formers (e.g., *B. thuringiensis*), (3) facultative pathogens (e.g., *B. sphaericus*), and (4) potential pathogens (e.g., *Seerratia marscens*). Of these, *B. thuringiensis* is the most effective, with about 6,000 isolates

Table 9.1 Molecular organization of the genes coding δ – endotoxin with target host insect

Delta endotoxin gene	M.W. (kDa)	Insect host target
CryIA (a)		Lepidoptera
CryIA (b)	130 a 133	Lepidoptera
CryIA (c)	138	Lepidoptera
CryIB	135	Lepidoptera
CryIC	130 a 134	Lepidoptera
CryID,E,F		
CryIIA	71	Lepidoptera/diptera
CryIIB	71	Lepidoptera
CryIIC	70	Lepidoptera
CryIIIA	73	Coleoptera
CryIIIB	74	Coleoptera
CryIIIC	129	Coleoptera
CryIIID	73	Coleoptera
CryIVA, CryIVB	134 a 128	Diptera
CryIVC	78	Diptera
CryIVD	72	Diptera
CryVA	81	Lepidoptera/coleoptera

Adapted from Nasrine Moazami. Biopesticide Production, Biotechnology (EOLSS) manuscript (<http://www.eolss.net>)

stored in various repositories throughout the world. This bacterium was first recorded in 1901 as the cause of the damaging “Sotto” disease in silkworms in Japan (Ishikawa 1936), and was isolated again in 1927 by Maltes in Germany and given the name *B. thuringiensis*. It occurs naturally in insect-rich locations, including soil, plant surfaces, and grain stores. So far, more than 40,000 strains of *Bacillus thuringiensis* have been isolated and identified as belonging to 39 serotypes. The *Bt* strains are classified according to their H antigens into 27 groups and 7 subgroups, and according to structure and molecular organization of the genes coding for the parasporal delta-endotoxins. Only a few strains are used commercially as bio-control agents. Chief among them includes *Bacillus thuringiensis*, *B. sphaericus* and *B. popilliae*. They are active against insect pests belonging mainly to the orders lepidoptera, diptera, or coleoptera (Table 9.1). *B. thuringiensis* produces three types of entomocidal toxins: alpha exotoxin, beta exotoxin, and delta endotoxin (insecticidal crystal protein, ICP). When ingested, the crystals paralyze the digestive tracts of insects, often killing them within 24–48 h. The stability of the *Bt* formulations, however, depends on the biological properties of insects, such as age and maturity, presence of the degenerative enzymes, pH, residual nutrient availability, ionic strength and osmotic pressure, type of preservatives used, type of surfactants used, and the temperature.

Mode of Action

The toxic crystal *Bt* proteins in commercial formulations are effective only when eaten by insects with a specific (usually alkaline) gut pH and the specific gut

membrane structures required to bind the toxin. So, when (1) the insect has the correct physiology, (2) been at a susceptible stage of development, and (3) the bacterium has been eaten in sufficient quantity, only then does the toxic protein damage the gut lining, leading eventually to gut paralysis of the infected insect. As a consequence, the insect stops feeding and dies from the combined effects of starvation and tissue damage. However, *B. thuringiensis* spores do not usually spread to other insects or cause disease outbreaks on their own as occurs with many other pathogens (Whalon and McGaughey 1998). Formulation plays a significant role in determining the final efficacy of a *Bacillus*-based product. As a dry powder, *B. thuringiensis* is quite stable, whereas flowable formulations are difficult to prepare and stabilize, and are quite sensitive to heat and, hence, must be protected during storage. Formulations of *Bt* var. *tenebrionis* and *sandiego* have been registered for use against Colorado potato beetle larvae and elm leaf beetle adults and larvae. *B. thuringiensis* subsp. *israelensis* is marketed for use against black flies and mosquitoes, while *Bt* var. *aizawai* is used to control fungus gnats, wax moth larvae in bee hives and various caterpillars (Duan et al. 2004; Zehnder and Gelernter 1989).

9.3.1.2 Virus

The efficacy of the insect-specific viruses can be seen among 1,600 viruses that have been recorded from more than 1,000 species of insects, particularly caterpillar pests. Different strains of naturally occurring nuclear polyhedrosis virus (NPV) and granulosis virus are present at low levels in many insect populations. No threat to humans or wildlife is posed by these insect viruses. A family of viruses called baculoviruses is the most popular choice for microbial control, which have been used regularly for pest control since the 1950s, particularly in forestry where they have been highly effective at controlling sawflies. They are usually small (less than 0.001 mm across), and are composed primarily of double-stranded DNA that codes for genes needed for virus establishment and reproduction. Because this genetic material is easily destroyed by exposure to sunlight or by conditions in the host gut, an infective baculovirus particle (virion) is protected by a protein coat called a polyhedron. Most insect baculoviruses must be eaten by the host to produce an infection, which is typically fatal to the insect. The majority of baculoviruses used as biological control agents belong to genus *Nucleopolyhedrovirus*. These viruses are considered suitable candidates for species-specific, narrow spectrum insecticidal applications, have no negative impacts on plants, mammals, birds, fish, or even on non-target insects, and are especially desirable when beneficial insects are being conserved to aid in an overall EPM program (Ramkrishnan 1992). They have a characteristic shiny-oily appearance, and are seen hanging limply from vegetation. They are extremely fragile to the touch, rupturing to release fluid filled with infective virus particles. This tendency to remain attached to foliage and then rupture is an important feature of the virus life-cycle. As discussed above, infection of other insects will occur only if they eat foliage that has been contaminated by

virus-killed larvae. Baculoviruses infect their hosts through ingestion. Virus particles invade the cells of the gut before colonizing the rest of the body. Infection reduces mobility and feeding, and insects are killed in 5–8 days.

Mass production of baculoviruses can be done only in insects, but this is economically viable for larger hosts such as caterpillars, and formulation and application are straightforward. At present, there are approximately 16 products available for use or under development, mostly for control of caterpillar pests. Commercial products are available in Switzerland, Germany, and Spain for the control of codling moth and the summer fruit tortrix. Based on their safety and potential to replace chemical pesticides, five baculoviruses have been registered as pesticides: *Helicoverpa zea* nuclear polyhedrosis virus (HzSNPV) in 1975, *Orgyia pseudotsugata* (Ot) MNPV in 1976, and *Lymantria dispar* (Ld) MNPV in 1993. However, the only privately produced and commercially available viral pesticide comes from the USA and is the SeMNPV (Spod-X™).

Mode of Action

Viruses invade an insect's body via the gut. They replicate in tissues and can disrupt components of an insect's physiology, interfering with feeding, egg laying, and movement. Different viruses cause different symptoms. NPV-infected larvae may initially turn white and granular or very dark. Some may climb to the top of the crop canopy, stop feeding, become limp, and hang from the upper leaves or stems, hence the common name "caterpillar wilt" or "tree top" disease. Victims of a granulosis virus may turn milky white and stop feeding, or contents of the dead larvae are liquefied and the cuticle ruptures easily to release infectious viral particles. Death from a virus infection usually occurs within 3–8 days. Their killing efficiency may be augmented by genetic modification of its genome with genes of other natural pathogens (Szewczyk et al. 2006).

9.3.1.3 Entomopathogenic Fungi

Over 750 species of fungi kill insects. Entomopathogenic fungi are widely distributed throughout the fungal kingdom, although the majority occur in the *Deuteromycotina* and *Zygomycotina* families. Some insect-pathogenic fungi have restricted host ranges, for example, *Aschersonia aleyrodis* infects only scale insects and whiteflies, while other fungal species have a wide host range, with individual isolates being more specific, for example, *Metarhizium anisopliae* and *Beauveria bassiana*. The potential of fungal pathogens in the control of insect pests has been recognized since the latter part of the nineteenth century, when *M. anisopliae* was tested against the wheat cockchafer, *Anisoplia austriaca* and sugar beet curculionid, *Cleonus punctiventris*. Over the past century, there have been many attempts to exploit *Verticillium lecanii*, *A. aleyrodis*, *B. bassiana*, *Nomuraea rileyi*, *M. anisopliae*, and some species of *Entomophthorales* for pest control. At present, fungi are being used for pest control

on a moderate scale in China (Nasrine Moazami, Biopesticide Production, Biotechnology (EOLSS) manuscript <http://www.eolss.net>).

Entomopathogenic fungi invade their hosts using spores that grow through the cuticle, and hence they are particularly suited for control of pests with piercing mouthparts, such as aphids and whiteflies, which are unlikely to acquire pathogens through feeding. Infection requires high humidity at the insect surface, but this can be circumvented using oil-based formulations. *Beauveria bassiana* are becoming available for the control of a range of glasshouse pests. Many entomopathogenic fungi, especially those in the entomophthorales, are responsible for epizootics that often successfully regulate pest insect populations. Although inoculation of insect populations with entomopathogenic fungi has provided classical biological control of some pests, most notably against the gypsy moth, the most common method of employing fungi for insect control is through inundatory means. Development of effective methods for production of resting spores and competent mycelia of entomophthoralean species will ultimately increase the utility of these fungi. Fungi often become attenuated (lose virulence or antagonistic characteristics) when maintained on artificial media. Cultural conditions must be identified which retain virulence without increasing production costs. At present, little progress has been made in this area partly because the underlying mechanisms for attenuation have not been elucidated. While 750 species of entomopathogenic fungi are known, less than 20 have received serious attention as control agents of insect pests (Hawksworth et al. 1995; Copping 2004). Among fungal pesticides, five have been introduced since 1979, and three in 1981. Many countries with centrally planned economies have been using fungal pesticides successfully for many years. Nowadays, about 20 products are available worldwide for managing sap-feeding insects, beetles, caterpillars, flies, and locusts.

Mode of Action

Entomopathogenic fungi invade their hosts by direct penetration of the host exoskeleton or cuticle. As occurs in many plant-pathogenic fungi, conidia germinate on the host surface and often differentiate to form an appressorium. An infected hypha penetrates down through the host cuticle and eventually emerges into the haemocoel of the insect. As with plant pathogens, entry into the host involves both enzymic degradation and mechanical pressure. A range of extracellular enzymes that can degrade the major components of insect cuticle is produced when *M. anisopliae* is grown in vitro with the cuticle as the sole carbon and nitrogen source. Growth of fungi in the haemolymph of insects may be as yeast-like blastospores, hyphal bodies, or protoplasts, rather than in the form of a mycelium (from which toxic compounds can be extracted). Death is caused by tissue destruction and, occasionally, by toxins produced by the fungus. The fungus frequently emerges from the insect's body to produce spores that, when spread by wind, rain, or contact with other insects, can spread infection. Destruxins (DTXs), a group of cyclic depsipeptides (peptides containing ester linkages) produced by *M. anisopliae*,

have received most attention, and are responsible for causing insect mortality by the fungus (Zimmermann 2007). DTXs are insecticidal by injection and, in some cases, when ingested by mouth; toxicity is most acute among lepidopteran larvae and adult Diptera.

9.3.1.4 Nematodes

Entomopathogenic nematode worms are just visible to the naked eye, being about 0.5 mm in length. The entomopathogenic nematodes are a nematode–bacterium complex forming a strong mutualistic relationship. The nematode may appear as little more than a biological syringe for its bacterial partner. The bacteria break down the insect body, which provides food for the nematodes. After the insect dies, the juvenile nematodes develop to adults and reproduce. A new generation of infective juveniles emerges 8–14 days after infection. Entomopathogenic nematodes are extraordinarily lethal to many important soil insect pests, yet are safe for plants and animals. This high degree of safety means that, unlike chemicals, or even *Bacillus thuringiensis*, nematode applications do not require other safety equipment; and re-entry time, residues, groundwater contamination, chemical trespass, and pollinators are not major issues. Like other biological control agents, nematodes are constrained by being living organisms that require specific conditions to be effective. Thus, desiccation or ultraviolet light rapidly inactivates insecticidal nematodes; chemical insecticides are less constrained. Similarly, nematodes are effective within a narrower temperature range than chemicals, and are more impacted by suboptimal soil type, depth, and irrigation frequency. In addition, unlike other entomopathogens, nematodes are exempted from registration and so have been popular choices for commercialization. Over 60 products prepared from nematodes are available in Europe. Nematodes require moist conditions to operate and have been marketed predominantly against soil pests, such as vine weevil and sciarid fly larvae. However, they may also control foliar pests, for example *Nemasys* (Becker Underwood) which can be used to control western flower thrips.

Mode of Action

Juvenile nematodes parasitize their hosts directly by penetrating the cuticle through natural openings and introducing symbiotic bacteria, which multiply rapidly and cause death by septicaemia, often within 48 h. Nematode growth and reproduction depend upon conditions established in the host cadaver by the bacterium. The bacterium further contributes anti-immune proteins to assist the nematode in overcoming host defences, and anti-microbials that suppress colonization of the cadaver by competing secondary invaders. Conversely, the bacterium lacks invasive powers and is dependent upon the nematode to locate and penetrate suitable hosts.

9.3.1.5 Entomopathogenic Protozoa and Microsporida

Protozoan diseases of insects are ubiquitous and perform an important regulatory role in insect populations. They are generally host specific and slow acting, most often producing chronic infections. They develop only in living hosts and many species require an intermediate host. Species in the Microsporida are among the most commonly observed. Their main advantages are persistence and recycling in host populations and their debilitating effect on reproduction and overall fitness of target insects. As inundatively-applied microbial control agents, only a few species have been moderately successful. The main disadvantages of the protozoa as inundatively-applied microbial control agents are the requirement for in vivo production and low levels on immediate mortality. *Nosema locustae* is the only commercially available species of microsporidium, marketed under several labels for the control of grasshoppers and crickets. It is applied with insect-attractant bait. Because of its slow mode of action, this product is better suited to long-term management of rangeland pests than to the more intensive demands of commercial crop or even home garden production.

9.3.2 Plant Incorporated Protectants

9.3.2.1 Botanicals

Every native plant is evolved with a specific recipe of natural controls. The rich plant bio-diversity of India which continues to be a major untapped source of a diverse range of bio-active molecules needs to be explored for safe crop protection. A range of secondary metabolites, like alkaloids, flavonoids, phenols, glycosides, sitosterols, and tannins, have a record of protecting plants against their herbivorous pests (Ahmad 2007). However, greater emphasis needs to be laid on developing innovative formulations with good storage ability and persistence. There is also a need to improve the knock-down characters in natural pesticides which are endowed with slow acting behavioral and physiological modes of action. Historically, plant materials have been in use longer than any other chemicals (with the exception of sulphur) but after the Second World War, they lost their importance with the introduction of synthetic organic chemicals. Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*), pyrethrum (*Chrysanthemum cinerariifolium*), derris (*Derris elliptica*), hellebore (*Helleborus niger*), quassia (*Picrasma excels*), camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*), and turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*) were some of the important plant products in use before the organized and systematic search began in the 1940s. In the US, the use of botanical pesticides like pyrethrum, nicotine, and rotenone peaked during 1966, but due to some limitations like photosensitivity, degradation, and availability, their use declined thereafter. Chief among the adverse effects are structural modifications and structure–activity relationships which led to the discovery of synthetic pyrethrin-like materials called synthetic pyrethroids which are

stable in light and act even at very low concentrations. Similarly, nicotinoids (previously referred to as nitro-quanidines, neonicotinylns, neonicotinoids, and chloronicotines, and more recently referred as chloronicotinylns) are considered the siblings of structurally modified pesticides. Therefore, there is an urgent need to explore these virgin plants for their bioactivities. However, the major bottlenecks in the commercialisation of biopesticides are: (1) resource availability, (2) problems in chemical standardization and delivery systems, (3) less effective field reports than laboratory results, (4) lack of novel, effective, stable and economical formulations of botanical products, and (5) lack of general awareness among the end users which discourage product realization. Despite all these constraints, the Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) under the patronage of the Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India, has developed a plant extract-based biopesticide formulation “*Bollcure*”, that could be used to control cotton bollworm (*Helicoverpa armigera*), the most challenging larvae capable of inflicting severe losses to the yield of cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum*) crops.

9.3.3 Biochemical Pesticides

9.3.3.1 Allelochemicals

Plant biodiversity provides a vast repository of biologically active compounds that find application in traditional medicines and crop protection systems. Among the estimated over a half a million species of the existing plant kingdom, nearly 2,500 species belonging to 235 plant families have exhibited measurable anti-pest properties (Saxena 1998). Phytochemicals have a wide range of activity including hormonal, neurological, nutritional, and enzymatic, many of which still need to be explored. Recent research in plant resistance to insect pests of *Nicotiana* spp. and *Solanum* spp. have demonstrated that leaf exudates produced by them play a significant role in determining resistance or susceptibility to infestation to insects in such plants (Severson et al. 1985). These exudates produce a protective waxy layer comprising numerous secondary metabolites such as glycolipids and glycerolipids as well as free fatty acids/esters and terpenes. The bioactive glycerolipids consisting of 1,2-diacylglycerol, 1,3-diacylglycerol and 1,2,3- triglycerol provide in-built plant resistance to invading pests and are active against certain phytophagous insects and pathogens. High levels of α -amaryl alkananoate and cycloartenyl alkananoate in epicular waxes from aphid-resistant raspberry (*Rubus* spp.) plants is responsible for its resistance. Moreover, some light-activated phytotoxins, like substituted acetylenes, thiophenes, acetylenic thiophenes, quinines, furanocoumarins and related compounds, have also shown significant pest control properties. Allelochemicals from microbes include spinosyns derived from aerobic fermentation of the soil-inhabiting actinomycetes *Saccharopolyspora spinosa* (Thompson

et al. 2000), while avermectin and milbemycin are derived from a family of macrocyclic lactones produced from *Streptomyces avermitilis* (Campbell 1989).

9.3.3.2 Sex Pheromones

Pheromones specifically disrupt the reproductive cycle of harmful insects. In this way, farmers can reduce the amount of insecticide they need; spraying only when insects are in a vulnerable stage or when their numbers exceed certain levels. There is no alteration to the natural biological and ecological cycle, hence ensuring that there is no environmental or health hazard. They are portable, less expensive, and a more natural form of crop-protecting agent. Pheromones lure and trap is an insect-trapping apparatus which essentially works by using the sex pheromones generated by female insects to attract their male counterparts. Pheromones as monitoring tools provide cost-effective and simple techniques to time application of biological control agents and bio-pesticides in integrated pest management (IPM). In 1987, Pest Control of India (PCI) became the first company in India to commercially introduce pheromone technology for agricultural use by launching sex pheromone lures and traps for monitoring *Helicoverpa armigera* and *Spodoptera litura*. Since then, PCI has introduced commercial pheromone lures for monitoring a range of pests, including cotton bollworms, tobacco caterpillar, rice yellow stem borer, sugarcane borers, diamond back moth, brinjal shoot and fruit borer, and fruit flies. Furthermore, PCI has also been regularly introducing suitable traps for use with these pheromone lures, and today has in its trap range funnel traps, delta traps, McPhail traps, cross-vane traps, water traps, and bucket traps.

9.4 Potentials and Constraints of Biopesticides

All these biopesticide strategies employed to control insect pests have distinct advantages and disadvantages under specific conditions. Although there has been an extensive programme for mass rearing and release of beneficial insects such as *Trichogramma* species, perhaps the greatest potential for successful biological control through augmentation of natural enemies exists with pathogenic microorganisms. The utility of these agents has, however, been limited by difficulties in the production and formulations of products, particularly with viruses and fungi, and has limited spectra of activity against pest complexes in comparison with chemical insecticides. However, recent research has indicated that the efficacy of bacteria and viruses have improved through recombinant DNA technology. The advantages of microbial insecticides over chemical insecticides in terms of reduced threats to nontarget species and limited potential for environmental degradation are compelling reasons for increasing efforts to improve these agents and increase their utility for IPM programmes (Cuperus et al. 2004).

Although many compounds have been isolated, characterized, and evaluated as anti-insect compounds from plants, not much headway has been achieved in the commercialization of such products. The standardization of plant based anti-insect preparations has been the biggest constraint and has subsequently hindered their potential marketability compared with conventional pesticides. Generally, natural plant products tend to be rather slow acting, of modest toxicity, and rapidly degrade in the environment. The variation in efficacy of the compounds between test species is probably the greatest barrier to their commercialization. However, the concept of phytosynergistic strategy and assessing the toxicity of co-occurring toxins seems to have potential and could lead to further advancement in the development of biopesticides (Koul and Dhaliwal 2001).

9.4.1 Advantages of Using Biopesticides

The potential advantages of bioinsecticides include that they: (1) are usually inherently less harmful than conventional pesticides, (2) do not leave harmful residues, (3) are designed to affect just the specific target organism in contrast to broad spectrum of conventional ones, (d) are effective in small quantities and often disperse quickly (Ware 1994), thereby resulting in lower exposures and largely avoiding the pollution problems caused by conventional pesticides, (e) as a component of IPM, greatly reduce the use of conventional synthetics while crop yields remain high, and (f) are often cheaper than chemical pesticides. The introduction of transgenic technology has opened up new vistas in crop protection management. Although investment in agricultural biotechnology is concentrated in industrialized countries, many developing countries like India, China, and Brazil have committed significant levels of public funding to biotechnology. Recent studies show that small-scale farmers in developing countries stand to benefit more from transgenic technology than commercial farmers in industrial countries, due to limited access to agrochemicals and greater losses associated with insect pests in tropical and subtropical climates. The best example of such progress in developing countries is the use of *Bt* cotton containing Cry 1ac gene from *Bacillus thuringiensis* which is commercially grown in India and China. Multi-level endocrine systems controlling a wide range of physiological processes (e.g., moulting, metamorphosis, diapause, reproduction, etc.) advocating multiple functional capacities of insect neuropeptides, also provide opportunities for new insect control strategies. As a biopesticide, they induce adult sterility, physical body change, water loss, and premature death in insects (Muraleedharan and Devi 1992). Their chief disadvantages are: (1) very high specificity, which will require an accurate identification of the pest/pathogen and may require multiple pesticides to be used, and (2) often variable efficacy due to the influences of various biotic and abiotic factors (since biopesticides are usually living organisms, which bring about pest/pathogen control by multiplying within the target insect pest/pathogen).

9.4.2 Constraints in the Promotion of Biopesticides

9.4.2.1 Technological

These includes (1) lack of technological advancement relating to the transfer of technology from pilot point scale to mega-scale, (2) lack of mass rearing facilities, (3) inconsistent field results, (4) limited or short shelf life (say 6 months), and (e) existence of very crude formulations.

9.4.2.2 Financial

This includes (1) huge rates of tax, (2) benefit of economy of scale rather limited, and (3) lack of subsidy from Government bodies.

9.4.2.3 Extension Related

- Existing mindset of farmers to compare biological vis-à-vis chemical pesticides
- Lack of field demonstration and training programmes

9.4.2.4 Regulatory/Statutory

(1) Need for a separate body for registering biological compounds, (2) need to liberalize expensive and time-consuming registration processes, (3) require strict quality control and standardised formulations, and (d) lack of large number of nodal biopesticide testing laboratories.

9.5 Biopesticides Global Scenario

During the 1970s, research institutions around the globe had started opting for biopesticides as a new and sustainable alternatives to conventional pesticides. The tactics of using biopesticides seems ideal for IPM if they could spare the pests' natural enemies, as they are narrowly selective and pose few problems to the nontarget ones. Except for *Bacillus thuringiensis*, the predicted demand for commercial biopesticides has not been realised. Estimated world sales of all biopesticides amount to 0.5% of the total world pesticide market accounting for more than 90% of the total sales of *Bt* products (Rodgers 1993). Among the best examples of its demand in developing countries, Brazilian farmers have obtained exceptional control of the velvetbean caterpillar, *Anticarsia gemmatalis*, by spraying NPV onto soyabean, *Glycine max* (Moscardi and Sosa-Gomez 1996). Chinese farmers applied

Beauveria bassiana to the soil surface to infect the larvae dropping from the plants to overwinter (Kogan and Turnipseed 1987) but, like the Brazilians, they used it as an IPM tool and did not rely merely on these biopesticides. Among the plant pathologists, at least 30 different biological control organisms are presently available as commercial formulations to manage plant diseases (Lumsden et al. 1995). For example, *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* (strain K84), which is able to synthesize antibiotic agrocin 84, has been used to prevent crown gall (Copping 2004; Kabulak and Gazdik 2005). The control of the coconut rhinoceros beetle, *Oryctes rhinoceros*, on coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) in Asia and the Pacific Islands is a good example of how entomopathogens could provide benefits to such plants (Waterhouse and Norris 1987).

9.6 Biopesticide Production

9.6.1 Use of Genetic-Engineering Technology

Major breakthroughs in molecular biology and biotechnology since the early 1980s indicate that rapid improvements in the competitive ability of biological control methods are possible, and that biopesticides can play a major role in crop protection in the future. It has become possible to improve some of the critical properties that earlier hampered the usefulness of many biocontrol agents. Valuable genes from completely unrelated organisms can now be utilized for biological control purposes. Biological control using recombinant DNA (genetic engineering) technology can be achieved in several different ways: control agents may be improved; crop plants can be engineered to carry better resistance genes; or organisms associated with the plant may be modified to provide protection. All these approaches have successfully been used experimentally in several different ways. Product development has been very active in the area of incorporating resistant genes – mainly from *Bt* directly into plants. Successes include potato (*Solanum tuberosum*), tomato (*Lycopersicon lycopersicum*), tobacco, and cotton. General root-colonizing bacteria of plants have also been engineered to produce insecticidal toxins, which protect against pests such as the corn rootworm.

9.6.2 Engineering Biological Control Agents

The genetic improvement of biological agents is a relatively new concept. For this, a great deal must be known about the biology, ecology, and behavior of the organism.

9.6.3 Engineering Crop Plants

The first gene encoding the *Bt* toxin was cloned by Schnepf and Whiteley (1981), and *Bt* gene regulation was known by 1986 (Whiteley et al. 1987). The crop plants were tobacco and tomato, producing the delta endotoxin of *Bacillus thuringiensis* to make them resistant against caterpillars. The uses of genetically modified crops that express insecticidal genes (e.g., Bt crops) also provide an important tool to control Lepidopterous pests (Shelton et al. 2002). Similar strategies have been employed to develop mosquitocidal species of algae. Through genetic engineering techniques, the *Autographa californica* multinucleocapsid nucleopolyhedrosis virus (AcMNPV) was engineered to kill insects more quickly by expressing either enzymes or toxins soon after host invasion. Of particular interest is the possibility of making viruses produce insect neurohormones, which can cause rapid physiological disruptions in minutely defined target hosts. Parasexual recombination not only facilitates genetic analysis in asexually reproducing fungi, but also provides an important tool in strain improvement of bioprotectant fungi.

9.7 Biopesticide Regulations

Integrated pest management is being redefined as BIPM (biointensive integrated pest management) by the advent of biologically-based alternatives, which are environment-friendly and ensure food safety and security, apart from maintaining the ecological balance of the living biota. In India, all pesticides (including biopesticides) are regulated under the Insecticidal Act 1968 and require mandatory registration from the Central Insecticidal Board and Registration Committee (CIB and RC). This body has streamlined the registration guidelines and brought the quantum of data generation to a lower scale, granting the registration of the biopesticide on a priority basis.

9.8 Biopesticide Commercialization

Biopesticides have not been adequately evaluated in terms of their costs relative to their benefits to farmers and others. Examples from both developed countries (Benbrook 1996) and developing countries (Oka 1996) show that farmers commonly reduce insecticide use by 50–100% without any loss in crop yield after switching to IPM. In addition, the synthetic pesticides market is expected to show a declining trend at the rate of 1.5% per annum. At the same time, the biopesticide market is growing and is expected to reach more than a billion dollars in the next 5 years (Table 9.2 and Fig. 9.1). Key developments expected in the coming years are more R&D in biopesticides, an increase in genetically modified crops, the application of

Table 9.2 The global market is rapidly expanding with 150–300% increase over next 5 years (\$ millions)

	Europe	NAFTA	Latin America	Africa	ASIA	Oceania	Total
Macrobials	70	100	15	8	30	20	243
Microbials							
Bacteria	15	80	10	5	20	30	160
Virus	10	15	10	2	5	10	42
Fungi	25	45	20	3	15	20	128
Total	50	140	40	10	40	60	330
Biorationals							
Natural	30	70	25	10	40	15	180
Semisynthetic	40	80	20	10	30	20	200
Total	70	150	45	20	70	35	390
TOTAL	190	390	100	38	140	115	973

Source: International Biocontrol Manufacturer's Association (2004)

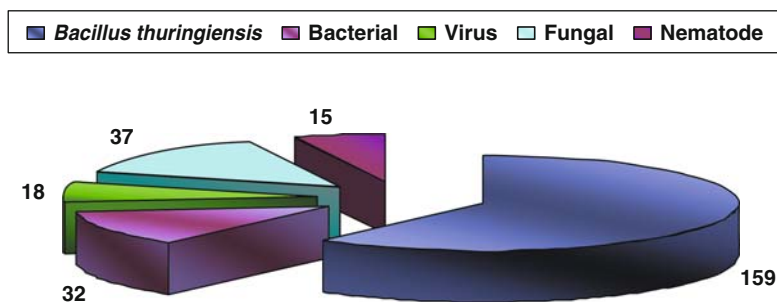


Fig. 9.1 \$260MM estimated 2005 sales projected to grow to \$350–400MM by 2015
Source: Nasrine Moazami. Biopesticide Production, Biotechnology (EOLSS) manuscript (<http://www.eolss.net>)

integrated pest management concepts, and a widening of organic farming. Biopesticides today represent about 2.5% of the overall pesticides market, and are expected to grow to about 4.2% by 2010 (Fig. 9.2). Of all the crops, orchard crops hold the largest share of biopesticides use at 55%.

The high cost of labor has also slowed down the development of other biopesticides. The spiralling cost, coupled with regulatory constraints and problems with formulations and marketing, have led to serious setbacks to the application of biopesticides. To apprehend a slow acting biological control agent (the essence of a biopesticide) to challenge an impressive and rapidly acting synthetic chemical is quixotic. Ecosystems are highly variable and unpredictable and to assume that either their resident pests or biocontrol agents will respond constantly over space and time is unrealistic. The inconsistent performance may merely be alluding to the variable nature of their crop ecosystem and are not flaws in the biopesticide per se, and the state of affairs will continue if we treat them like conventional pesticides

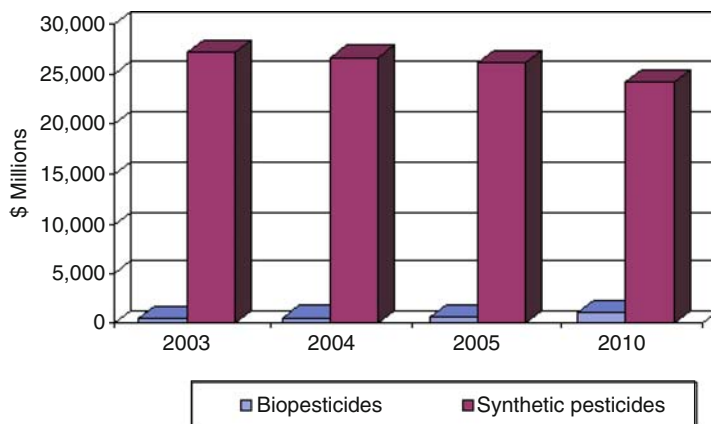


Fig. 9.2 Global biopesticide market
Report ID: CHM029B, Published (adapted from Thakore 2006)

and expect them to perform evenly across a range of situations and apply them in an ecological abyss.

The successful commercialization of insect-pathogenic viruses has been limited. Thus far, NPV strains have only been mass produced in living insects, a costly procedure. Viral insecticide development is further hindered by the fact that the viruses are specific to one species or genus, ensuring a relatively small market. Genetic engineering offers a potential solution to these shortcomings. A foreign pesticidal gene can be inserted into the viral genome, and expression of the pesticidal gene product during replication will allow the virus to kill insects faster or cause rapid cessation of feeding. Foreign genes which have been inserted into baculoviruses for this purpose include the *Buthus eupeus* insect toxin-1, the *Manduca sexta* diuretic hormone, the *Bacillus thuringiensis* ssp. *kurstaki* HD-73 delta-endotoxin, the *Heliothis virescens* juvenile hormone esterase, the *Pyemotes tritici* TxP-I toxin, *Androctonus australis* neurotoxin, Dol m V gene and T-urf 13 genes [Nasrine Moazami. Biopesticide Production, Biotechnology (EOLSS) manuscript (<http://www.eolss.net>).]

9.9 Conclusion

Although chemicals characteristically have good storage life, relatively wide spectrum of activity, fast speed of kill, and relatively short persistence, frequent and injudicious applications leads to environmental hazards and poses a serious toxicological threat. In contrast, biological control agents tend to have relatively poor storage life, high target specificity, slow speed of kill, potentially long persistence through secondary cycling, and consequently lower frequency of application. They are environmentally friendly and have a low degree of hazard for humans and livestock. The need of the hour is for a biological agent that possesses the desirable

properties of a chemical pesticide, is highly toxic to the target organism, is able to be mass-produced on an industrial scale, has a long shelf life, can be safely transported, and is highly effective both in its capacity to kill and to reproduce on pests (compounding its killing action). It is important that microbial control of insect pests be further developed and that entomologists along with microbiologists should be able to quantify and make contributions to the regulation of insect populations by naturally occurring pathogens.

Biological control uses a different approach to pest management, focusing on natural enemies of plant pests and diseases to manage their populations. The strategies rely on detailed knowledge of the ecology, the life cycles, and the food chains in each system, thus developing highly target-specific control strategies that leave the nontarget plants, insects, or other animals unharmed. Researchers should employ a range of strategies, often looking for means to strengthen local, natural enemies or to produce them as biopesticides. Fungi, insect viruses, and competing but harmless strains of the same pest need to be tried so as to develop “safer pesticides”.

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Chapter 10

Benefits of Arbuscular Mycorrhizal Fungi to Sustainable Crop Production

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Abstract The majority of agricultural crops form relationships with arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi, which affect physiology and, consequently, yields and food qualities of plants. Mycorrhiza occur naturally in agroecosystems, but their abundance decreases with soil degradation, pollution or excessive use of agrochemicals. Additionally, mycorrhiza may be negatively affected by soil management practices and disadvantageous crop rotation. Conversely, mycorrhizal fungi are usually more abundant in sustainable and medium-to-low-input production systems. In order to exploit the beneficial effects of AM fungi, appropriate management practices, such as the design of suitable crop rotations, appropriate tillage practices, the introduction of multi-microbial inoculants, and the regulated use of agrochemicals, have to be employed. An alternative strategy for improved use of AM in sustainable crop production is to target crop breeding programs involving AM-favoring traits. Understanding the multifarious activities of AM fungi is likely to provide a prospective tool for sustainable crop production in different agro-ecosystems.

10.1 Introduction

Mycorrhiza form a beneficial soil microbe–plant interaction that affects the physiological traits of many crop plants, including yield and food-quality. Recently, mycorrhiza have become a prospective tool for sustainable, low input crop production

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systems. Mycorrhizas inhabit the ecosystems of terrestrial plants as a natural way to acquire nutrients from soils (Pirozynski and Dalpe 1992). The majority of crop plants form relationships with arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi, and their responsiveness to mycorrhiza depends on numerous factors including genotype, soil-related and climate properties, and agrochemical inputs into the cultivation system. Extensive mycorrhizal research conducted during the last few decades has focused on the mechanisms of the symbiosis and its role in the management of a sustainable crop production. Systems high in sustainability include those which aim to make the best use of environmental factors and services without damaging these variables (Pretty 1995). The sustainability has, therefore, become one of the most prominent issues in agricultural practices. Sustainability incorporates the concepts of resilience (the capacity of systems to buffer shocks and stresses) and persistence (the capacity of systems to sustain over long periods), and in turn addresses many wider economic, social and environmental outcomes (Pretty 2008). Moreover, the soil quality is an integral indicator of sustainable ecosystems as well (Herrick 2000).

Soil microorganisms including AM fungi form the basis of healthy and productive soil environments. During the last century, soils have degraded considerably on a global level, and as a result microbial diversity is disturbed. When the world population was less than half what it is currently, its pressure on the environment did not have such far-reaching consequences, and concerns about the environment were not so vital (Lal 2008). The growing world population and human needs such as food, energy and living environments have, however, imposed increasing demands on agroecosystems. The twenty-first century faces many global challenges involving soil functioning where mycorrhiza could play an important role in combating these problems. Mycorrhiza's problem-solving potential applies to (1) increasing agronomic production, (2) enhancing carbon sequestration in terrestrial ecosystems to stabilize the atmospheric CO₂ concentration, (3) converting degraded, polluted or desertified soils to restored land or sustainable agroecosystems, and (4) developing sustainable farming/cropping systems aimed at improving water use efficiency and soil properties to combat increasing erosion and minimize risks of water pollution and eutrophication. Thus, AM fungi are regarded as essential components of sustainable soil-plant systems (Schreiner et al. 2003). As an ecological biofertilizer, a bioprotectant against environmental stresses, an agent controlling root pathogens and a soil improver acting as an anti-erosion agent, mycorrhiza possesses great potential in sustainable or organic agriculture. Moreover, it appears that its contribution to carbon sequestration is substantial; mycorrhizal fungi can be an important soil carbon sink and often constitute 20–30% of total soil microbial biomass (Leake et al. 2004). Under conditions of continuously increasing ambient CO₂ concentrations, AM fungi are expected to increase their role. Based on meta-analysis, global standing stocks of mycorrhizal fungi may increase substantially by up to 50% under elevated CO₂ (Treseder 2004).

Phosphorus (P) availability in soil is often a limiting factor in plant production, and the use of chemical fertilizers (e.g., manufactured water-soluble superphosphates)

has played a significant role in meeting the growing population demands for foods. However, the conventional agricultural practices based on the application of agrochemicals (chemical fertilizers and pesticides) cannot sustain the production base as a healthy plant–soil system for very long (Khan et al. 2007). Also, consistently increasing prices of chemical fertilizers warrants the implementation of sustainable approaches. The new approaches to farming, referred to as sustainable agriculture, require agricultural practices that maintain a long-term ecological balance in the soil ecosystem, including the sustainable management of soil microbes. Under low P or P-deficient conditions, interaction of plants with rhizospheric microorganisms either improves the uptake of the available P or renders unavailable P sources that would otherwise be accessible to the plant. Many lines of scientific evidence highlight the importance of a targeted and sustainable microbial management of soil resources. Management of sustainable agricultural systems needs to develop technologies and practices that do not have adverse effects on environmental variables. Additionally, these technologies and practices need to be accessible to farmers in an effective manner that could lead to enhanced food productivity (Pretty 2008). Mycorrhizal biotechnology meets the demands of sustainable agriculture, and in addition, it often improves food crop quality. However, efficient management of biological soil resources in sustainable cropping systems remains the largest challenge because of the complexity of its roles and interactions with other parts of cropping systems. Special attention is paid to highlight the effects of mycorrhiza on crop productivity and the principles underlying crop responsiveness to AM, including the occurrence and importance of AM in agro-ecosystems depending on environmental factors and management practices. Also, the specifics of AM fungi in horticultural production and the advantages, prospects, and drawbacks of mycorrhiza-friendly management in sustainable plant–soil systems is reviewed and discussed.

10.2 Principles of Crop Responsiveness to Mycorrhiza

Many important crops are mycotrophic, or responsive to mycorrhiza, except species from the non-mycotrophic families *Brassicaceae*, *Chenopodiaceae*, and *Amaranthaceae*, which are never or rarely mycorrhized (Gerdemann 1968). Mycotrophic agricultural and horticultural crops usually form symbioses with AM fungi, and there are reports that approximately 160 zygomycetous fungal taxa of the order *Glomales* (*Glomeromycota*) form mycorrhizal symbioses (Schüssler et al. 2001). A number of AM fungi, including the most common ones *Glomus intraradices*/*Glomus fasciculatum* group and *Glomus mosseae*, have a global distribution occurring in both natural and anthropogenic (disturbed) habitats (Opik et al. 2006). Morphological structures of mycorrhizal fungi and of entire symbiotic system with plant roots determine the symbiotic effects and formulations of mycorrhizal inocula.

In general, colonization with AM fungi result in improvements in plant fitness and nutrition (Smith and Read 1997). A network of extraradical mycorrhizal hyphae facilitate nutrient acquisition and transport many ions to roots, particularly less mobile ions such as P, N, K, S, Ca, Zn, etc. In addition, AM fungi may enhance the reabsorption of nutrients lost through root exudation (Hamel 2004). The contribution of AM fungi to soil fertility has been partly attributed to production of glomalin resulting in an accumulation of organic matter and protection against erosion via forming water stable soil aggregates (Rillig 2004a). The application of AM fungi facilitates the growth of plants by enhancing seedling growth and rooting of cuttings, reducing phosphate and nitrate requirements, increasing survival rate and development of plantlets, increasing resistance to abiotic stresses, increasing flowering and fruiting, and by increasing crop uniformity (Azcon-Aguilar and Barea 1997). In addition to the nutritional effects, AM fungi induce an array of biochemical and molecular responses in host plants. For example, AM fungi have shown an increased production of many allelochemicals (soluble and cell wall-bound phenolics, terpenes, alkaloids, essential oils, and other secondary compounds), and have also included up regulated expression of genes (e.g. phenylalanine ammonia-lyase, chalcone synthase, and chitinase coding genes) involved in plant defences (Bi et al. 2007; Yao et al. 2007). Furthermore, AM fungi often increase resistance or decrease susceptibility of plants to soil-borne pathogens (Dassi et al. 1998; Brimner and Boland 2003; Whipps 2004; Dalpe 2005; Franco et al. 2008). However, mycorrhizal-induced defenses and increased systemic resistance in host plants are still not fully understood (Toussaint 2007).

Generally, the mycorrhizal fungi can be regarded as efficient biofertilizers for sustainable agriculture (Piotrowski and Rillig 2008). In this regard, several aspects of their interaction with target crops and the environment should, however, be taken into account. Chief among them is the responsiveness of plants to mycorrhiza (i.e., the dependence of plant upon mycorrhiza), and the effectiveness of mycorrhizal fungi species and their mixtures. These are terms commonly used in mycorrhiza research with a variety of meanings, which have evolved during the last few decades. Responsiveness to mycorrhiza refers to the dependency of plants upon mycorrhiza, a measure of mycorrhizal fungus effectiveness (Janos 2007), and is represented by the difference in growth between plants with and without mycorrhiza at any designated level of P availability. The difference in performance between AM-colonized and non-colonized plants can be measured as a difference in biomass accumulation, improved morphological parameters, yield, etc. Mycorrhiza dependence denotes the inability of plants to grow or survive without mycorrhizas and without leading to any increase in soil fertility. It can be assessed by examining the effects of a range of soil nutrient contents (especially available phosphorus) on the performance of plants lacking mycorrhizas (Janos 2007). Mycorrhiza dependence can be calculated as the level of nutrient availability below which noncolonized plants either cease to grow or fall below a given performance threshold. By extension, variation in responsiveness can be partitioned into dependence and nondependence components (Sawers et al. 2008). Dependence variation relates to plant performance under a given set of abiotic conditions, and nondependence

variation describes differences in the interaction between plant and the fungus. As such, nondependence differences include variation in the ability of lines to establish colonization, variation in the efficiency of nutrient uptake, and variation in the regulation of nutrient exchange between the fungus and host (Sawers et al. 2008).

The degree of mycotrophy depends to a greater extent on the plant genotype and on environmental conditions (Hamel 1996). Many studies have investigated mycorrhizal responsiveness variation in existing crop varieties, and it is apparent that selection and breeding programs have often selected against AM associations, as the programs are mainly aimed at maximum plant performance in high-input production agro-ecosystems. For example, when comparing the performance of wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) varieties developed before and after 1900, varieties developed before 1900 were more responsive to AM colonization than those developed later (Hetrick et al. 1992). The principle of this phenomenon lies in selection for increased ability of modern lines to take up phosphate without AM fungi under high phosphorus availability in soils (Sawers et al. 2008).

More insight into the complexity of plant responsiveness to AM brought recent advances in the molecular basis of AM–plant interactions including P uptake by mycorrhized plants (Paszkowski 2006). Plants use two distinct P uptake pathways: one acquiring P directly from the soil via P membrane transporters located in the outer membrane of the rhizodermis and root hairs, and the second being active in colonized plants when P is uptaken by the extraradical hyphal network and delivered to arbuscules. In the arbuscules, it is absorbed by plant phosphate transporters in the periarbuscular membrane (Sawers et al. 2008). In mycorrhized plants, a switch from one pattern of gene expression to another corresponding to changes in P uptake occurs. This process is not a simple superimposition of additional gene expression on the noncolonized state (Sawers et al. 2008). Moreover, although cytological and physiological features of AM fungi seem to be conserved, the molecular components may differ significantly between distantly related plant species, as has been shown for P transporter genes in rice (*Oryza sativa*) (Paszkowski et al. 2002). Sawers et al. (2008), however, imply that the genetic determinants affecting the performance of AM-colonized and noncolonized plants vary independently.

Mycorrhizal development increases the availability of nutrients other than P. Nitrogen serves as a good example because of the ability of extraradical mycelium of AM fungi to access small soil pores in the event of low nutrient status or immobile nutrients such as NH_4^+ (Drew et al. 2004). Progress has been made in exploring metabolic pathways of N uptake and transport by AM fungi (Govindarajulu et al. 2005). For AM fungi, NH_4^+ is the most likely form of N uptaken though the N uptake mechanisms remain largely unknown (Jackson et al. 2008). Nitrogen is synthesized and stored in the extraradical mycelium in the form of arginine and is transported to the intraradical mycelium in host cells following its generation from arginine breakdown (Jin et al. 2005). The presence of mycorrhiza can affect the uptake of nitrogen depending on the type of fertilizer supplied and the ratio of ammonium/nitrate in it. For example, corn (*Zea mays*) plants colonized by

Glomus aggregatum take up ten times more N from a $^{15}\text{NH}_4^+$ pathway than from a $^{15}\text{NO}_3^-$ pathway (Tanaka and Yano 2005).

10.3 Mycorrhiza in Agro-ecosystems

10.3.1 Occurrence

Mycorrhizas occur naturally in agro-ecosystems but their abundance is usually lower compared to natural, nonmanaged ecosystems (Opik et al. 2006). The level of AM fungi in soils and their efficacy decreases with soil degradation, pollution or overfertilization. Also, high soil P fertility and/or fertilization, the use of systemic fungicides, and the use of nonmycotrophic or low mycotrophic crops in rotation have an adverse effect on mycorrhizal symbiosis (Plenchette et al. 2005). Generally, soil AM fungi are more abundant in low input cropping systems with low-to-medium soil P content usually having less than 50 mg g^{-1} soil. In agro-ecosystems, the inoculation effects of mycorrhizal fungi increases with lower availability of essential nutrients and/or water, or where other environmental constraints are in force. The occurrence of mycorrhizal fungi in a particular agro-ecosystem is greatly dependent on the environmental conditions, management history, and current management practices. Agricultural practices can directly or indirectly influence mycorrhizal biodiversity. For example, the lowest AM species abundance has been found in arable fields (Helgason et al. 1998; Daniell et al. 2001) and metal-contaminated soils (Whitfield et al. 2004). Relatively low species richness (about five fungal taxa per plant species) has been reported in habitats that remain under anthropogenic influence (Opik et al. 2006). By contrast, taxon-rich fungal communities (over 20 taxa) were detected in different natural ecosystems, such as a boreal herb-rich coniferous forest (Opik et al. 2008). Recent evidence suggests that the richness of AM fungal taxa in soil is in a complex relationship with the management history of a particular site and its production scheme (Hijri et al. 2006). For example, conventional high-input agriculture with long-term maize monoculture demonstrated low AM fungal diversity, while substantially higher diversity of AM fungi was found in a field trial where a 7-year crop rotation was performed under lower levels of inorganic fertilizer input and chemical pest control (Hijri et al. 2006). Sustainable agricultural practices including crop rotations, reduced or no-tillage practices, and organic farming practices increase total microbial biomass and caused a shift in the soil microbial community structure towards a more fungal-dominated community (Six et al. 2006). It becomes apparent that low-input agriculture involving an AM-friendly crop rotation may provide better conditions to preserve AM fungi diversity by preventing the selection for the few AM fungi species tolerating high nutrient levels.

Changes in the sequence of crops grown on agricultural land – crop rotation – are known to enhance the yield of grain (e.g., wheat) crops by 20% or more (Kirkegaard

et al. 2008). Some of the principal mechanisms responsible for the benefits of crop rotation include (1) effects on disease control, and (2) improved nitrogen nutrition and water supply, besides affecting changes in rhizosphere biology and allelopathy effects or soil structure (Kirkegaard et al. 2008). To successfully integrate mycorrhiza in cropping systems, different factors of production systems and management practices have to be considered. However, the detailed knowledge of mycorrhizal conditions in sustainable agro-ecosystems is scarce (Rillig 2004b). To improve it further, efficient and fast quality indicators of AM fungi populations in the field, including relative field mycorrhizal dependency, soil mycorrhizal infectivity, and mycorrhizal fungi development on plants, need to be developed (Plenchette et al. 2005; Vosátka and Albrechtová 2008).

10.3.2 Mycorrhiza-Friendly Management in Sustainable Plant–Soil Production Systems

In order to exploit beneficial effects of AM fungi in sustainable agricultural plant–soil production systems, the appropriate management practices have to be applied. These include the design of suitable crop rotation in cropping systems, appropriate tillage practices, the introduction of multi-microbial inoculants, and the reduced use of agrochemicals, including pesticides. The appropriate management of mycorrhizal symbiosis could enable a reduction in the use of chemical fertilizers and water supply (Verma and Arya 1998; Sharma and Adholeya 2004; Hart and Trevors 2005; Subramanian et al. 2006; Wu and Xia 2006). In this context, many reports suggest a substantial increase in soil fertility and, consequently, crop productivity following AM inoculation in low-to medium input cropping systems (Harrier and Watson 2003; Johansson et al. 2004; Hart and Trevors 2005; Gosling et al. 2006; Liebig et al. 2006; Perner et al. 2006). Practical management of AM fungal populations and AM symbiosis in agricultural soils and substrates can be of two types: (1) the manipulation of indigenous AM fungi through selected agronomical practices, or (2) artificial crop inoculation with AM inoculum (Sieverding 1991; Gianinazzi and Vosátka 2004; Vosátka and Albrechtová 2008). From an agronomic practice point of view, the most important factors in the management of indigenous AM fungi populations are fertilization, its intensity and method of application, pesticide management, tillage practices, and cropping system (Sieverding 1991). A better understanding of the impacts of agronomic practices on soil microorganisms and the dissemination of this information to end-users will ensure an opportunity for the utilization of the AM fungi that could lead to enhanced sustainable agricultural production.

One of the major priority management issues in sustainable systems is how to maintain nutrient levels (particularly P in the soluble form) compatible for AM development. A significant positive effect of AM inoculation is reported in low or P-deficient soils. This is particularly obvious when slow release biofertilizers are used. In contrast, highly available soil P often limits AM colonization.

For example, Hao et al. (2008) showed a negative effect of AM application on growth and P uptake by maize plants grown in soil rich in P compared to those having low P supply. When P availability is relatively high with simultaneous low N supply, AM fungi did not promote plant N acquisition suggesting that they can act as a carbon drain to plants (Reynolds et al. 2005; Nogueira and Cardoso 2006). Even when P availability is low and AM colonization levels are high, as may occur in organic and biodynamic agricultural systems, AM fungi may not always facilitate plant growth for reasons not yet fully explained (Ryan and Graham 2002).

Irrigation does not belong to the major factors affecting development and efficacy of AM fungi. Mycorrhiza can function under irrigated-to-dry conditions while frequent overlogging can be inhibitory to AM symbionts, since most AM fungi seem to be rather resistant to drought stress (Auge 2001). The application of agrochemicals to soils in order to attain optimum yields severely affects the mycorrhizal symbiosis (Kjoller and Rosendahl 2000; Schweiger et al. 2001). Such effects could be neutral, as reported for the impact of mefenoxam or fludioxonil on soybean (*Glycine max*) (Murillo-Williams and Pedersen 2008), or inhibitory, as observed with certain fungicides, herbicides, or insecticides (Thingstrup et al. 2000; Pimienta-Barrios et al. 2003). Another factor affecting the colonization of AM fungi are the tillage practices applied in agriculture systems. Tillage interferes with AM fungi abundance and lowers the AM fungal diversity (Jansa et al. 2002, 2003). Therefore, such practices need to be considered while designing sustainable farming systems (Gosling et al. 2006). To consolidate this hypothesis, different tillage treatments including moldboard, shred-bedding, subsoil-bedding (Alguacil et al. 2008), plowing, or chiseling (Jansa et al. 2003) have been investigated using maize as a test crop. Although no differences in the effects of tillage treatments on AM fungi diversity were observed, yet a moderate change in mycorrhizal diversity was reported. Such variations in mycorrhizal diversity could be due to (1) the differences in tolerance to the tillage-induced disruption of the hyphae among the different AM fungal species, (2) changes in nutrient content of the soil, (3) changes in microbial activity, and (4) changes in weed populations in response to soil tillage. These findings therefore suggest that the frequent disturbances caused by tillage practices should be avoided. Moreover, conservation tillage in combination with high mycorrhization seems to be a strategy to reduce root pathogens, as was shown for maize (Franco et al. 2008).

Crop rotation has proved to be an efficient tool for AM fungi management (Gosling et al. 2006), and adopting an appropriate crop sequence is an important part in developing sustainable production systems in many areas of the world (Kirkegaard et al. 2008). For example, the use of nonmycotrophic or low mycotrophic crops in crop sequences can lead to a substantial decrease or even the disappearance of indigenous mycorrhizal populations (Harrier and Watson 2003; Plenchette et al. 2005). The involvement of intercropping plants producing nonfavorable root exudates to AM fungi development can also have negative effects on the maintenance of indigenous AM fungal populations. This phenomenon was observed for some cruciferous plants that are inserted as cover crops between two cash crops to improve soil nitrate

fertility (Grodzinsky 1992). The consequences of practices using cruciferous nitrate trapping plants, such as mustard (*Brassica campestris*), on mycorrhizal fungi survival have not yet been fully considered (Plenchette et al. 2005). The allelopathic properties of cereal crops can be related to low responsiveness to AM fungi or even carbon drain effects in different crop rotation systems and have to be considered. The most important grain crops like wheat, rice, maize, and sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) may exhibit allelopathy and show variable response to mycorrhizal inoculation under different soil environments (Javaid 2008).

An appropriate design of crop rotation involving the use of AM fungi may result in improved mineral nutrition. The proper management of cover crops inducing enhanced AM fungi colonization can increase the availability of soil P pool (both organic and inorganic) by stimulating microbial activity and release of root exudates (Nelson and Janke 2007). For example, legumes fixing biologically atmospheric nitrogen are often supposed to be capable of bringing energy savings when used as a cover crop. For maize production, it has been shown that under P-deficient conditions, legumes supplied with phosphate rock increase P acquisition by a subsequent maize crop compared to direct application of phosphate rock to maize (Pypers et al. 2007). The results of this trial suggested that the legume in the rotation system had other positive effects, possibly soil-microbial effects enhancing maize growth and production. Nevertheless, caution should be exercised when simultaneous application of intercropping legumes and mycorrhizal inoculation is practised. Arbuscular mycorrhizas can alter competitive interactions between plants that markedly differ in their dependence upon mycorrhizas, and also during intra- and inter-specific competition between similarly dependent plant species (Schroeder-Moreno and Janos 2008). Yao et al. (2008), while using AM fungi in a citrus-leguminous *Stylosanthes gracilis* intercropping system, reported negative growth effects of citrus due to the increased nutrient-competing capacity of *S. gracilis* and, hence, suggested that AM fungi is not a potential biofertilizer candidate in a citrus-*S. gracilis* intercropping system. However, the study of Brehmer et al. (2008) concludes that legumes grown as bioenergy crops do not present energy savings, and thus do not contribute to sustainability. The authors state that the benefits of nitrogen fixation by legumes should be carefully assessed and best utilized within the emerging sector of nonfood applications. The influence of AM fungi on soil processes is complex and difficult to define, in part because it varies with plant and fungal genotypes as well as with environmental conditions (Hamel 2004). Biocontrol can be another benefit of suitable crop rotation. Integrating appropriate break crops into the farming system should contribute to disease control. Break crops impede the life cycle of crop-specific pathogens by growing a nonhost crop, and lead to better nutrient, water, and soil management (Kirkegaard et al. 2008). From a practical point of view, the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices may not yield desirable effects immediately, and hence numerous field trials in conventional agriculture have turned to organic systems. Due to various reasons, the natural populations of AM fungi in soils can be greatly reduced (Harrier and Watson 2003; Plenchette et al. 2005; Gosling et al. 2006).

10.3.3 *Specifics of Mycorrhiza Applications in Horticultural Crop Production*

High responsiveness to mycorrhiza is common for the majority of horticultural crops (Plenchette et al. 1983; Azcon-Aguilar and Barea 1997). In this context, the mycorrhizal biotechnology, i.e., introduction and/or maintenance and management of mycorrhizal fungi populations in the cultivation system, should become an important component of horticultural production (Vosátka and Albrechtová 2008). In floriculture, mycorrhizal application has shown a substantial increase in the yield properties, such as aboveground biomass (Sramek et al. 2000), number of flowers per plant (up to 24%) for marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) plants (Flores et al. 2007), flower diameter, or shortening the period to flowering. The degree of crop mycorrhizal responsiveness plays an important role, particularly when cultivation conditions involve either soil-less or fumigated substrates where indigenous mycorrhizal fungal populations are either lacking or greatly reduced.

In high-value greenhouse crop production in horticulture, the introduction of mycorrhiza can be important in soil-less substrates lacking microorganisms and during the production of micropropagated plants (Vosátka and Albrechtová 2008). For example, the AM fungi are not usually present in peat, while some ericoid and ectomycorrhizal fungi are very common in peat substrates (Perner et al. 2006). Peat based soil-less substrate is usually enriched with nutrients, and when excessive P-enrichment of substrates is used, it can suppress the germination of endomycorrhizal spores. A mycorrhizal-friendly peat amendment can have a high N content and low P content promoting spore growth of *Gigaspora margarita* Becker and Hall (Ma et al. 2006). In horticultural crop systems, plants are usually transplanted after the first propagation stage, and the conditions found in the transplanting substrate are crucial for plant survival. Only a few reports are available on the use of mycorrhizal inoculation when plants are grown in soil-less hydroponic culture systems as described for the production of axenic arbuscular mycorrhizae (MacDonald 1981) or nutrient film technique (NFT) in hydroponic culture systems (Mathew and Johari 1988). George and Lee (2005) suggested that a modified NFT system might be a useful way to mass-produce mycorrhizal crops and inoculum for commercial horticultural purposes.

Mycorrhizal inoculation can be successfully used in horticulture for tissue cultured plants. Micropropagation is a well-established and widely used technology for propagation of many vegetables and spices (Vestberg and Estaun 1994). Plants propagated under in vitro conditions can suffer from an initial lack of beneficial soil microorganisms while they can greatly benefit from inoculation when transferred to post vitro unsterile conditions. To alleviate transplantation shock and to increase plant survival after transplantation, successful plant acclimatization has to be achieved. The most crucial phase of acclimatization is the development of a functional root system that mediates effective nutrient acquisition and water supply. There are three stages during which mycorrhizal inoculation could be included in the micropropagation procedures: (1) rooting phase, (2) at the beginning of acclimatization

(weaning) phase, and (3) after the acclimatization phase but before starting the post-acclimatization period under greenhouse conditions (Azcon-Aguilar and Barea 1997; Taylor and Harrier 2003).

Studies on the inoculation of micropropagated plants again underlined the necessity of selecting an efficient combination of mycorrhizal fungi and host plant genotype for a particular substrate and cultivation conditions (Vestberg et al. 2002). As was documented in the case of red raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*) inoculated with *Gigaspora* sp. (Taylor and Harrier 2000), the whole range of plant growth responses from enhancement to growth depression can occur. Current possibilities of using consortia of rhizotrophic microorganisms for the inoculation of micropropagated plants are under investigation, and could lead to the development of composite inoculants of mycorrhizal fungi and nitrogen-fixing and/or phosphate-solubilizing bacteria (Vosátka et al. 2000; Gryndler et al. 2002; Vestberg et al. 2004).

10.4 Drawbacks and Potentials of Mycorrhizal Applications in Sustainable Agriculture

During the last decade, mycorrhizal technology reached a more developed stage by becoming an industry supported by extensive research and commercial applications that emphasized ecological aspects of the use of mycorrhiza (Gianinazzi and Vosátka 2004; Vosátka et al. 2008). Since large-scale inoculations with AM fungi have become a reality, the drawbacks of these applications should be carefully considered with regard to their profitability.

An important question for using AM fungi in sustainable crop production systems is whether generic or tuned products should be used. One of the drawbacks of using mycorrhizal inoculants in field is that there are already indigenous populations of AM fungi in soils. Such indigenous fungi can be highly competitive in securing their colonization niche from the introduced fungi. Even though introduced strains can be less efficient than indigenous ones (Schwartz et al. 2006), in some cases the adaptation of the native fungi has shown a competitive advantage over the introduced strains (Batkhuugyin et al. 2000; Oliveira et al. 2005). This is often more pronounced in degraded ecosystems with extreme soil properties where native populations of AM fungi can perform better in the environment of their origin compared to other nonnative symbionts in degraded soils (Batkhuugyin et al. 2000). Furthermore, there can be significant differences in performance even among different geographical isolates that belong to the same fungal species. It is possible to isolate native mycorrhizal strains for a particular ecosystem, to produce inoculum, and to re-introduce native strains in the field on a large scale. Some commercial companies are applying inoculum tuning to target conditions where native mycorrhizal populations have been reduced (Gianinazzi and Vosátka 2004; Vosátka and Albrechtová 2008).

For the successful introduction of inocula into the field, numerous ecological factors have to be considered. These include soil properties, level of fertilizer input,

and the degree and potential of existing fungal population (Vosátka and Dodd 2002). To realize all the potentials of mycorrhizal management and applications, it is absolutely vital to conduct reference field trials prior to large-scale applications, which are of great importance for properly tuning the best combinations of mycorrhizal fungal inoculum for target conditions. And, hence, a careful selection of symbionts intended for use should be employed prior to large-scale production and application. By tuning the appropriate inoculants to the target cultivation system, it is possible to achieve economic feasibility of mycorrhizal technology (Vosátka and Dodd 2002).

Molecular identification of different isolates in a field to reliably distinguish native and introduced populations is needed to evaluate ecological and economic consequences of artificial inoculation into field conditions. Although, within species, genetic differences among AM fungi have been shown to differentially affect plant growth, very little is known about the degree of genetic diversity in AM fungal populations (Croll et al. 2008). It is apparent that differences in crop responsiveness to various mycorrhizal isolates can be based on genetic variability in AM fungal populations that affects host–plant fitness. The AM fungi are asexually reproducing organisms that show coexistence of a population of many genomes (Hijri and Sanders 2005). This implies a high genetic variation of within-AM fungi populations, though the effects of within-AM fungi species or within-population variation on plant growth have received less attention (Koch et al. 2006). Recently, success has been achieved in molecular identification of different isolates of *G. margarita* (Yokoyama et al. 2005) and *G. intraradices* using newly developed simple sequence repeat, nuclear gene intron, and mitochondrial ribosomal gene intron markers (Croll et al. 2008). Advances in molecular identification further support the importance of adjusting the tuning of introduced commercial inocula to a specific target combination of a crop production system.

Among different types of mycorrhiza, AM fungi exhibit relatively low specificity in host–symbiont formation, which is advantageous for natural spreading of arbuscular mycorrhiza in a plant community as well as for large-scale commercial use of mycorrhizal inoculants in agriculture in different agro-ecosystems. However, the last decade of AM fungi research has revealed far more selectivity of AM fungi–plant associations, and a greater dependence of resulting functions on particular host/fungus combinations than previously suggested (Piotrowski and Rillig 2008). It has been proposed that genetic diversity, either within or among AM fungal species, rather than the species richness of AM fungi, could play a pivotal role in the diversity, functioning and overall performance of plants (Sanders 2004). Host plants in a field could provide a heterogeneous environment favoring certain genotypes. Such preferences, in turn, may partly explain the patterns of genetic diversity within populations. The effects of specific host/AM fungi combinations range from beneficial to parasitic; hence, the next step in AM fungi application will entail an effort to employ advantageous combinations. The tuning of commercial inoculum is regarded not as management practices but as necessity to achieve optimum benefits from mycorrhizal association (Vosátka and Albrechtová 2008).

In crop breeding programs, progress has been made in the isolation and functional analyses of genes controlling yield and tolerance to abiotic stresses (Takeda

and Matsuoka 2008), which have to be considered with respect to the type of environment for which a crop cultivar is targeted. Crop breeding targeted to drought tolerance focuses on physiological yield drivers such as water uptake, water use efficiency, and harvest index (Reynolds and Tuberosa 2008). The AM fungi can directly mediate improved drought tolerance via changes of plant physiological traits, such as higher leaf water potential, transpiration rates, stomatal conductance, and relative water content, and alleviate drought stress conditions, as reported for citrus (Wu and Xia 2006), chillies (*Capsicum annuum* L.) (Mena-Violante et al. 2006), and tomato (*Lycopersicon lycopersicum*) plants (Subramanian et al. 2006). Indirect effects of mycorrhiza on crop drought resistance can be mediated by the introduction of glomalin into soil, quantified operationally in soils as glomalin-related soil protein, which is able to aggregate soil particles and increase water stable aggregates (Rillig 2004a) having a positive effect on soil moisture. In conventional agriculture, the breeding programs have not considered mycorrhiza-oriented breeding traits, and crops are selected to favor solely nutrient acquisition in high input systems without considering the role of mycorrhiza in nutrient management of soils (Sawers et al. 2008). This is a major drawback to mycorrhiza application, though it can be circumvented by the proper selection of crop genotype. Thus, there is an urgent need to manipulate plant genetic factors that impact the cost–benefit balance of mycorrhizal applications, or more specifically, the rate at which resources are diverted to the fungus in return for a given level of enhanced performance or reduction in production costs.

One of the main potentials of mycorrhizas for sustainable agriculture is that they induce plant physiological changes that affect the quality and safety of food crops, including a higher production of antioxidants or essential oils, or reduced uptake of pollutants such as heavy metals to plant tissues (Toussaint 2007; Toussaint et al. 2007; Vosátka and Albrechtová 2008). Although no clear mechanism other than an improvement in the nutritional status (mainly P) has been proposed (Toussaint 2007), yet the beneficial fungus–plant interactions has shown enhancement in productivity of crops by synthesizing an increased level of active compounds (Rai et al. 2001). For example, the suitable selection of host plant–fungus genotype led to an altered accumulation of essential oil levels in AM-colonized plants of *Mentha arvensis* (Freitas et al. 2004) and sweet basil *Ocimum basilicum* L. (Copetta et al. 2006, 2007; Toussaint et al. 2007). Thus, the use of mycorrhiza is being extended to herbal plants in order to get maximum benefits by the steadily increasing herbal medicine industry (Ernst 2000). However, to achieve good outcomes from mycorrhizal inoculations in crop production, it is necessary to incorporate inoculum in the production systems in the most effective manner. The mycorrhiza should be introduced in the plant propagation as soon as possible so that a reliable and effective mycorrhization of crop plants is achieved. Unfortunately, there is no universal method of inocula application, while some planting and plant production systems require specific ways of application. Mycorrhizal inocula, however, could be applied in several ways. For example, they can be applied in dry formulation form. For this, a layer of inoculum is placed below the seeds or can be mixed with the growing substrate for containerized plants. Either of these methods leads to its spreading into

the planting hole. When the mycorrhizal product is used as a gel formulation, it can be easily applied either to the planting hole or the bare roots during transplanting. Additionally, the root balls can be dipped into a gel product to cover their surface and ensure mycorrhizal colonization of newly emerging roots. For large-scale applications under field environments, mechanical devices are needed (mixing tanks for application in substrates or sowing machines for dispersing granulated inocula).

Currently, there is increasing demand for the incorporation of bioproducts from organic agriculture and new alternatives that enhance sustainability in agriculture. There are obviously certain problems that need to be seriously addressed. For example, it is necessary to educate farmers about the benefits of mycorrhizal inoculation and organic farming so that the reliance on agrochemicals is minimized. Also, the questionable capacity of organic agriculture to provide sufficient yield should be addressed (Connor 2008). Some analyses have estimated the capability of organic agriculture to feed three to four billion people, well below the present and projected world population (Smil 2001). Recently, a new concept of eco-agriculture was proposed for achieving productivity in perpetuity (Kesavan and Swaminathan 2008). That includes developing farming/cropping systems that improve water use efficiency and minimize risks of water pollution, contamination, and eutrophication thereby converting the degraded/desertified soils to restored land use for enhancing biodiversity and improving the environment (Lal 2008). The efficient management of mycorrhizas and soil biota, in general, forms an important component of this technology.

In developing countries, many farmers are using less agrochemicals and more biocontrol agents like species of *Trichoderma*, *Bacillus*, and also mycorrhizal products as an alternative to agrochemicals (Kesavan and Swaminathan 2008). Apparently such bioagents are more often used due to economic reasons, since agrochemicals are too expensive, rather than from mere interest in sustainable crop production. Official marketing of mycorrhiza as a biocontrol agent is currently unrealistic, because the registration of mycorrhizal products with biocontrol activity is complicated and too costly for inoculant producers (Whipps 2004). Mycorrhizal products are usually sold as growth promoters for two simple reasons: (1) a large-scale screening process would be needed to specify strains acting as biocontrol agents for specific plants and environmental conditions, and (2) biocontrol strains would have to be formally registered (Whipps 2004). Despite all these facts, the trend of using natural resources like AM fungi, seems to be increasing and could become prevalent due to increasing demands placed on safety and quality of foods across the globe. Another driving force for stronger focus on sustainable agriculture in developing countries is indeed continuous depletion of soil and water resources.

10.5 Conclusion

In properly managed agriculture systems, mycorrhiza can act as a biofertilizer, biocontrol agent and soil improver. When accurate inoculum tuning is accomplished and used for formulation of mycorrhizal products, the large-scale application of

such fungi is not a threat either to the biodiversity or to soil fertility. Genotype-related differences in host plant–AM fungus combinations can be discerned which could be attributed to the differences in the balance between P uptake by the fungal pathway and direct uptake via the roots of plants. Furthermore, maintaining sustainability in agriculture requires attention on how new breeding programs could help to attain maximum benefits following mycorrhizal symbiosis. Recent advances in molecular breeding approaches are helping to optimize the use of AM–fungal symbioses for improvement of crop productivity. However, there is also a need to produce efficient varieties which are able to use AM fungi in more effective ways for nutrient acquisition (Sawers et al. 2008).

Despite its potential and proven ability, microbe management currently plays only a secondary role in agricultural practices. One of the reasons is that there is a lack of legislative policy focusing explicitly on soil ecosystems and degradation processes. And, currently, there is no international policy framework to guide sustainable soil management, though there are some guidelines related to that issue in the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (Stringer 2008). Another area of concern is the lack of awareness about the benefits of AM fungi among farmers besides their inconsistent performance under different ecological niches. The application of soil microbial inoculations is further compounded by poor understanding of ecology, population dynamics, and functionality of AM fungi over a range of environments (Khan et al. 2007). And, hence, if the microbes are to be used in a predictable and useful way, focus has to be directed towards understanding the basic biology of these microbes and their interaction with host plants (Hart and Trevors 2005). Additionally, in order to expand the use of AM fungi, inoculum tuning to monitor and predict the functioning of introduced mycorrhiza in crop production systems able to improve soil fertility and pest management should be given priority. Despite such problems, the mycorrhiza industry has developed quickly. If farmers are provided with sufficient training as to how these organisms are properly applied, the use of AM fungi is likely to maximize not only the productivity of crops while reducing the use of agrochemicals but is also likely to reduce soil pollution.

Acknowledgement The authors acknowledge the funding of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic from the projects No. 1P04OE187, the EU project E! 3375 EUROAGRI +MYCOTAGRIF, the Centre for Bioindication and Revitalization 1M0571, and the Institutional project AV0Z60050516 of the Institute of Botany, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.

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Chapter 11

Enhancement of Rhizobia–Legumes Symbioses and Nitrogen Fixation for Crops Productivity Improvement

Hamdi Hussein Zahran

Abstract Rhizobia form a very interesting symbiotic relationship with leguminous plants. This relationship has attracted the attention of biologists all over the world due to the great impact of legumes for sustaining nutritional demands to humans and animals. Great efforts have been made to improve the symbiotic N₂-fixing ability and productivity of legumes. The first step to improve legume productivity is to select effective (N₂-fixing) rhizobia to be used as inoculants for the respective legumes. Recent studies reported about the wild-legume rhizobial ability to establish successful symbiosis with their original hosts, as well as with legume crops. In addition to the traditional approaches, modern strategies like genetic and biotechnological tools are adopted to unravel several molecular and genetic mechanisms controlling the rhizobia–legumes symbioses and to enhance N₂ fixation and productivity of the legumes. Extensive research work should be continued to improve the inoculation technology using modern approaches, especially in N-poor lands. Successful symbioses between the bacteria and the legumes are not sustained unless the effects of environmental stresses such as salinity and drought are modulated. The majority of arable lands of the globe experience one or more environmental stresses, therefore stress-tolerant and effective N₂-fixing legumes–rhizobia symbioses will be the only productive systems on these lands.

11.1 Introduction

Cultivation in the dry land of arid climates is increasingly advocated as a strategy to protect and reverse soil fertility decline, thus sustaining agricultural production and prevent serious nitrogen (N) deficits in many tropical agro-ecosystems.

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Effective management of N in the environment is an essential element of agricultural sustainability. An essential source of N input into the soil is the biologically-fixed N₂ (Graham 2008), which is used directly by the plant, and so is less susceptible to volatilization, denitrification, and leaching. About 80% of this biologically-fixed N₂ comes from symbioses involving leguminous plants and various rhizobial species. Worldwide, legumes are grown on approximately 250 mha and fix about 90 million metric tons (Tg) of N₂ per year. N₂ fixation-based systems (e.g., legumes and trees) are the most promising and potentially profitable in extensive agricultural systems for coping with the N export problems (Zahran 1999, 2001; Graham and Vance 2000). The significance of N₂ fixation of rhizobium–legume symbiosis in global agriculture, in the light of modern biotechnological developments, was recently reviewed (Zahran 2005). The wide use of legumes as green manure or biofertilizer is mainly associated with their ability to establish symbiotic associations with N₂-fixing bacteria (NFB), collectively called rhizobia (Zahran 2006a). These bacteria are among the most studied group of microorganisms, mainly because of their potential to replace N-fertilizers, with emphasis on their key role in achieving sustainability of N-poor soils (Menna et al. 2006).

The significance of rhizobia–legume symbiosis for soil fertility improvement is well known. The root-nodule bacteria (rhizobia and other newly discovered NFB) establish substantial symbiotic associations with the leguminous plants to utilize atmospheric N₂. These diverse groups of bacteria form associations with crop (forage and grain), as well as with wild legumes (Zahran 2006b). The leguminosae is one of the most important and largest plant families and is composed of about 750 genera containing 16,000–19,000 species distributed worldwide and having major impacts on agriculture, the environment, animal/human nutrition, and health. Plants of the family leguminosae (Fabaceae) are able to form a symbiosis with bacteria (termed rhizobia), which leads to the development of a new organ on the roots (and sometimes stems) of the plant, the nodule, in which the bacteria fix N₂. The legume–*Rhizobium* symbiosis have tremendous ecological and agronomic importance and constitute a significant source of N, and consequently play an essential role in structure ecosystems and sustainable agriculture (Dita et al. 2006).

Current bacterial taxonomy divides a group of Gram-negative bacteria, the Proteobacteria, into a number of branches, α , β , γ , δ , and ϵ . The α -branch has seven orders, one of which is the rhizobiales, which has 11 families. Four of these families (Bradyrhizobiaceae, Methylobacteriaceae, Phyllobacteriaceae, and Rhizobiaceae) contain genera that can nodulate and fix N₂ in association with legumes (Sprent 2008). The β -proteobacterial branch also contains seven orders. One of these orders, Burkholderiales, is divided into five families, and one of these families, the Burkholderiaceae, contains two genera, *Burkholderia* and *Cupriavidus* having species known to nodulate legumes (Sprent 2008). Several species of *Burkholderia* have been shown to nodulate mimosoid legumes (Barrett and Parker 2005; Chen et al. 2005), with varying levels of host specificity, some of which are capable of fixing N₂ ex planta. However, it remains to be seen how these β -rhizobia become important in certain environments. The nodule-forming bacteria are currently divided into about 50–60 species within about 10–12 genera, with 8 genera

among the alphaproteobacteria: *Azorhizobium*, *Bradyrhizobium*, *Mesorhizobium*, *Methylobacterium*, *Rhizobium*, *Sinorhizobium* (*Ensifer*), *Devosia*, and *Blastobacter*, and 2 genera (*Burkholderia* and *Cupriavidus*) within the β -proteobacteria, in addition to some species in the γ -proteobacteria (Barrett and Parker 2005, 2006; Wang et al. 2006). However, the picture of rhizobia diversity is far from clear, especially considering the wide geographical distribution and the large number of leguminous species which might harbor novel root-nodule bacteria (Wei et al. 2007).

The desert areas are characterized by a water deficiency due to the atmospheric dryness, and very low rainfall, resulting in seriously-degraded vegetation and a progressive reduction of biodiversity in the ecosystem (Verdoy et al. 2006; Essendoubi et al. 2007). Rhizobia encountered in desert areas play an important role as root symbionts involved in N_2 fixation of some leguminous plants (e.g., *Acacia*), which are pioneering species that contribute to soil fertility (Zahran 2005). Rhizobial bacteria occur naturally in most agricultural soils whose survival is affected directly both by drought and salinity (Zahran 1999). To make optimal use of the N_2 -fixation process, the physical and physiological conditions that affect the survival of rhizobia during desiccation should be optimized (Vriezen et al. 2006).

The root-nodule bacteria from wild legumes are multipurpose bacteria with very interesting characteristics; this concept was recently reviewed (Zahran 2006a). They have a wide host range, a characteristic that offers these legumes an ecological advantage as they can form nodules with other wild or crop legumes (Zahran et al. 2003), and can be a source of genetic information to improve characteristics of other rhizobia. The significance of rhizobia from wild legumes is their symbiotic N_2 -fixing activity, which improves soil fertility and plant productivity. Woody (trees) legumes like *Faidherbia albida*, *Inga oerstediana*, *Prosopis lavesata*, and *Pachycereus hollianus* host NFB, and occasionally arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF) may contribute to the soil organic carbon pool and soil fertility (Grossman et al. 2006; Bernatchez et al. 2008; González Ruiz et al. 2008). These leguminous trees usually create localized distributions of soil N, C, and P, through N_2 fixation and subsequent litter fall. The companion crops benefit from the N_2 fixation of trees by reabsorbing N mineralized from decomposing N-litter and prunings. Nitrogen may transfer directly by belowground processes from tree to grass, e.g., via root exudates and/or common mycorrhizal networks (Sierra and Nygren 2006). The nodulation of four tree legumes (*Calliandra calothyrsus*, *Gliricidia sepium*, *Leucaena leucocephala*, and *Sesbania sesban*) and the ecology of their native rhizobial populations in tropical soils has been examined (Bala et al. 2003). *C. calothyrsus* had the highest nodulation rate in the soils used; however, inoculation tests showed *L. leucocephala* to be the most promiscuous species, *G. sepium* to be the most effective symbiosis, and *S. sesban* to be the most specific for both nodulation and symbiotic effectiveness.

Salinity of soil is one of the most serious forms of land degradation in the world, especially in arid lands, where insufficient precipitation causes extensive reliance on irrigation. Globally, about 7% of all land areas is affected by soil salinity (Unni and Rao 2001). Of the total 1.5 billion ha of cultivated land, about 5% are affected

by excess salt content. Among the most common effects of soil salinity is growth inhibition by Na^+ and Cl^- . Elevated Na^+ in soil solution inhibits the uptake of other nutrients (e.g., P, K, Fe, Cu, and Zn) directly by interfering with various transporters in the root plasma membrane (Giri et al. 2007). Salinity has profound effects on crop production, therefore, reducing the spread of salinization and increasing the salt-tolerance of high-yielding crops, are becoming important global issues. Mineral nitrogen deficiency is another important limiting factor for plant growth in arid zones, and rhizobia–legume symbioses are the primary sources of fixed N_2 in these habitats (Verdoy et al. 2006). Salinated soil contains very little N and thus is not suitable for cultivation of most plants. An appropriate solution to this situation would be the cultivation of plants that are able to fix N_2 through symbiotic systems (Chen et al. 2000). Most leguminous plants, however, are sensitive to even low levels of salinity. In addition, most rhizobia are also sensitive to moderate and higher levels of salinity during both the free-living stage and the symbiotic process. Legumes used in the reclamation of degraded lands (e.g., salt-affected lands) include *P. juliflora*, *Acacia nilotica*, *A. auriculifonnis*, *Dalbergia sisso*, and *Glyricidia maculate*. However, both legume growth and the process of nodule formation are more sensitive to salinity than are rhizobia (Zahran 1999). For instance, *Sinorhizobium meliloti* tolerated up to 300 mM NaCl, while nodulation and N_2 fixation of its host (*M. sativa*) was inhibited at about 100 mM salt (Graham and Vance 2000).

Major advances in our understanding of the relations between legumes and rhizobia are being made using the legume models *Medicago truncatula* and *Lotus japonicus*. Despite the taxonomic diversity, all rhizobia establish symbioses using the same molecular mechanisms, involving signal molecule exchange between the two partners. Host plants excrete inducing compounds (mainly flavonoids) that activate regulatory NodD proteins and induce the expression of bacterial nodulation (*nod*) genes. *Nod* genes are involved in the biosynthesis of the lipochitooligosaccharides (nod factors) that are required for specific infection and nodulation of legumes (Ba et al. 2002). This chapter reviews several reports to assess the significance of symbiotic bacteria (rhizobia and other nodule bacteria) for the enhancement of N_2 fixation and the consequent effect on productivity improvement of the economically important crop plants, either legumes or nonlegume-associated crops. The recent developments in molecular genetics and their usefulness in improving *Rhizobium*–legume symbiosis are also reviewed and discussed.

11.2 Molecular and Genetic Mechanisms Controlling the Symbiosis

The soil bacteria (rhizobia) within the phylogenetic family Rhizobiaceae have the unique ability to infect and establish a N_2 -fixing symbiosis on the roots or stems of leguminous plants. The establishment of the symbiosis involves complex interactions between the host and the rhizobia, resulting in the formation of a special

organ, the nodule, which the bacteria colonize as intracellular symbionts. Two general developments have contributed to the recent explosion of research progress in this area (Stacey et al. 2006): first, the adoption of two genetic model legumes, *M. truncatula* and *L. japonicus*, and second, the application of modern methods in functional genomics (transcriptomic, proteomic, and metabolomic analyses). The first *Rhizobium* genes for nitrogen fixation (*nif*) and for nodulation (*nod*) were cloned in the early 1980s (Long 2001), and soon many more *nif*, *nod*, and *fix* (symbiotic fixation) genes were discovered. The rules for genome organization are different for different rhizobia. Symbiotic genes are clustered or dispersed on plasmids and can spread at high frequency by conjugation, while in others, the genes are scattered among many chromosomes and plasmids. With all of this genomic diversity it is no wonder that systematists have had a field day classifying and reclassifying the root-nodule bacteria. Numerous genes coding for transporters (sugar, peptide, nitrate, and H⁺-ATPase transporters) were shown to be upregulated in *L. japonicus* and *M. truncatula* nodules, suggesting an important role of these transporters in the exchange of carbon and nitrogenous compounds between legumes and rhizobia.

The DNA microarray and transcript profiling studies of nodulation have been considered only recently; however, the large numbers of expressed sequence tags (ESTs) available for legume plants, in addition to cDNA and oligonucleotides, have made large-scale transcriptomic studies on nodulation possible. Studying the gene expression using DNA microarray became possible because of the availability of the complete genomic sequence of one of the rhizobial strains (*S. meliloti* 1021). The DNA microarray technology has revolutionized gene expression studies by providing a powerful tool for parallel measurement of gene expression on a whole genome scale. In contrast to the labor-intensive gene fusion technique, this technology achieves a higher coverage and provides the direct determination of mRNA levels to monitor an expression profile (Rüberg et al. 2003). The microsatellites or simple sequence repeats (SSRs), which are ubiquitous in genomes of various organisms, can be used as genetic marker. The analysis of SSR in rhizobial genome provides useful information for a variety of applications in population genetics of rhizobia (Ya-mei et al. 2008). The occurrence, relative abundance, and relative densities of SSRs of *B. japonicum*, *M. loti*, and *S. meliloti* were analyzed and are available in the genomes sequenced database. The motif and distribution of SSRs among the three rhizobia genomes were similar, and the tetranucleotide, pentanucleotide and hexanucleotide repeats were predominant and indicated higher mutation rates in these species. This marker can be used to find the gene position quickly and exactly and then to scan, identify, and annotate the gene, and to study gene function. Thus, the SSR marker had an important effect on functional genome research of rhizobia.

Although rhizobia colonize roots in a way that is reminiscent of pathogenic microorganisms, no host plant defense reactions are triggered during successful symbiosis (Mithöfer 2002). The question is how defense responses in effective symbiosis might be suppressed? A prerequisite for understanding the molecular mechanisms underlying the control of defense in symbiosis is the identification of

receptors, as well as the elucidation of subsequent signal transduction events involved in the onset of plant defense for both rhizobial elicitors and suppressors (Mithöfer 2002). Some of the defense-related genes, e.g., those coding for enzymes of the phytoalexin biosynthesis pathway and genes coding for proteins that are involved in cell wall modifications, were also regulated during the nodulation process. Interestingly, the defense-related genes were upregulated during the early stages of nodulation (recognition and infection) and then decreased in later stages of nodule development, suggesting that the invading rhizobia suppress the host's defense to successfully colonize roots and so form nodules (Stacey et al. 2006).

Substantial progress has been made recently to understand how rhizobia enter into symbiotic relationships with legumes. The establishment of the legume–*Rhizobium* symbiosis requires recognition of the bacterial microsymbiont at the root epidermis followed by initiation of plant infection and nodule organogenesis. The symbiotic N₂-fixing rhizobia harbor a set of nodulation (*nod*) genes that control the synthesis of modified lipochitooligosaccharides, called nod factors; required for nodulation (Moulin et al. 2004). Studies on nod factor activities, coupled with the recent cloning of genes required for nodule initiation, are leading to an understanding of the first steps in the signaling pathways. Moreover, studies have shown that phytohormones (e.g., auxin and cytokinin) are involved in controlling or mediating symbiotic responses. The challenge for the future will be to establish how nod factor signaling integrates with phytohormone activities in the control of infection and nodulation in the establishment of symbiosis (Mulder et al. 2005). The *nodA* gene, which is essential for symbiosis, is responsible for the attachment of the fatty acid group to the oligosaccharide backbone. PCR amplification, sequencing and phylogenetic analysis of *nodA* gene sequences from a collection of diverse *Bradyrhizobium* strains, isolated from various legume species and geographical areas, revealed the monophyletic character of these strains. This study also revealed a large nucleotide diversity of *nodA* sequences within this genus, ranging up to 21%, which seems consistent with the overall genetic variability of bradyrhizobial strains and their ability to perform efficient symbiosis with many different plants (Moulin et al. 2004).

Plants, like humans, contain hemoglobin. Three distinct types of hemoglobin, with different functions exist in plants: symbiotic, nonsymbiotic, and truncated (Hoy and Hargrove 2008). Symbiotic hemoglobins (sHbs) are proteins found in millimolar quantities in legume root-nodules and sometimes in nonlegumes, for example, *Parasponia andersonii*–rhizobium symbiosis (Ott et al. 2005). The main function of sHbs in plants is well known: sHbS in the root-nodules are responsible for facilitating diffusion of the oxygen necessary for N₂ fixation, similar to the activity of mammalian myoglobin (MB) in muscles. While using an RNA interference approach to silence the expression of a three nodule-expressed leghemoglobin genes in the legume *L. japonicus*, it was found that leghemoglobins indeed are essential for N₂ fixation in nodules (Downie 2005). Leghemoglobins, however, can have a 20-fold higher affinity for oxygen than myoglobin. The oxygen-binding characteristics of leghemoglobins are unusual in that they have an extremely fast O₂ association rate and a relatively slow O₂ dissociation rate, and so can buffer the free

oxygen concentration at around 7–11 nM (Downie 2005). Legumes can select for greater mutualism, controlling nodule O₂ supply and reducing reproduction of rhizobia that fix less N₂ (Denison and Kiers 2004).

11.3 Selection of Effective Symbiotic Rhizobia

Because of the value of rhizobia in the environmental and agricultural fields, rhizobial analysis, based on symbiotic performance and cross inoculation range, is essential for selection for field applications. Selection of effective strains of rhizobia is mainly dependent on symbiotic properties of the bacteria. Symbiotic properties are coded by genetic elements (e.g., plasmids) that can be transmitted between different bacteria. Nevertheless, the symbiotic genes could be used as markers for complete rhizobial characterization. Common nodulation genes (e.g., *nodABC*) or nitrogenase genes (e.g., *nifHDK*) have been useful in the study of interactions with host plants and to clarify relationships between rhizobial systematic and symbiotic properties (Villegas et al. 2006).

The establishment of new legumes in agriculture often requires the introduction of symbiotically competitive root-nodule bacteria as inoculants. However, prior to the introduction of new species, the symbiotic interactions between the new legume and the indigenous populations of root-nodule bacteria, and also the interaction of any new inoculants with legumes already in the ecosystem, must be carefully evaluated. The host recognizes the compatible and effective rhizobia from a soil that harbors effective and ineffective rhizobia. Therefore, optimization of the symbiosis between legume plants and their respective symbiotic rhizobia requires the presence in the rhizosphere of competitive and infective strains of rhizobia which are highly efficient at fixing N₂. The success of inoculated strains of *Rhizobium* in soil is largely dependent on their ability to colonize rapidly and out-compete coexisting strains for nodule occupancy by specific strains of rhizobia. Highly competitive strains for nodule formation need not always exhibit the highest level of saprophytic fitness (Duodu et al. 2005). The basal rhizobial cell density, rather than soil pH, is essential for colonization of the soil and selection by specific host (Yates et al. 2008). A legume introduced into a new area will only form nodules and fix N₂ if compatible rhizobia are present in the soil. Rhizobial population sizes estimated after trapping by the legume species, in soils from tropical areas of Africa, Asia and Latin America (Bala et al. 2003), ranged from undetectable numbers to 3.16×10^4 cells g⁻¹ of soil depending on the trap host species. Symbiotic effectiveness did not bear any close relationship with specific soil parameters, but rhizobial numbers have been found highly correlated with soil acidity, particle size, and exchangeable ions (Bala et al. 2003).

The traditional methods adopted for identifying the most effective rhizobial strains to be used as inoculant is a time-consuming process, involving the production of thousands of rhizobial cultures followed by greenhouse experiments and field trials. Selection of effective strains of nodulating bacteria for legumes should

consider the genetic characterization and taxonomic position (Menna et al. 2006). Rhizobia are known to vary widely in their ability to nodulate many species of legume host plants, ranging from species that appear to be highly specific (with a very limited host range), such as *Rhizobium galegae*, compared with *Rhizobium* sp. NGR 234 with a very wide host range and able to nodulate legumes from at least 112 genera, and some indigenous isolates of *Bradyrhizobium*, which nodulate promiscuous varieties of soybean (Musiyiwa et al. 2005). Identification of effective locally adapted strains with wide host ranges could be useful in the development of rhizobial inoculants which can survive longer in agricultural soil and, hence, reduce the need for regular inoculant applications.

It is essential to reclassify and evaluate the existing strains of rhizobia for their symbiotic and N₂-fixing abilities, using modern molecular genetic tools while selecting bacteria for raising inoculants. A comprehensive study consistent with this concept has been carried out in Brazil (Menna et al. 2006). The phylogeny of a collection of rhizobial strains from a wide range of legumes was examined based on the sequencing of the 16S rRNA genes. Host specificity of these strains was not related to 16S rRNA genes, suggesting the diverse evolution of ribosomal and symbiotic genes in such organisms (Menna et al. 2006). Similarly, strains of *R. leguminosarum* bv. *trifolii* showed a different symbiotic pattern with *Trifolium spp.*, although their 16S rRNA gene sequences were identical (Yates et al. 2008). Strains of *R. leguminosarum* bv. *viciae* from pea (*P. sativum* L.) displayed a relatively high degree of genetic diversity among both plasmid and chromosomal components (Vessey and Chemining'wa 2006). Rhizobial strains from *A. tortilis*, which are grouped in the genera *Mesorhizobium* and *Sinorhizobium*, exhibited very similar symbiotic characters despite their chromosomal diversity (Ba et al. 2002).

11.4 Selection of Symbiotic Rhizobia from Crop and Wild Legumes

11.4.1 *Rhizobia from Crop Legumes*

Soils in cultivated areas are rich in rhizobia from the so-called “cowpea group” that effectively nodulate cowpea, peanut, and other tropical legumes. They are usually slow-growing bacteria belonging to the genus *Bradyrhizobium*. Bacteria in the genus *Bradyrhizobium* is a cosmopolitan and diverse group nodulating a variety of legumes, as well as the nonlegume *Parasponia*. Polyphasic characterization of these rhizobia from different hosts and from different geographic regions was done by analyzing the variability of 16S rRNA gene RFLP, 16S–23S rRNA gene intergeneric spacer (IGS) RFLP, G–C rich RAPD, and phenotype assays. The evolution of “cowpea group” isolates of *Bradyrhizobium* nodulating cowpea and peanut from different locations in South Africa were studied (Steenkamp et al. 2008). These bacteria are diverse, representing a number of distinct *Bradyrhizobium*

groups; horizontal gene transfer significantly influences the evolution of cowpea and peanut root-nodule bacteria. The identification of the *nodZ*, *noel* and *noeE* genes in the isolates tested indicated that African *Bradyrhizobium* species may produce highly decorated nodulation factors, which represent an important adaptation enabling nodulation of a great variety of legumes inhabiting the African continent (Steenkamp et al. 2008). Based on these characteristics, mung bean (*Vigna radiata* L.) rhizobia from China (Yang et al. 2008) were found to have diverse slow-growing bacteria clustered into four groups, three related to *Bradyrhizobium* and the fourth group formed a miscellany of fast-growing isolates variously related to the genera *Mesorhizobium*, *Rhizobium* and *Sinorhizobium*. Studies of the native rhizobial populations associated with peanut *Arachis hypogaea* nodules in soils of Argentina, Morocco and Cameroon revealed that these populations are highly diverse and include slow- and fast-growing isolates (El-Akhal et al. 2008; Nkot et al. 2008). The bacteria isolated from Morocco were firstly characterized by restriction of the 16S rDNA region, and phylogeny was inferred from the 16S gene sequence. The isolates were grouped with species belonging to the *Bradyrhizobium* and *Rhizobium* genera (El-Akhal et al. 2008); a high degree of variability was detected among isolates in terms of their N₂-fixing ability. Strains from peanut (*A. hypogaea* L.) in Cameroon were examined after RFLP analysis of 16S–23S rDNA genes (Nkot et al. 2008) and a considerable level of genetic diversity was determined among those peanut isolates. Fast-growing *Rhizobium* isolates were obtained from root-nodules of the legumes belonging to the genera *Vicia*, *Lathyrus* and *Pisum* from different agro-ecological areas in Italy (Moschetti et al. 2005). Analysis of symbiotic properties showed a wide spectrum of nodulation. The majority of the isolates were presumptively identified as *R. leguminosarum* bv. *viciae* both by their symbiotic properties and by the specific amplification of the *nodC* gene, RFLP–PCR 16S rDNA analysis, and RAPD–PCR technique, which showed a high level of genetic polymorphism.

11.4.2 *Rhizobia from Wild Legumes*

Wild (herb and tree) legumes harbor diverse and promiscuous root-nodule bacteria (Zahran 2006a), which are currently classified into several rhizobial or nonrhizobial genera. Further genetic and molecular studies are needed to elucidate the identification and classification of many new isolates of rhizobia from wild legumes. To develop new symbiotic legume species for agriculture, the genetic and symbiotic diversity of rhizobial isolates from various wild legumes are being investigated using numerical analysis, phenotypic characteristic, cross nodulation to selected legumes, and modern genetic tools, such as amplified 16S ribosomal DNA restriction analysis (ARDRA), RFLP analysis of 16S–23S rDNA intergeneric spacers (IGS), 16S rRNA gene sequencing, and multi-locus sequence analysis of the PCR-amplified *nodC* gene and DNA/DNA hybridization.

The rhizobial strains isolated from several wild forage legumes collected from various geographical regions were identified. For example, rhizobia from *Lathyrus*, *Vicia* and *Lotus* grown in China (Han et al. 2008) clustered into nine genomic species belonging to four genera: *Bradyrhizobium*, *Mesorhizobium*, *Rhizobium*, and *Sinorhizobium* (*Ensifer*). The N₂-fixing rhizobial isolates from root-nodules of *Medicago laciniata*, and from Mediterranean soils in Tunisia and France (Villegas et al. 2006), differed markedly from other *S. meliloti* or *S. medicae* isolates in their symbiotic traits, such as *nifDK* RFLP diversity, *nodA* sequences, and N₂-fixing efficiency with annual *Medicago* species (*M. truncatula*, *M. polymorpha* and *M. sativae*). The rhizobial isolates from root-nodules of *Astragalus*, *Lespedeza* and *Hedysarum* in China (Wei et al. 2007) were divided into two groups: the first was related to the *Rhizobium*–*Agrobacterium* group and the second was related to *R. galegae* and *R. huautlense*. The bacteria isolated from nodules of *Lotononis angolensis* were fast-growing, highly mucoid, and pink pigmented, and related to genera other than rhizobia based on 16S rRNA phylogeny, while those isolated from *L. bainesii* and *L. listii* were slow-growing, pink pigmented and attributed to *Methylobacterium* (Yates et al. 2007). Sequencing of the 16S rRNA region of *Biserrula pelecinus* (a new forage legume in Australia with high quality feed for cattle and sheep and having many agronomic attributes) root-nodule bacterial isolates revealed a close relationship between these bacteria and with both *M. loti* and *M. ciceri* (Nandasena et al. 2004). As *B. pelecinus* can be nodulated by *Mesorhizobium* spp. isolated from other legumes, particularly *Lotus*, there is an opportunity to utilize this trait in cultivar development.

The leguminous trees have an important role in maintaining soil fertility. Many legume trees were recently screened for their ability to form effective N₂-fixing nodules. Large numbers of the diverse root-nodule bacteria were isolated and identified, and their symbiotic activities were assessed by using traditional methods, molecular methods, and genetic tools. Tree legumes such as *Acacia*, *Prosopis*, *Sesbania*, *Albizia*, *Leucaena*, etc. have received increasing attention because of their uses as fodder and wood, and are included in ambitious reforestation programs in arid environments (Zakhia et al. 2004; Zahran 2006a). Some of the legume trees have records of good N₂ fixation capacities with their symbiotic bacteria. The high diversity (rhizobial genotypes, host affinities and symbiotic effectiveness) of the isolates require rigorous selection for host × strain × site combinations in order to obtain effective and competitive inoculants for legume trees and crops in rehabilitation and agro-forestry programs. A collection of rhizobial isolates from *A. tortilis* subsp. *raddiana*, from various sites in the north and south of Sahara (Africa), was very diverse (Ba et al. 2002). Based on whole cell protein (SDS-PAGE) and 16S rDNA sequence analysis, most strains were related to *Mesorhizobium* and *Sinorhizobium* genera, but with similar symbiotic characters (Ba et al. 2002). The rhizobia isolated from root-nodules of *Acacia* species native to Mexico constitute a diverse group of bacteria distinguished from other *Sinorhizobium* species by their levels of DNA–DNA hybridization and the sequence of 16S rRNA and *nifH* genes. Therefore, a new species, *S. americanus*, was described (Toledo et al. 2003). The rhizobial strains isolated

from *A. abyssinica*, *A. seyal*, *A. tortilis*, *F. albida*, *S. sesban*, *P. vulgaris* and *V. unguiculata* grown in southern Ethiopia was assessed using the BiologTM system and AFLP finger printing technique (Wolde-Meskel et al. 2004). The rhizobia constituted metabolically and genomically diverse groups that are not linked to reference species. The root-nodule bacteria from tree legumes (*Acacia*, *Prosopis*, *Sesbania* and *Faidherbia*) and other legumes (*Macroptilium*, *Phaseolus* and *Vigna*), growing in ecologically diverse sites in Kenya (Odee et al. 2002), were analyzed by PCR–RFLP of the 16S rRNA gene and sequence analysis of a 230-bp fragment of this gene. The bacteria were assigned to four rhizobial genera (*Bradyrhizobium*, *Mesorhizobium*, *Rhizobium*, and *Sinorhizobium*) and the *Agrobacterium*. An analysis of the PCR-amplified 16S rDNA gene digestion profiles, using 5-endonucleases, indicated the presence of different lineages among the taxa associated with *P. juliflora* nodules in arid soils of Morocco (Benata et al. 2008). Nucleotide sequencing of the small subunit rRNA gene and blast analysis showed that *P. juliflora* hosted bacteria belong to *Rhizobium*, *Sinorhizobium* and *Achromobacter xylosoxidans*; the latter species is from β -proteobacteria.

Diversity of root-nodule bacteria (and sometime stem-nodule bacteria) from the legume shrub *Sesbania* has received increasing interest. The symbiotic properties, LPS profiles, sym plasmid and rhizobiophage sensitivity of bacterial isolates of three *Sesbania* species (*S. sesban*, *S. aegyptica* and *S. rostrata*) of the semiarid Delhi region of India were analyzed (Sharma et al. 2005). The isolates differed in their symbiotic efficiency, but 16S rDNA sequences revealed that root-nodule isolates of *Sesbania* belonged to diverse rhizobial taxa (*S. saheli*, *S. meliloti*, *R. huautlense*) whereas stem-nodule isolates were strictly *Azorhizobium caulinodans*. Molecular systematics of rhizobia based on phylogenies inferred from *rrs*, *atpD*, *recA* and *nifH* sequences were used for classification of *Sesbania* isolates from Venezuelan wetlands (Vinuesa et al. 2005). The isolates were consistently identified as *M. plurifarium* or *R. huautlense*. DNA–DNA hybridization and 16S rRNA sequences support the inclusion of the rhizobial strains isolated from root-nodules of *Sesbania virgata* in southeast Brazil in the genus *Azorhizobium* but not in the species *A. caulinodans*, and hence the name *A. doebereineriae* was proposed (Moreira et al. 2006). Rhizobial isolates from *Albizia* trees grown in China were identified employing PCR–RFLP and sequencing of 16S rRNA genes, SDS-PAGE of whole cell proteins, and clustering of phenotypic characters (Wang et al. 2006). *Albizia* trees are nodulated by a wide range of rhizobial species within the genera *Rhizobium*, *Bradyrhizobium* and *Mesorhizobium*. The bacterial isolates from root-nodules of the woody legumes *Wisteria sinensis*, *Cercis racemosa* and *Amorpha fruticosa* grown in China were characterized with phenotypic analysis, PCR-based 16S and 23S rRNA gene RFLP, Box PCR and 16S rRNA gene sequencing (Liu et al. 2005) and identified into three rhizobial genera (*Rhizobium*, *Bradyrhizobium* and *Mesorhizobium*). The diversity of *Retama raetam* root-nodule bacteria, grown in arid regions of Tunisia, was determined by 16S rRNA gene sequencing and phenotypic analysis (Mahdhi et al. 2008). The bacteria were assigned to the genera *Agrobacterium*, *Rhizobium* and *Sinorhizobium*, those of the latter genus showed a large diversity in their symbiotic properties and N₂-fixing ability.

11.5 Selection of Symbiotic Rhizobia Tolerant to Various Abiotic Stresses

11.5.1 The Problem of Soil Salinity

One of the most severe and widespread problems facing agriculture is the degradation of soil quality due to desiccation and salinity. Almost 40% of the world's land surface is affected by salinity-related problems (Zahran 1999; Vriezen et al. 2007). Salinity may have a detrimental effect on soil microorganisms and, in general, results in a decreased productivity of crop plants. Harsh environmental conditions negatively affect the activity of most endogenous soil bacteria including rhizobia. The crops grown in 90% of arable lands are subjected to one or more environmental stresses. To face the threat of these stresses, several genetic improvement strategies are available from classical plant breeding to more direct physiological and genetic approaches. However, understanding the mechanisms underlying a specific stress is essential (Dita et al. 2006). Various soil problems (such as extreme pH, salinity, drought, and high temperature) hinder agriculture in arid areas. Some legumes are relatively tolerant to such stress conditions, but nodule formation and N₂ fixation are greatly impaired by stress conditions. Therefore, for legume cultivation in arid areas under environmentally friendly and economically attractive conditions (i.e., without applying fertilizer-N), the availability of stress-tolerant rhizobial strains is an absolutely required precondition (Priefer et al. 2001).

Cultivation of agricultural crops in soil is limited by salt stress, which arises from the excessive uptake of salt by plants and is an unavoidable consequence of high ion concentrations. A higher salt amount in a soil, most commonly NaCl, has detrimental effects on plant growth and productivity. In this regard, salinity affects the activities of enzymes involved in nitrogen metabolism, but the mechanism underlying this phenomenon still remains unclear. It is well known that the establishment of legume–*Rhizobium* symbiosis is susceptible to the effects of salinity. The responses of plant genotypes to salinity differ widely, depending in the form and dosage of salt and the stage of plant growth (Zilli et al. 2008).

11.5.2 Free-Living and Symbiotic Rhizobia Under Abiotic Stress

The symbiotic interactions between rhizobia and their host legumes have strongly driven the investigation and application of biotechnology tools for legumes. Stress parameters such as soil acidity, salinity and desiccation affect rhizobial persistence and nodulation efficiency. The responses of various rhizobia to desiccation were recently reviewed (Vriezen et al. 2007). An adaptation to increased salt or osmotic stress elevates the ability of rhizobia to survive desiccation by accumulation of osmoprotectants, desiccation protectants, and heat-shock proteins (Vriezen et al. 2006).

Four strains of rhizobia nodulating *Acacia* were isolated from the Moroccan desert soil by trapping seedlings of *A. gummifera* and *A. raddiana*, and were studied for their ability to tolerate high salinity and dry conditions (Essendoubi et al. 2007). Three strains were halotolerant, and grew at 1 M NaCl and accumulated glutamate and mannosucrose. Such strains showed high resistance to desiccation, whose tolerance to dryness was stimulated by osmotic pretreatment. The accumulation of solutes and sugars in these rhizobia represents both an osmoadaptive response and a part of a desiccation tolerance mechanism (Essendoubi et al. 2007). High salt concentrations may have detrimental effects on rhizobial populations as a result of direct toxicity, as well as through osmotic stress. Howieson and Ballard (2004) suggested that stressful environments limit rhizobial communities to less than 100 cells g⁻¹ soil, at some time during the season. One of the salt-induced responses in rhizobia is changes in cell morphology and size, and modifications in the pattern of polysaccharides (Zahran 1999). The latter responses may have an impact on the symbiotic interaction between rhizobia and their legumes because extracellular polysaccharides (EPS) and lipo-polysaccharides (LPS) are essential factors for the development of root nodules. A *Rhizobium* mutant (EPS deficient, exo⁻), showed decreased levels of LPS in the presence of 350 mM NaCl (Unni and Rao 2001). The response and adaptation of rhizobia to environmental stresses are probably complex phenomena involving many physiological and biochemical processes that likely reflect changes in gene expression and consequently the activity of enzymes and transport proteins (Wei et al. 2004; Domínguez-Ferreras et al. 2006). Some species of rhizobia adapt to saline conditions by intracellular accumulation of low-molecular-weight solutes called osmolytes, such as glutamate, glycine betaine and polyamines, or by accumulation of K⁺. As salt tolerance of rhizobia is a phenotype, in which many regulatory mechanisms are involved, it is necessary to study salt-tolerant rhizobial genes. Different genes involved in salt tolerance of *S. meliloti* were identified using random Tn5-1063 insertional mutagenesis (Wei et al. 2004). The adaptation of *S. meliloti* to salt is a complex multilevel regulatory process in which many different genes can be involved.

The rhizobia–legume symbioses are more sensitive to salt or osmotic stress than free-living rhizobia. Salt stress may inhibit the initial steps of the symbiosis (root colonization and infection), but it also has a depressive effect on N₂ fixation. Nevertheless, salt-tolerant rhizobia are important to establish a salt-tolerant symbiotic system. Selection of adapted strains of rhizobia under stress conditions is possible and they can be used as inoculants for successful lupin growth (Raza et al. 2001). Objectives of genomic research on rhizobia are the identification of genes and regulatory networks relevant for symbiosis and the consideration of the free-living status, especially adaptations to fluctuated soil environmental conditions (e.g., temperature, osmolarity, pH, and nutrient supply). DNA microarrays have been used to examine gene expression in response to various abiotic stresses in rhizobia (Domínguez-Ferreras et al. 2006). Based on the complete *S. meliloti* genome sequence, Rüberg et al. (2003) established DNA microarrays as a comprehensive tool for systematic genome-wide gene expression analysis in *S. meliloti* 1021. Gene expression in *S. meliloti* in response to an osmotic upshift, imposed by

the addition of 0.38 M NaCl, was monitored using the DNA microarray tool. About 137 genes showed significant changes in gene expression resulting from the osmotic upshift. From these genes, 52 were induced and 85 were repressed (Rüberg et al. 2003). DNA microarrays were used to investigate genome-wide transcriptional responses of *S. meliloti* to a sudden increase in external osmolarity elicited by addition of either NaCl or sucrose to exponentially-growing cultures (Domínguez-Ferreras et al. 2006). The genetic data correlated well with the microarray results and suggested that pSymB contains a large number of genes upregulated after an osmotic upshift, which may play an active role in the osmoadaptation of *S. meliloti*. A well-characterized promoter is now available to drive expression of rhizobial stress-tolerance genes of interest under acidic conditions. Selection of stress-adapted symbioses, or elite rhizobial strains or legume genotypes, can overcome these stress factors. *Rhizobium* mutants whose adaptation to high salinity is affected have deficiencies in their symbiotic capacity (Nogales et al. 2002). Salt-tolerance genes of *S. fredii* (a halotolerant rhizobium strain grow at 0.6 M NaCl) were identified by the construction and screening of a transposon Tn5-1063 library containing over 30,000 clones (Jiang et al. 2004). This strain could have developed sophisticated mechanisms to maintain its intracellular steady osmotic and ionic state. Several genes involved in osmotic tolerance of this strain were identified, which are important to improve salt tolerance of salt-sensitive rhizobia.

Bacterial isolates from *Canavalia rosea*, an indigenous leguminous halophyte grown in the seaside area of southern Taiwan, were effective symbionts for the original host and able to grow at NaCl concentrations up to 3–3.5% (w/v). Based on SDS-PAGE of proteins, pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) analysis and ARDRA results, the 12 isolates were highly diverse. The 16S rRNA and *nifH* gene sequences were determined for isolates with distinct ARDRA patterns and compared with other members of the rhizobial species. The isolates were proposed to be classified into the genus *Sinorhizobium* and distinguished from the current species of the genus (Chen et al. 2000). Rhizobia were isolated from the root-nodules of *Glycyrrhiza glabra* and *G. uralensis*, growing in the arid and semiarid regions of northwestern China (Ge-Hong et al. 2008). The taxonomic position and stress tolerance were determined to select the promising putative inoculant strain. Based on physiological and biochemical characteristics, the isolates were clustered into three groups. One isolate was found to have high tolerance to NaCl, pH and temperature. Based on the sequence analysis of 16S rDNA and *nodA* gene, this isolate was placed in the genus *Mesorhizobium*.

11.5.3 Symbiotic N₂ Fixation of Legumes Under Abiotic Stresses

Optimum performance of the N₂-fixing symbiosis depends upon preselection of both symbiotic partners for adaptation to the target environment, which may in some cases present a challenge to rhizobial survival or nodulation. Symbiotic N₂ fixation in legumes is limited, especially in semiarid conditions. Legumes are

classified as salt-sensitive crops, and their limitation in productivity is associated with poor development of symbiotic root-nodule bacteria, reduction in the N₂ fixation capacity and lower growth of the host plant. N₂ fixation of legumes is usually affected by abiotic stress; the response of root-nodules of legumes to various kinds of stress was examined extensively at the physiological and biochemical levels. However, improvement of N₂ fixation of these legumes under abiotic stressed environments requires a better knowledge of the key elements acting at the molecular level.

The response of *Rhizobium–Phaseolus* symbiosis to salt stress was investigated, and each of the symbiotic partners was examined separately for their salt tolerance (Bouhmouch et al. 2005). Plant cultivars of *Phaseolus* showed genotypic variations with respect to salt tolerance. *Rhizobium* strains (e.g., *R. tropici* and *R. giardinii*), were tolerant up to 250 mM NaCl but failed to nodulate *Phaseolus* under saline conditions (50 mM NaCl). The unsuccessful nodulation could be related to the inhibition of one or more steps of the early events of the infection process under salt stress (Zahran and Sprent 1986). In contrast, common bean plants (*P. vulgaris*) inoculated with a salt-tolerant strain (wild-type *R. tropici*) formed more active symbiosis than did its decreased salt-tolerant mutant derivatives (Tejera et al. 2004). The growth, nodule weight and nitrogenase activity of salinized common bean (*P. vulgaris*) plants were improved by abscisic acid (ABA) pretreatment (Khadri et al. 2007). ABA treatment limited Na⁺ translocation to shoots, which is a strategy of bean to limit Na⁺ toxicity. When water-stressed *P. vulgaris* was inoculated with salt-tolerant rhizobia, the nodulation, shoot dry weight and grain yield were significantly increased under nonirrigated conditions (Mnasri et al. 2007). The improvement of the cultivation of *P. vulgaris* under arid conditions can take place by enhancing stress tolerance of N₂-fixing rhizobia (Priefer et al. 2001).

Alterations of plant growth, nitrogenase activity and nutrient concentration as a consequence of salt treatment was studied in five chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*) cultivars from Spain and Syria, in symbiosis with *Mesorhizobium ciceri* (Tejera et al. 2006). One cultivar (ILC1919) was moderately salt tolerant at 100 mM NaCl, and exhibited less N₂ fixation inhibition, a higher root-to-shoot ratio, normalized nodule weight and shoot K/Na ratio, and a reduced foliar accumulation of Na⁺. The results revealed the effectiveness of these nutritional and physiological indicators in the selection of salinity-tolerant and symbiotic N₂-fixing chickpea plants. Since nitrogenase, the enzyme responsible for N₂ fixation, is O₂ labile, nodules have evolved mechanisms to regulate their permeability to O₂ and maintain the infected-cell O₂ concentration at the lowest level (about 5–50 nM) compared with approximately 250 μM for cells in equilibrium with air (Aydi et al. 2004). Nodule conductance to O₂ diffusion is a major factor of the inhibition of N₂ fixation by soil salinity. However, salinity did not significantly change the nodule conductance and nodule permeability of the plant, and the salt tolerance of this variety appears to be associated with stability in nodule conductance and the capacity to form nodules under salt constraint (L'taief et al. 2007). Salinity stress (75 mM NaCl) significantly increased the nodule conductance of *M. truncatula* plants inoculated with

S. meliloti (Aydi et al. 2004). The sensitivity to salinity appears to be associated with an increase in nodule conductance that supports the increased respiration of N_2 -fixing nodules under salinity (Aydi et al. 2004). Nodule conductance (oxygen uptake) in chickpea inoculated with *M. ciceri* was measured under salt (25 mM NaCl) treatment (L'taief et al. 2007). The symbiotic performance of three strains of rhizobia (*M. ciceri*, *M. mediterraneum* and *S. medicae*) with chickpea was investigated under salt stress (25 mM NaCl) conditions (Mhadhbi et al. 2004). *M. ciceri*, the most efficient strain, seemed to allow the best tolerance to chickpea plants under salt stress. The activity of enzymes involved in nitrogen metabolism, as well as oxidative stress generation and heme oxygenase (HO) gene and protein expression and activity, were analyzed in soybean (*Glycine max* L.) nodules exposed to 50, 100 and 200 mM NaCl (Zilli et al. 2008). Nitrogenase activity and leghemoglobin content were diminished while ammonium content increased only at 200 mM NaCl. The synthesis of several enzymes involved in nitrogen metabolism was only changed at higher levels of salt (200 mM NaCl). HO activity, protein synthesis and gene expression were significantly increased under 100 mM NaCl treatment. The data demonstrated that the upregulation of HO, as part of an antioxidant defense system, could protect N_2 fixation and assimilation under saline stress conditions. Under osmotic stress conditions, plants accumulate some compatible osmolytes (e.g., proline, glycine betaine, etc.) to protect major processes such as cell respiration, photosynthetic activity, nutrient transport, and nitrogen and carbon metabolism. *L. japonicus* and *M. truncatula*, as legume models, provided a convenient system to study plant–*Rhizobium* interactions (López et al. 2008). Plant growth parameters, nitrogenase activity, and activities of trehalose-6-phosphate synthase and trehalase of *L. japonicus* and *M. truncatula* decreased with NaCl treatments (25 and 50 mM NaCl). Legume root-nodule N_2 -fixing activity was severely affected by osmotic stress (100 mM NaCl) in *M. truncatula* (Verdoy et al. 2006). High proline accumulation level was found in the transgenic *M. truncatula* plants under osmotic stress. N_2 fixation in the transgenic *M. truncatula* plants was significantly less affected by salt treatment compared to the wild-type plants. This is the first time that a produced transgenic legume displayed N_2 -fixing activity with enhanced tolerance to osmotic stress, and that the essential role of proline in the maintenance of N_2 -fixing activity under osmotic stress was ascertained (Verdoy et al. 2006).

Under stress treatments, some genes of nodules are downregulated while others are upregulated as an adaptive response to abiotic stress. To identify molecular markers of drought stress in nodules of soybean, the suppression subtractive hybridization (SSH) was chosen as a method to isolate rare but differentially expressed genes (Clement et al. 2008). In this work, 56 cDNA fragments were validated as drought stress-induced genes by reverse northern hybridization, and analysis was focused on two genes, encoding respectively a ferritin and a metallothionein, which are involved in homeostasis (cellular metal balance) and detoxification of metals. These two genes showed high accumulation of transcripts restricted to infected cells of nodules in response to drought. The growth of *Lotus creticus*, a major forage legume in the arid climate of Tunisia, was studied under

salt stress (Rejili et al. 2007). The presence of salt (50–400 mM) negatively affected plant growth, such negative effects being more obvious on aerial organs than on roots. The content of Na^+ in both parts (above and below ground) increased; however, plants probably expressed a certain mechanism of compartmentation. Under salt stress, salt-tolerant plants maintain a high concentration of K^+ and a low concentration of Na^+ in the cytosol (Zhu 2003; Zahran et al. 2007). They do this by regulating the expression and activity of K^+ and Na^+ transporters and of H^+ pumps that generate the driving force for transport. The effect of salinity (EC up to 3.8 dS m^{-1}) on yield and nitrogen uptake of four grain legumes (broad bean, chickpea, lentil and soybean) was examined (Van Hoorn et al. 2001). Salinity affected crop yield, crop total nitrogen uptake, and the nitrogen contribution of the soil. A salinity effect on N_2 fixation explains, at least partly, the salt sensitivity of grain legumes. Exposure of mungbean to water deficit results in variability in grain yield, nitrogen accumulation, and grain quality (Thomas et al. 2004). Nodule activities are dramatically affected in most legumes under several environmental constraints, an effect which results in crop yield loss. A negative response to drought stress effects on N_2 fixation by root-nodules of *P. sativum* is mainly controlled in nodules rather than by a systemic nitrogen signal (Marino et al. 2007).

Wild forage legumes are the most potential forage legumes grown in salt-affected soils (Ashraf and Bashir 2003; Zahran et al. 2007) which play a vital role in long-term maintenance of soil productivity because of their high N_2 -fixing ability. The effects of salt stress on growth and metabolic changes in nodules and other plant parts of two leguminous species, *P. vulgaris* (salt sensitive) and *S. aculeata* (salt tolerant), were investigated (Ashraf and Bashir 2003). Plants of *P. vulgaris* were subjected to 3.5 dS m^{-1} of NaCl and those of *S. aculeata* to 13 dS m^{-1} of NaCl. *S. aculeata* showed a small reduction in the number of root-nodules, high proline content in leaves, high glycine betaine content in all plant parts, a high photosynthetic rate, and low uptake of Cl^- in the leaves. The nodules of *S. aculeata* seemed to have played an active role in the high salt tolerance of the species because the nodules had lower concentrations of both Na^+ and Cl^- and a higher level of glycine betaine as compared to those found in *P. vulgaris*. Many legumes form symbioses with both rhizobia and AM- fungi. Dual inoculation with both microorganisms results in a tripartite mutualistic symbiosis and generally increases plant growth to a greater extent than inoculation with only one organism. Enhanced acquisition of P by the host and effects on molecular signaling between the three symbionts may explain the synergism of AMF and rhizobia. De Varennes and Goss (2007) investigated how the rate of colonization by indigenous AM fungi (AMF) affects the interaction between *S. meliloti* and *M. truncatula* and AMF. The effects of dual inoculation of *V. faba* plants with NFB such as *Azospirillum brasilense* and AMF were investigated at five levels ($0\text{--}6.0 \text{ dS m}^{-1}$) of NaCl using irrigating water (Rabie and Al Madini 2005). The AMF infection significantly increased tolerance to salinity, mycorrhizal dependency, P level, phosphatases, nodule number, nitrogen level, protein content, and nitrogenases in all salinized *V. faba* plants, in comparison with control and non-AMF-colonized plants, either in the absence or presence of NFB. The study provides evidence for benefits of NFB to

AMF in the protection of host plants against the detrimental effects of salt. The bacterial–AMF–legume tripartite symbioses could be a new and interesting approach for increasing tolerance of legumes to salinity conditions (Rabie and Al Madini 2005). The effects of a mycorrhizal fungus (*Glomus fasciculatum*) on growth and mineral acquisition by *A. nilotica* seedlings over a wide range of soil salinity was investigated (Giri et al. 2007). Mycorrhizal plants maintained greater root and shoot biomass and higher P, Zn, and Cu concentrations than uninoculated plants at all salinity levels. Mycorrhizal fungus alleviated deleterious effects of salinity on plant growth that could be primarily related to improved P nutrition. The improved K/Na ratios in root and shoot tissues of mycorrhizal plants may help in protecting disruption of K-mediated enzymatic processes under salt stress conditions.

11.6 Improvement of Inoculation Technology

Many of the microbial inoculants applied worldwide are based on solid peat formulations. This has been mostly true for well-developed legume inoculants due to peat bacterial protection properties. Commercial legume inoculant formulations include powder or granular carriers, and broth cultures or liquid formulations, for agricultural applications. Due to unavailability of peat, more readily available alternative carriers for inoculant production should be investigated. An appropriate material for carrying microorganisms must offer special properties, such as water-holding capacity, chemical and physical uniformity, and lack of compounds toxic to microbial strains, and be environmentally safe. However, osmotic stress, nutrient deficiencies (especially phosphorous), and the lack of efficient strains of rhizobia are major factors limiting symbiotic N₂ fixation and yield of legumes. Ideally, inoculation is required in the absence of compatible resident rhizobia, where the native rhizobial population density is very low, or where the resident rhizobia are less infective than alternative (inoculant) strains. Soils lacking in compatible rhizobia are found in areas where indigenous legumes are absent or where levels of pH, osmotic stress, high temperature, and heavy metals are detrimental to rhizobial populations. Chemining'wa and Vessey (2006) found that effective strains of *R. leguminosarum* bv *viciae* occur broadly in agricultural soils; nevertheless, there is a tendency for increased symbiotic efficiency with the use of commercial inoculation.

Effective rhizobial inoculants, inoculation carriers able to support viable rhizobia, and appropriate methods of storage, are required for successful symbiosis. Rhizobial density and the period for which these are maintained are highly variable. Even where strains are carefully evaluated, the lack of competitiveness with indigenous rhizobia and inconsistency in their performance can lead to a decline in nitrogen-fixing efficiency under field environments. And, hence, before applying rhizobia, the establishment and persistence of such strains must be considered in inoculation studies. Perlite and compost from the cork industry were superior to

peat in maintaining survival of different rhizospheric bacteria. Similarly, some culture media maintained more than 10^9 cfu mL⁻¹ of *S. fredii* or *B. japonicum* after 3 months of storage. Soybean plants inoculated with two highly effective rhizobia, using the carriers cork compost, perlite and liquid formulations, produced seed yields that were not significantly different to those produced by peat-based inoculants (Albareda et al. 2008). Responses to bean rhizobia inoculation and P fertilization were investigated (Zaman-Allah et al. 2007), and a significant effect of inoculation and P supply on nodulation, N content and growth was found. It is concluded that inoculation with suitable rhizobia with supply of additional P is a technology that may improve symbiotic N₂ fixation and yield in the common bean.

Rhizobial inoculation of legume seeds or soils has been well studied. However, much less work has been done regarding the association and growth-promoting activities of rhizobia with nonlegumes. Efforts at extending N₂-fixing ability to important nonleguminous crops such as cereals has long been a major goal of workers in the field of biological N₂ fixation and would be a useful technology for increasing crop yields (Matiru and Dakora 2004). Although some inoculation attempts have resulted in nodule formation in cereal plants, there was no evidence of N₂ fixation. Nevertheless, associated rhizobia produce molecules such as auxins, cytokinins, abscisic acids, IAA, lumichrome, riboflavin, lipochitoooligosaccharides and vitamins that promote plant growth. Therefore, rhizobial colonization and infection of cereal roots would be expected to increase plant development and grain yield (Matiru and Dakora 2004). Roots of sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) and millet (*Pennisetum americanum*) were easily infected by rhizobia from five unrelated legume genera. Plant growth and P uptake, in sorghum in particular, were significantly increased by rhizobial inoculation, suggesting that field selection of suitable rhizobia/cereal combinations could increase yields and produce fodder for livestock production (Matiru and Dakora 2004). Inoculation of rice (*Oryza sativa*) seedlings with *R. leguminosarum* bv. *trifolii* and *Rhizobium* sp. stimulated rice growth and increased grain and straw yields (Biswas et al. 2000). The tested rhizobial strains produced IAA in vitro, and some of them reduced acetylene to ethylene in association with rice under laboratory growth conditions. Enhancement of legume N₂ fixation by coinoculation of rhizobia with plant growth-promoting bacteria is thus important for improving nitrogen availability in sustainable agriculture.

Endophytes recovered from the surface-sterilized root-nodules of pigeonpea (*Cajanus cajan*), designated as nonrhizobial isolates (Rajendran et al. 2008), facilitated plant growth and increased the fresh weight and symbiotic traits when coinoculated with the rhizobial bioinoculant strain, isolated from nodules of the same plant. The nonrhizobial isolates were not able to nodulate pigeonpea and nor did they show significant plant growth promotion when inoculated alone without *Rhizobium* spp. The nonrhizobial isolates were identified as *Bacillus megaterium* following amplified ribosomal DNA restriction analysis and partial sequences of 16S rRNA genes studies. Several papers have reported on dual inoculation with rhizobia and NFB (e.g., *Azospirillum*) and P-solubilizing bacteria (e.g., *Pseudomonas*). The legume growth, yield, and P and N uptake, could be increased by coinoculation

(Graham and Vance 2000). A general positive effect of *Azospirillum–Rhizobium* coinoculation on the expression of *nod* genes by *R. tropici* and *R. etli*, and on nodulation, was observed in the presence of root exudates (Dardanelli et al. 2008). The negative effects obtained under salt stress on *nod* gene expression and on nod factor appearance were relieved in coinoculated plants. The effect of dual inoculation of P-solubilizing bacteria (*Pseudomonas putida*) on the symbiosis of *S. meliloti* and *B. japonicum* with alfalfa and soybean, respectively, was evaluated (Rosas et al. 2006). Modification of shoot and root dry weights occurred in soybean but not in alfalfa in the presence of *P. putida*.

11.7 Breeding and Selection for Enhanced N₂ Fixation in Crop Legumes

Biotechnology is a powerful tool that has potential to contribute to sustainable agriculture. Over the years, biotechnology has emerged as a promising tool to overcome stresses in plants, but to date, progress has been limited in legumes. However, molecular approaches, such as marker-assisted breeding, genetic transformation, tissues cultures, gene expression, transcriptomics, transcription factors, proteomics, etc., can contribute to speed-up classical breeding. Dita et al. (2006) reviewed many of the modern biotechnological techniques and evaluated their applications to improve tolerance of legumes to abiotic stress. The use of genetic and genomic analysis to help identifying DNA regions tightly linked to agronomic traits in crops, the so-called molecular markers, can facilitate breeding strategies for crop improvement. Numerous molecular marker-related techniques have been used in legumes in relation to abiotic stress. As a result, genetic maps for many species have been established and quantitative trait loci (QTLs) have been located in some legumes, as reported for soybean, under salt stress (Lee et al. 2004). This improved the knowledge of genetic control of specific resistance and/or tolerance in many legumes by providing information on the chromosomal number and location, and individual or interactive effects of the QTLs involved. In plants, there is a poor understanding of most abiotic stress responses. Thus, the successful use of genetic transformation requires a better physiological and molecular understanding of these stresses. Enhancement of resistance against both hyperosmotic stress and Na⁺ toxicity is necessary for successful molecular breeding of salt-tolerant plants. Introduction of genes for osmolyte biosynthesis is useful to increase hyperosmotic tolerance of plant cells (Yoshida 2002). Overexpression of a single-gene controlling vacuolar or plasma membrane Na⁺/H⁺ antiport protein in plants (e.g., *M. intertexta*; Zahran et al. 2007) provided them with a high level of salt tolerance. Identification of differentially expressed genes is particularly important to understand stress responses in plants. With respect to abiotic stress, gene expression analyses have been mainly based on studies with cloned genes. Transcriptomic tools are a good option for legume breeding to environmental stresses. Using a modified cDNA-AFLP

technique in soybean, 140 differentially expressed cDNA fragments were obtained by comparing control and osmotic-treated plants. Some of the responsive genes encoded ion transporters, transcription factors and redox enzymes (Umezawa et al. 2002). Further, recent technological developments have allowed the establishment of valuable methods for quantitative and qualitative protein profiling. This approach is very important in evaluating stress responses because mRNA levels do not always correlate with protein accumulation (Dita et al. 2006).

Graham and Vance (2000) reviewed the developments and research areas which are critical for improvement of N₂ fixation. Genetic improvement in nodulation and nitrogen fixation can be done by indirect selection for growth and seed yield in plants grown under N limitation conditions, and by direct selection for nodule mass, acetylene reduction activity and xylem ureide content. For all legumes, there is great potential to increase the percent of legume N derived from N₂ fixation as well to enhance the total N₂ fixed through improved management and genetic modification of the plant. Herridge and Rose (2000) reviewed strategies and operational frameworks for conducting selection and breeding programs to enhance N₂ fixation, and methods for measuring N₂ fixation that have been used in such programs. Three general strategies for increasing legume N₂ fixation through breeding. Firstly, there is the maximizing of legume (biomass) and seed yield under constraints imposed by agronomic management and the environment. This approach assumes a capacity for N₂ fixation sufficient to satisfy increased N demand of larger plants, but has particular application to lower-yielding plants such as common bean, lentil (*L. esculentum*), mungbean, and chickpea. Secondly, legume ability to nodulate and fix N₂ in the presence of soil nitrate is enhanced. Variation for symbiotic nitrate tolerance exists in natural plant populations and has also been created through mutagenesis. Thirdly, legume nodulation is optimized through specific nodulation traits (e.g., mass and duration). Crop improvement through genetic engineering has become a reality, and it is now possible to transform many grain legumes using *A. tumefaciens* as a vector for legume transformation; the inserted DNA can be either a specific gene with a specific biochemical function, a regulatory gene that controls a network of other genes, or multiple genes to generate long-term durable resistance. Rhizobia were examined for their ability to be used as potential vehicles for plant transformation. Several species of rhizobia were successfully transformed with broad host-range plasmids of different replicons. A genetic binary vector (pPZP211) was maintained in *M. loti* and stably inherited during nodulation (Vincze and Bowra 2006).

11.8 Conclusion

The information available in the literature highlights the significance of N₂-fixing rhizobia–legumes symbioses for improving soil fertility and, consequently, plant productivity. The symbiotic bacteria that colonize nodules of these plants are very diverse, with prominent ecological characteristics and specific genetic traits.

These bacteria are classified into more than 70 genomic species belonging to several genera. With all of this genomic diversity, it is no wonder that the systematics of root-nodule bacteria are changing every day. Recent developments in the field of *Rhizobium* biology has taken place due to the advances in the molecular and genetic techniques. Such techniques provide an effective tool to characterize and identify the bacterial isolates vis-a-vis examining the physiological responses of the host plant. Molecular identification of rhizobia depends on the symbiotic and ribosomal genes. However, in some cases, host specificity of rhizobial strains was not related to ribosomal genes (16S rRNA). The evolution of ribosome and symbiotic genes may have been diverse. The symbiotic and N₂-fixing genes appear to be spread in various bacterial taxa and not restricted to what is known as rhizobium bacteria of the alphaproteobacteria. In recent years, plenty of new strains of symbiotic bacteria were classified in nonrhizobial genera, namely *Burkholderia* and *Cupriavidus*, in the β -proteobacteria.

Symbiotic characteristics are some of the basic criteria for selecting compatible rhizobia. Numerous species of the newly isolated and identified nodule bacteria have shown substantial symbiotic activities and proved that legumes exhibit biodiversity with regards to symbiotic bacteria and also the host plants. Enhancement of N₂ fixation of the existing symbiotic systems, and those newly discovered symbiotic systems, is possible through the inoculation of legumes with compatible and effective strains of bacteria. However, inoculation technology and delivery system is needed to be improved. Successful symbiosis can be obtained by coinoculation or mixed inoculation with other plant-growth promoting rhizobacteria including N₂ fixers. Legumes' N₂ fixation enhancement is likely to improve the productivity of associated nonlegume plants by providing them with N and growth-promoting substances. Suitable rhizobia-cereal combinations could increase yields and produce fodder for livestock. Bacterial-AMF-legume tripartite symbioses could also be viable alternatives to enhance N₂ fixation of legumes especially under salt stress conditions.

The N₂-fixing activity of root-nodules is severely affected by osmotic stress. However, elucidation of genes involved in the regulation of ion transport and their expression has increased our understanding about how legumes circumvent the stress conditions. One of the strategies adopted to combat the problem of soil salinity is the usage of transgenic leguminous plants. The transgenic plants in certain cases are more salt tolerant than wild-type plants. For example, transgenic plants (e.g., *M. truncatula*) accumulated higher levels of proline and fixed N₂ actively more than wild-type under osmotic stress, and is the first transgenic legume that displayed N₂-fixing activity with enhanced tolerance to osmotic stress. However, selection of a salt-tolerant effective *Rhizobium*-legume symbiosis is of paramount importance. The symbiotic bacteria have shown a variable response to abiotic stresses such as salinity, acidity, and aridity. Some strains of symbiotic bacteria exhibit substantial stress-tolerant abilities. Understanding the mechanisms of osmoadaptation of rhizobia at the molecular level would help to rationally design and engineer better strains for field applications.

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Chapter 12

Monitoring the Development of Nurse Plant Species to Improve the Performances of Reforestation Programs in Mediterranean Areas

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Abstract In the Mediterranean basin, a millenarian history of overexploitation has lead to the loss of most primeval forests and an increase of the surface area covered by shrublands that represent stages of degradation of mature forests. In this situation, and since environmental characteristics act as barriers to succession, human intervention is usually necessary to improve recovery of woodlands. Reafforestation is a common practice in Mediterranean areas to achieve this aim but its performances are very low with high rates of early mortality making this practice unprofitable in ecological as well as in economic terms.

In degraded semiarid ecosystems, shrub and tall-grass species grow following a patchy distribution. Traditionally, shrubs growing near to newly planted trees are considered heavy competitors, and are consequently removed before planting. However, the vegetation patches usually constitute “fertility islands” or “resource islands” which could promote the tree species development. It has previously been assessed that some native plant species could act as “nurse plants” through their positive impacts on soil abiotic characteristics (i.e., soil nutrient contents), but they also exhibit a positive influence on soil microbiota, especially on symbiotic

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microorganisms including rhizobia and mycorrhizal fungi. In this chapter, an attempt is made to assess the beneficial effects of plant nurses on the growth of Mediterranean tree species like *Cupressus* species, and on the bio-functioning of soils. Furthermore, the potential benefits of native plant species in the rehabilitation of degraded areas especially in stressful conditions is reviewed and discussed.

12.1 Introduction

Shrub and tall-grass species growth following a patchy distribution are characteristic of the plant communities in semiarid ecosystems and more particularly in Mediterranean areas. The vegetation patches usually form “fertility islands” (Garner and Steinberger 1989) or “resource islands” (Schlesinger et al. 1996) that could be involved in the development of native plant species (Callaway 1995, 1997). It has been previously reported that some native plants species improve their own environment by self-promoting changes in water infiltration, organic matter, etc. (Bochet et al. 1999; Valladares and Pugnaire 1999), and could act as “nurse plants” through their positive impacts on the survival of other native plant species (Carrillo-Garcia et al. 2000). It is now well accepted that the spatial proximity among plants could be beneficial in environments such as Mediterranean-type ecosystems that are characterized by abiotic stress (Boucher et al. 1982; Callaway and Walker 1997; Gomez-Aparicio et al. 2004).

In semiarid Mediterranean ecosystems, desertification processes result from scarce and irregular rainfall, long dry and hot summers, and man-mediated degradative activities like deforestation, overgrazing, non-regulated cultivation techniques, etc. (Francis and Thornes 1990). Desertification generally alters natural plant communities including population structure, succession pattern, and species diversity (Barea and Jeffries 1995). In addition, these disturbances are often accompanied by degradation of physico-chemical and biological soil properties, such as nutrient availability, microbial activity, soil structure, etc., that largely determine soil quality and fertility (Garcia et al. 1997a, b; Albaladejo et al. 1998; Requena et al. 2001). For instance, it is well known that land degradation is usually linked with reductions in the belowground microbial diversity and/or activity (Kennedy and Smith 1995).

Among components of soil microbiota, arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi are known to be key components of natural systems in semiarid ecosystems and particularly important in counteracting desertification of Mediterranean ecosystems (Carpenter and Allen 1998; Brundrett 1991). The mycorrhizal symbiosis mobilizes and transports nutrients to roots (Smith and Read 1997), reduces water stress (Augé 2001), and improves soil aggregation in eroded soils (Caravaca et al. 2002). AM fungal symbiosis also changes root functions (e.g., root exudation) (Graham et al. 1981; Marshner et al. 1997), modifies carbohydrate metabolism of the host plant (Shachar-Hill et al. 1995), and synergistically interacts with rhizosphere populations (Andrade et al. 1997; 1998). The structure and functionalities of these microbial communities surrounding AM roots differ from those of the rhizosphere

(Duponnois et al. 2005), and this microbial compartment has been named “mycorrhizosphere” (Linderman 1988). It has also been reported that AM fungi affect the diversity of plant communities (van der Heijden et al. 1998; Klironomos et al. 2000; O’Connor et al. 2002) and influence competitive relationships between plants (West 1996; Marler et al. 1999; van der Heijden et al. 2003).

It is well known that the AM fungal activity is generally low in degraded semiarid Mediterranean ecosystems (Maremammani et al. 2003). However, an increased activity of fungal inoculum is needed in both natural and artificial processes of re-vegetation. It has already been shown that AM inoculation of plants is very effective in establishing plants on disturbed soils (Estaun et al. 1997). In order to increase and maintain high populations of infective AM propagules in soil, two main cultural practices can be considered: (1) screening of AM fungal isolates (native or exotic isolates) for their effect on the plant growth under controlled conditions and a cultural substrate inoculation with the most efficient AM strains, and (2) adoption of field practices to manage and improve the inoculum potential of indigenous AM fungi. The inoculation practice is generally used in tree nurseries to help tree establishment in field conditions (Plenchette 2000; Franson and Bethlenfalvay 1989). However, previous studies have reported that, although AM inoculation improved plant growth, it could also strongly modify soil microbial activities (Dabire et al. 2007). In some conditions, to overcome the negative influences of AM inoculation on soil microbiota, it is possible to increase AM soil potential through the management of highly mycotrophic plants (Azcon and Barea 1997). In the following section, focus is placed on highlighting the impacts of some Mediterranean shrubs on microbial functionalities and AM potential and evaluating their significant use in forestry practices to enhance the performance of afforestation program. In this context, most of the reported results will be directed to *Cupressus* spp. and *Lavandula* species. In Morocco, the area of natural and introduced cypress stands, one natural species, *Cupressus atlantica*, and two introduced species, *Cupressus sempervirens* and *C. arizonica*, has declined, and numerous reports indicate a complete absence of natural regeneration. Although attempts have been made to replant these species, the rate of success has been very low. *Lavandula* species are representative plant species in Mediterranean shrublands and belong to the natural succession in semiarid Mediterranean ecosystems (Barea et al. 1992). They have been classified as “obligatory mycorrhizal” (Brundrett 1991) or as “highly dependent on mycorrhiza” (Habte and Manjunath 1991).

12.2 Impacts of “Nurse Plant Species” on Soil Microbial Functionalities and AM Fungus Communities

A study has been conducted in the N’Fis valley (Haut Atlas mountains, Morocco) at the Idni station (8°17’02’’ W, 31°54’34’’N, 1,700 m above sea level) in a natural stand of *C. atlantica* (Ouahmane et al. 2006). This area was covered by a sparse

and degraded vegetation mainly composed of grasses (i.e., *Stipa nitens* Ball.) and various shrub species, such as *Cistus salviifolus* L., *Lavandula dentata* L., *L. stoechas* L., *Thymus pallidus* Coss., *Polygala balansae* Coss., *Globularia alypum* L. and *Thymus satureioides* Coss. Soil samples were collected from the rhizosphere of *L. dentata*, *L. stoechas*, and *T. satureioides* (abundant shrub species and always recorded in the vicinity of *C. atlantica* adult trees) and of *C. atlantica*. Control samples were collected from bare soil sites, away from plant influence. The soil carbon and nitrogen contents were higher under *C. arizonica* than under the other sampling areas due to the leaf litter formation and the fact that, in forest ecosystems, most of the soil nitrogen is in organic form (Kaye and Hart 1997) (Table 12.1), while soluble phosphorus contents were significantly lower under the targeted plant species than in the bare soil (Table 12.1). Therefore, the shrub species did not demonstrate greater effects on soil chemical characteristics and, in contrast, decreased soil P content. The main impacts of these shrub species were recorded on soil functionalities and AM soil potential.

Microbial functional diversity in rhizosphere and in bare soil was assessed by measuring the patterns of in situ catabolic potential (ISCP) of microbial communities (Degens and Harris 1997). Organic compounds comprising of a range of amino acids, carbohydrates, organic acids, and amides were screened for differences in substrate-induced respiration (SIR) between soil treatments. The results show that microbial communities are very different according to the soil origin (Fig. 12.1). In particular, SIR responses to carboxylic acids were significantly higher in the *C. atlantica* and *T. satureioides* rhizosphere soils than in the soils of other origins (Fig. 12.1). Soluble organic acids are involved in plant nutrient acquisition and they particularly act as biological weathering agents of minerals in soils. They could be of high molecular weight (HMW) (i.e., humic substances) or low molecular weight (LMW) produced by plant roots and soil microorganisms (Ochs 1996). In the process of P acquisition from minerals, among the identified carboxylic acids, dicarboxylic (oxalic, tartaric, malic, fumaric, malonic acids) and tricarboxylic acids (citric acid) have been found very effective in P mobilization (Ryan et al. 2001). Since the highest SIR responses with most of these organic acids have been measured under *C. atlantica* and one of the targeted shrub species (*T. satureioides*), it suggests that these plant species and their associated microflora

Table 12.1 Chemical characteristics of the rhizosphere soils collected from *Lavandula dentata*, *L. stoechas*, *Thymus satureioides*, *Cupressus atlantica* and the bare soil (control) in the *C. atlantica* stand located in the N°Fis valley (Haut Atlas mountains, Morocco)

	Control	Plant species			
		<i>L. dentata</i>	<i>L. stoechas</i>	<i>T. satureioides</i>	<i>C. atlantica</i>
pH	7.5 a	7.0 a	7.5 a	7.4 a	7.7 a
Total carbon (%)	1.58 a	1.60 a	1.73 a	1.80 a	3.15 b
Total nitrogen (%)	0.09 a	0.10 ab	0.12 ab	0.10 a	0.14 b
C/N	17.2 a	15.7 a	14.7 a	18.8 a	22.9 a
Soluble P (mg kg ⁻¹)	19.7 d	7.9 a	9.8 ab	11.8 bc	13.1 c

Data in the same line followed by the same letter are not significantly different ($p < 0.05$) according to one-way analysis of variance. Adapted from Ouahmane et al. (2006)

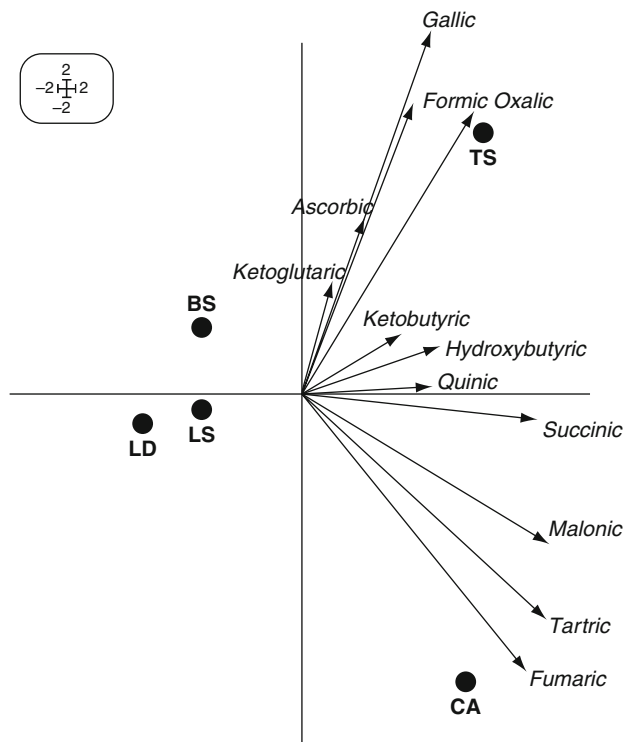


Fig. 12.1 Between-group analysis (BGA) of the substrate-induced respiration (SIR) responses with respect to the rhizosphere and the bare soils. *LS*, *LD*, *TS*, *CA* and *BS* represent *Lavandula stoechas*, *L. dentata*, *Thymus satereioides*, *Cupressus atlantica* and bare soils, respectively (Ouahmane et al. 2006)

(AM fungi and mycorrhizosphere microbiota) excreted higher amounts of such organic acids which could exert a selective influence on soil microbial communities through a multiplication of microorganisms that catabolize organic acids.

Beside the positive effects of “nurse” plant species on soil microbial functionalities, they also increase the mycorrhizal soil infectivity. Three *Lavandula* species (*L. multifida*, *L. dentata*, *L. stoechas*) have been studied for their AM dependencies (Ouahmane et al. 2007). After inoculating with the AM fungus, *Glomus intraradices*, the mycorrhizal dependency of *L. stoechas* was 33% whereas those recorded for *L. dentata* and *L. multifida* were 63 and 58%, respectively (Ouahmane et al. 2007). These results confirmed the high mycorrhizal dependency of these plant species (Azcon and Barea 1997). Lavender plants are very mycotrophic and enrich their cultural soil in AM fungal propagules. The *L. multifida* have been found to increase the mycorrhizal soil infectivity (Table 12.2) in six different soils as determined by MPN (most probable number) method (Ouahmane et al. 2007). In addition, this positive contribution is linked with the total soil P contents since the highest increases were recorded in soils with the lowest soil total P contents. Hence,

Table 12.2 Responses of soil mycorrhizal infectivity to *Lavandula multifida* plantation in six sandy soils after 5 months culturing

Soils	pH (H ₂ O)	Total C (g C kg ⁻¹)	Organic matter (%)	Total N (g kg ⁻¹)	Total P (g kg ⁻¹)	MSI ^a
1	5.8	3.99	0.7	0.26	68.5	533.3
2	4.9	2.85	0.5	0.19	78.7	1121.9
3	5.4	6.62	1.1	0.46	119.2	144.9
4	5.7	3.17	0.5	0.12	48.4	443.0
5	6.1	7.29	1.3	0.60	200.7	87.2
6	5.7	3.09	0.5	0.47	90.0	131.3

^a (MSI of soil planted with *L. multifida*) – (MSI of soil unplanted with *L. multifida*) after 5 months culture in each soil. Adapted from Ouahmane et al. (2007)

as lavender plants have a patchy distribution in *Cupressus* stands in Haut Atlas Mountains in Morocco, this *Lavandula* species could act as a “nurse plant” for natural regeneration of *Cupressus* young seedlings by (1) enhancing soil microbial activities (in particular those involved in P mobilization), and (2) enhancing the mycorrhizal soil infectivity.

12.3 Response of *Cupressus* sp. Growth to the “Nurse” Plant Effects

Recognizing the benefits recorded for lavender plants on soil diversity and functioning, several studies have been undertaken to determine their potential impacts on the early growth of *Cupressus* sp. To test the potential benefits from the association between *Cupressus* sp. and “nurse plant” on the growth of each plant partner, Ouahmane et al. (2007) conducted an experiment in controlled conditions combining the following treatments: *C. arizonica* + *L. multifida*, *L. multifida* alone and *C. arizonica* alone in 20-l pots filled with non-disinfected sandy soil. The results show that the height of plant species was increased in the dual cultivation treatment (Fig. 12.2). In addition, after 4 months culturing, the growth of *L. multifida* and *C. arizonica* was generally higher when they were cultured together than those recorded for singly cultured treatment (Fig. 12.2). A similar effect was observed for the mycorrhizal colonization of the plants (Table 12.3). Other studies have also been conducted to evaluate the capacity of the “fertility islands” created by the nurse plants to facilitate the early growth of *Cupressus* spp.. Soil samples were collected under *L. dentata*, *L. stoechas* and *T. satureioides* rhizosphere and from an area free of cover plant (control). Soils were then packed in 1-dm³ pots and one *C. arizonica* seedling was planted per pot. After 6 months of culturing, the height, stem diameter, N and P foliar contents, AM colonization, and shoot and root biomass were significantly higher in the soils originating from the nurse plants than in the bare soil (Table 12.4). These results suggest that *C. atlantica* has to be mycorrhizal in order to reach its optimal growth and that this Mediterranean tree species is “highly dependent on mycorrhizas” (Habte and Manjunath 1991). These

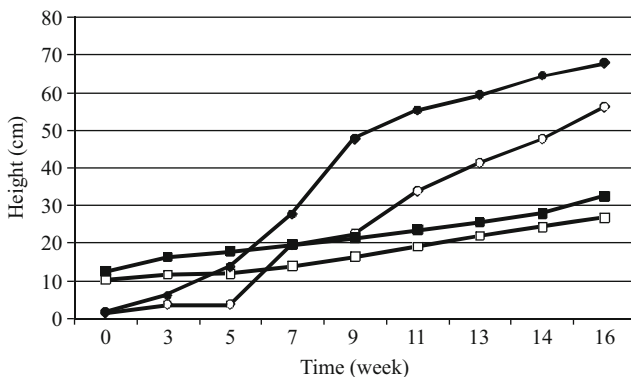


Fig. 12.2 Time course changes in plant height (in cm) of *Cupressus arizonica* and *Lavandula multifida* seedlings in the mono and dual cultivation treatments. Height growth of *C. arizonica* seedlings: empty square *C. arizonica* alone; filled square *C. arizonica*+*L. multifida* – height growth of *L. multifida* seedlings; empty circle *L. multifida* alone; filled circle *L. multifida*+*C. arizonica* (adapted from Ouahmane et al. 2007)

Table 12.3 Growth and mycorrhizal colonization of *Cupressus arizonica* and *Lavandula multifida* after 4 months culturing in a non-disinfected sandy soil

Plant species	Treatment	Shoot biomass (mg dry weight/plant)	Root biomass (mg dry weight/plant)	Mycorrhizal colonization (%)
<i>C. arizonica</i>	Alone	3,393 a	735 a	4 a
	+ <i>L. Multifida</i>	3,456 b	1,499 b	92 b
<i>L. multifida</i>	Alone	1,020 a	1,102 a	10 a
	+ <i>C. arizonica</i>	1,032 a	2,120 b	50 b

For each plant species, data in the same column followed by the same letter are not significantly different ($p < 0.05$) according to one-way analysis of variance. Adapted from Ouahmane et al. (2007)

Table 12.4 Growth and mycorrhizal colonization of *Cupressus atlantica* seedlings planted in the rhizosphere soils collected from *Lavandula dentata*, *L. stoechas*, *Thymus satureioides*, *C. atlantica* and the bare soil (control) after 6 months culturing in greenhouse conditions

	Control	Soil origin			
		<i>L. dentata</i>	<i>L. stoechas</i>	<i>T. satureioides</i>	<i>C. atlantica</i>
Height (cm)	14.2 a	18.6 b	21.0 cd	23.0 d	19.4 bc
Stem diameter (mm)	2.02 a	2.72 bc	2.72 bc	2.94 c	2.54 b
Shoot biomass (mg dry weight/plant)	330 a	634 bc	738 c	666 bc	486 ab
Root biomass (mg dry weight/plant)	76 a	176 c	157 bc	115 abc	104 ab
N (mg/plant)	0.79 a	1.56 b	1.82 c	2.03 d	1.48 b
P (mg/ plant)	0.033 a	0.107 c	0.115 c	0.147 d	0.090 b
AM colonization (%)	35 b	48 b	50 b	75 c	54 b

Data in the same line followed by the same letter are not significantly different ($p < 0.05$) according to one-way analysis of variance. Adapted from Ouahmane et al. (2007)

studies confirmed that plant nurses mainly act on *Cupressus* seedling growth through their impact on AM fungus communities. AM fungi are important agents in promoting plant co-existence (Allen and Allen 1990). Moreover, the abundance and diversity of AM fungi are known to have a strong effect on the direction of succession (Medve 1984). This AM fungal effect is mainly important in early successional ecosystems where plant and soil have been severely disturbed and where AM fungi are absent or are in low abundance and patchily distributed (Hart et al. 2003). Hence, the use of plant nurses as promoting agent of mycorrhizal soil infectivity could be of great interest in restoring a self-sustaining vegetation cover in order to act against desertification.

12.4 Conclusion

The use of nurse shrubs facilitates seedling establishment in many different ecological settings in Mediterranean mountains (Gomez-Aparicio et al. 2004) suggesting that the removal of shrubs is not an appropriate practice for reforestation in Mediterranean mountains. Therefore, a new paradigm for the science of restoration of Mediterranean forests emerges from all these ecological studies (Maestre et al. 2001, 2002; Gomez-Aparicio et al. 2004). It is based on the natural spatial patterns of regeneration of woody vegetation with shrubs as micro-sites for recruitment. Furthermore, since the benefits of positive interactions between plant species is widely recognized (Callaway et al. 2002), this innovative forestry practice might be more relevant under the predicted rise in temperatures, dryness, and rainfall variability for the Mediterranean region under global warming (IPCC 2001). Since the primary limitation of plant fitness is generally represented by the severity of the physical environment, the enhancement of environmental conditions by nurse shrubs can be of crucial importance in many stressful environments.

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Chapter 13

Pea Cultivation in Saline Soils: Influence of Nitrogen Nutrition

Etelvina Figueira

Abstract Salinity is one of the most important abiotic factors limiting plant growth and productivity. This is especially acute in arid and semiarid regions of the world. In this chapter, attention is paid to evaluate the influence of different forms of nitrogen on the tolerance and the yield of pea (*Pisum sativum* L.) plants cultivated under different saline conditions. Results show that the nitrogen form influenced pea growth, yield and ionic content, both under the presence and absence of salinity. Under nonsaline conditions, the highest growth and yields were obtained by NO_3NH_4 , whereas under salinity, NO_3^- displayed the highest values. The inoculation with a salt-tolerant strain allowed the nodule formation process to remain unaffected by salt. Nevertheless, these plants had lower yields than NO_3^- -fed plants, although similar values to NH_4^+ -supplemented plants, indicating that, by relying solely on biological N_2 fixation or NH_4^+ fertilization, pea yields under saline conditions will be compromised.

13.1 Introduction

Salinity stress is of great importance in arid and semiarid areas of the world, since most crops are sensitive to salinity, evidencing sharp yield decreases in the presence of moderate salt concentrations (Subbarao and Johansen 2004). More than 6% of the total land area of the world is salt affected. Most of these salt-affected areas have arisen from natural causes, by the accumulation of salts over long periods of time in arid and semiarid zones (Rengasamy 2002). Apart from natural salinity, a significant proportion of recently cultivated agricultural land has become saline owing to land clearing or irrigation, both of which cause water tables to rise and

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concentrate the salts in the root zone. Of the 1,500 million ha of land farmed by dry land agriculture, 32 million ha (2%) are affected by secondary salinity of varying degrees. Of the current 230 million ha of irrigated land, 45 million ha (20%) are salt affected (Munns and Tester 2008).

Tolerance to salinity may have different meanings according to the objectives by which it is considered. If tolerance is viewed from an ecological perspective, the most relevant is that species colonizing a habitat can complete their life cycle and create conditions for their permanence. From an agronomic point of view, the most important factor is productivity. If salinity causes toxic effects and osmotic and nutritional imbalances, a large part of photosynthates will be used as osmotic solutes or in ion exclusion, reducing growth and productivity and putting their cultivation in salt-affected agricultural soils at risk.

The focus of this chapter is to evaluate the influence that different nitrogen sources have on salt tolerance of pea (*Pisum sativum*), during its growth and productivity. To achieve this goal, growth, productivity, seed protein content, and ion contents were determined and compared between *Pisum sativum* plants grown for 75 days under the presence (90 mM NaCl) or absence (0 mM NaCl) of salinity and four types of nitrogen nutrition (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ , NH_4NO_3 , or symbiotically fixed N_2 by an halotolerant isolate of *Rhizobium leguminosarum*).

13.2 Nitrogen Nutrition Under Salt Stress

13.2.1 Cell Ionic Status

As the boundary between the outside and inside, the plasma membrane is one of the most important structures that cells have to adjust their composition. Plasmalemma proteins control which solutes will be accumulated and which will be excluded, creating gradients through the membrane. This process is important in many aspects of plant growth and development, including mineral nutrition (Ward 1997). Some ions and solutes, such as H^+ , Na^+ , and Ca^{2+} , are excluded from the cytosol of cells, while others, such as K^+ , NH_4^+ , NO_3^- , Cl^- , SO_4^{2-} , HPO_4^- , sugars, organic acids, and amino acids are accumulated. One of the fundamental characteristics of membrane transport in plants is that protons are actively excluded from the cytosol to the cell outside. This process creates a pH gradient, usually between 1.5 and 2 units (Marschner 1995; Ward 1997), and a voltage gradient, usually between 100 and 200 mV (Marschner 1995; Ward 1997) in the plasmalemma. Thus, in electrophysiological terms the absorption of cations can occur passively, while anion absorption uses up energy.

As the selectivity of ion channels and transporters is based on the ionic charge it leads to competition between ions of the same electrical charge. The competition between Cl^- and NO_3^- , between K^+ and Na^+ , or between Ca^{2+} and Na^+ (Marschner 1995; Tyerman 1992; Fox and Guerinot 1998) results in severe nutritional imbalances

to plants when the intracellular ratios of these ions are very different from those in the soil solution. In the presence of saline conditions, Na^+ and Cl^- are often the most abundant ions. Therefore, it is not surprising that these soils are characterized by low activities of nutrient ions and high ratios of $\text{Na}^+/\text{Ca}^{2+}$, Na^+/K^+ , and $\text{Cl}^-/\text{NO}_3^-$. In these circumstances, nutritional disorders may develop and plant growth be reduced.

13.2.2 Nitrogen as a Plant Macronutrient

Nitrogen is the fourth most abundant element in organisms, constituting about 1.5–5% of the plant dry weight (Below 1995). Due to the high requirements of this element, about 70% of the ions absorbed by plants are nitrogen-containing compounds (Marschner 1995). Among the mineral nutrients, nitrogen often limits the growth and productivity of many crops (Marschner 1995). Nitrogen is incorporated in numerous organic compounds that include proteins, nucleic acids, chlorophylls, and growth regulators, all playing crucial roles in plant growth and development.

13.2.2.1 Inorganic Nitrogen Nutrition

Nitrogen is available to plants in the soil in a variety of forms including ammonium (NH_3 and NH_4^+), nitrate, amino acids, soluble proteins, and other nitrogen-containing compounds, but plants absorb nitrogen primarily in an inorganic form as NO_3^- or ammonium (Williams and Miller 2001). Under natural conditions, the nitrogen present in the soil originates from biological fixation, or animal and plant decomposition. The vast majority (over 90%) of nitrogen present in the soil is contained in organic matter, which is relatively stable and is not directly available to plants (Below 1995). However, part of the organic nitrogen may become available through mineralization by microorganisms in the soil (Marschner 1995). The form of nitrogen provided, cationic or anionic, affects their availability to plants due to differences in the mobility of the two ions in the soil solution. The cation NH_4^+ binds to the negatively charged particles in the soil and becomes relatively immobile. In contrast, the NO_3^- anion is repelled, which increases its bioavailability for root uptake. However, this form of nitrogen is easily lost by leaching and denitrification (Bray 1983; Below 1995).

Plants acquire the vast majority of their nitrogen through the root system. This process involves the movement of inorganic nitrogen, NO_3^- or NH_4^+ , through the plasma membrane. The high-affinity transport systems in roots are able to scavenge NH_4^+ and NO_3^- from the soil at concentrations between 1 μM and 1 mM, whereas the activity of low-affinity transport systems becomes evident when these ions are above 5 mM (Jackson et al. 2008). All NO_3^- transport systems need energy to overcome an unfavorable electrochemical gradient between the outside solution and the symplast of root cells. Ammonium transport can be passive if uptake occurs

through low-affinity systems or active through high-affinity systems (Williams and Miller 2001; Grossman and Takahasi 2001). Whereas NH_4^+ can be directly used in the synthesis of amino acids, NO_3^- must first be reduced to NH_4^+ . This reduction is a process that uses up energy and may be the reason why NH_4^+ inhibits NO_3^- uptake (Gazzarrini et al. 1999; Gessler et al. 1998; Siddiqi et al. 2002).

13.2.2.2 N_2 Fixation and Plant Nutrition

Eukaryotic cells do not possess the biochemical "machinery" to react with diatomic nitrogen. Only a few prokaryotes, including species of the genera *Azotobacter*, *Azotococcus*, *Clostridium*, *Klebsiella*, *Bacillus*, *Azopirillum*, *Nostoc*, *Anabaena*, *Rhizobium*, *Bradyrhizobium*, and *Frankia*, have enzymes that reduce N_2 (Bray 1983; Marschner 1995). Some of them establish endosymbiosis, such as the association between plants of the family Fabaceae and bacteria of the genera *Rhizobium*, *Bradyrhizobium*, *Azorhizobium*, *Mesorhizobium*, and *Ensifer*. Free-living rhizobia do not fix N_2 , this function is accomplished only in association with the host plants. Bacteria colonize legume roots at the beginning of the vegetative growth and leads to the formation of nodules. In nodules, bacteria undergo structural (such as loss of cell wall) and metabolic (as the expression of nitrogenases) changes that enable them to fix the N_2 , turning into bacteroids (Brewing et al. 1993). Individually or in small groups, each bacteroid is surrounded by a membrane, forming a structure called the symbiosome which is the site of N_2 fixation. The NH_4^+ resulting from the reduction of NO_3^- , from the symbiotic fixation of N_2 , or absorbed directly, is assimilated into glutamate and glutamine. Ammonium assimilation usually occurs at root level, whereas nitrate assimilation can occur both in roots and leaves. Glutamate and glutamine are the precursors of other amino acids, generating all the amino acids required for protein synthesis. They are also the raw material responsible for generating a series of other compounds, such as chlorophylls, plant growth regulators, and nucleic acids (Below 1995).

13.2.2.3 N_2 Fixation in Plants Under Salinity Stress

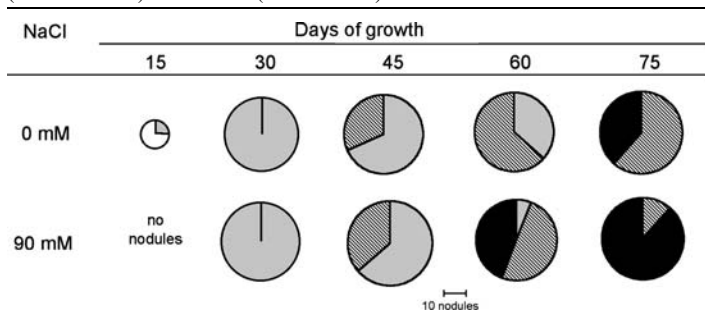
Many studies have reported the inhibitory effects of salinity in the fixation of N_2 (Lauter and Munns 1986; Cordovilla et al. 1994, 1996, 1999a, 1999b; Tu 1981; Salehi et al. 2008; Tawfik 2008). In saline environments, the nodulation reduction may be due to the decrease in rhizobial populations, because of its sensitivity to salt, affecting the survival and distribution of rhizobia in the soil and rhizosphere of plants (Singleton et al. 1982; Craig et al. 1991). For example, Pereira et al. (2008) found that 50 mM NaCl strongly inhibited the growth of three of the five *Rhizobium* populations compatible with pea plants, when grown in YEM medium supplemented with salt. Elsheikh and Wood (1995) selected strains of *Rhizobium* and *Bradyrhizobium* for their salt tolerance and reported that one of them only grew in the absence of NaCl, and the others showed different tolerances but were not able

to grow above 340 mM. However, Zharan et al. (1994) isolated strains of *Rhizobium* with different salt tolerances; some grew at 1.7 M NaCl. Pereira et al. (2008) also recorded isolates that grew at the same level of halotolerance (1.6 M NaCl).

In the nodulation process, salt inhibition is regarded more as an effect on the establishment of nodules than on the reduction of *Rhizobium* population. There are several studies showing that the most sensitive process to salinity is the establishment of the nodules (Lauter and Munns 1986; Cordovilla et al. 1999a). For example, Singleton and Bhoolool (1983) found a strong reduction (50%) in the number of nodules in the roots of soybean [*Glycine max* (L.) Merr] growing under 26.6 mM NaCl. In a similar study, Elsheikh and Wood (1990) observed that nodulation in chickpea (*Cicer arietinum* L.) was completely inhibited by 61.6 mM NaCl, even when inoculated with a strain tolerant to salt, while Abd-Alla et al. (1998) observed that salinity (30 and 60 mM NaCl) inhibited the number of nodules and the biomass of four cultivars of *G. max* inoculated with a salt-tolerant strain of *Bradyrhizobium*. The reduction in the number of nodules has been associated with the effect of salinity on cell expansion inhibition, and to root hairs number and curling (Sprent and Zahran 1988; Tu 1981). In *Pisum sativum* plants growing in the presence (90 mM) and absence of NaCl, it was observed that salinity delayed nodule formation. In contrast to control plants, 15-day-old salt-stressed plants had no nodules. However, salinity had no effect on nodule number at later stages, although nodule senescence started earlier (Table 13.1). These results show that the susceptibility of the nodulation process to salinity is not always verified and that the selection of a halotolerant *Rhizobium* strain with good N₂-fixing ability is important to legume nodulation in saline conditions.

The effects of salinity on the symbiosis between rhizobia and host may also be on the N₂-fixation process directly. Several hypotheses aim to explain the negative

Table 13.1 Number and color of root nodules produced on halotolerant *Rhizobium*-inoculated *Pisum sativum* plants grown in soils treated with (90 mM NaCl) or without (0 mM NaCl) salts



Circle diameter reflects the number of nodules present in roots: less than 30 (small circles); and higher than 30 (big circles); nodule absence is also registered. The relative abundance of different nodule colors is also presented: *white* white nodules, *gray pink* nodules, *stripes* green nodules, *black* brown nodules

effects of salt on N_2 fixation: a decline in the supply of photosynthates to the nodules (Bekki et al. 1987; Georgiev and Atkins 1993); lower availability of reduced compounds to bacteroids (Delgado et al. 1993, 1994); changes in the oxygen diffusion barrier (Delgado et al. 2006; Serraj et al. 1994; Wahab and Zahran 1981); or inhibition of several enzymes important to N_2 assimilation. Serraj et al. (1994) showed that exposure of *G. max* plants to 0.1 M NaCl resulted in a rapid decrease in nitrogenase activity. Abd-Alla et al. (1998) found that 30 mM was enough to cause a sharp decline in the activity of nitrogenase in three of the four cultivars of *G. max* used in the study. Bourgeais-Chaillou et al. (1992) described reductions in the activity of glutamine synthetase (GS) and glutamate synthase (GOGAT) in the root nodules of plants under salt stress. Cordovilla et al. (1996, 1999a, 1999c) reached the same conclusion and showed that GOGAT was more inhibited than GS; thus concluding that GOGAT limited the assimilation of ammonium in the nodules of *Vicia faba* L. plants under salt stress. In other works, the same authors (Cordovilla et al. 1994, 1999c) concluded that N_2 fixation was more sensitive to salinity than the assimilation of ammonium.

The influence of salt stress in N_2 fixation is higher than on the absorption of inorganic nitrogen due to the higher energy costs to fix N_2 , leaving less energy available for growth and for salinity coping. The accumulation of intracellular organic solutes in the nodules, such as proline and glycine betaine, has been correlated with salt tolerance (Robson and Bottomley 1991; Botsford and Lewis 1990). A more efficient way to acquire salt tolerance will be to compartmentalize subcellularly inorganic compounds in the vacuoles, thus avoiding ion toxicity (Zahran 1991). The improvement of ion partitioning in the nodule cells could promote sustainable legume growth by means of N_2 fixation in the presence of salinity. According to Zahran (1991), this seems to be a good criterion for selecting legumes for cultivation under salt conditions. Thus, although the importance that salt-tolerant plant species and cultivars may have on the establishment of an effective symbiosis under salt stress, the need for salt-tolerant rhizobia cannot be ignored. Over time, only the rhizobia tolerant to salt can survive and persist in a saline soil. It is imperative that soils contain salt-tolerant populations of rhizobia compatible with the legume crops to be cultivated, in order to establish an effective symbiosis and to promote good growth and yield in saline soils.

13.3 Plant Growth Under Salt Stress

13.3.1 Growth in Saline Conditions

Plants absorb most of the mineral nutrients from the soil. That is why they are greatly affected by soil characteristics. Most crops are glycophytes and evolved under conditions of low salinity in the soil. Therefore, they possess mechanisms for nutrient absorption in nonsaline soils and are often unable to grow in this type of environment without evidencing damage. Plant growth and productivity involve the

integrated effect of diverse environmental factors and metabolic processes that act with different intensities throughout the plant life cycle. The first problem that plants have to overcome when growing in an adverse environment is to establish. Establishment is only possible if plants build up a good photosynthetic capacity to produce enough biomass to support their vegetative growth and reproduction. Maintenance of the photosynthetic capacity can become a problem when plants grow under stressful conditions, such as those precipitated by salinity. Salinity is characterized by an excess of ions, frequently Na^+ and Cl^- , in whose presence most plants grow poorly (Figueira and Caldeira 2005; Dudley 1994; Marschner 1995).

13.3.2 Nitrogen Nutrition and Growth Under Salinity

Under saline conditions, the three main constraints imposed by salinity on growth are (1) osmotic stress that originates with the increase of the soil osmotic potential, (2) ion toxicity which is associated to excessive uptake of Cl^- and Na^+ ; and (3) nutritional imbalances due to the decrease of absorption and/or transport to shoots as well as to an altered distribution of mineral nutrients (Marschner 1995; Munns and Tester 2008). The decrease in the turgor pressure caused by the defective osmotic regulation of the shoot is regarded as the main factor causing the inhibition of leaf elongation, leading to a reduction in leaf area and to the partial closure of stomata. The prolonged stomata closure causes considerable reduction in the CO_2 fixation per leaf area and per plant (Marschner 1995). The higher respiration rates and the shorter leaf duration also contribute to reduction in photosynthetic rates (Yeo 1998; Munns and Tester 2008). In fact, many studies report reductions of the photosynthetic capacity in plants subjected to salt stress (Below 1995; Marschner 1995; Yeo 1998). The decrease of photosynthates and the additional energy costs with the exclusion, partitioning, excretion, osmotic adjustment, and repair of cellular damage necessary to cope with salinity, contribute to the decline of plant growth under saline conditions (Marschner 1995; Munns and Tester 2008). In pea plants grown under different salt concentrations (0 and 90 mM NaCl) and nitrogen nutrition (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ , NO_3NH_4 , *Rhizobium* inoculation), it was observed that both salinity and N form affected plant growth (Fig. 13.1). Root growth was reduced by salinity and irrespective to the duration of salt exposure the N form also affected root growth. Under saline conditions, N_2 -fixing plants had a higher root biomass than plants fed with mineral N (Fig. 13.1a, b). In the absence of salinity, shoot biomass was lower in N_2 -fixing than in mineral N-fed plants, and NO_3NH_4 produced the highest shoot biomass (Fig. 13.1c). The enhanced biomass of shoots may certainly be related to the effect that a combined nitrogen nutrition of anions and cations has on the maintenance of cell pH, through the rates of H^+ production (assimilation of NH_4^+) and consumption (assimilation of NO_3^-), with lower energy costs in the maintenance of the cytosolic pH homeostasis, usually between 7.3 and 7.6 (Marschner 1995). Under salt stress, however, the response pattern changed. Although biomass was reduced in all N treatments, N_2 -fixing plants were less and

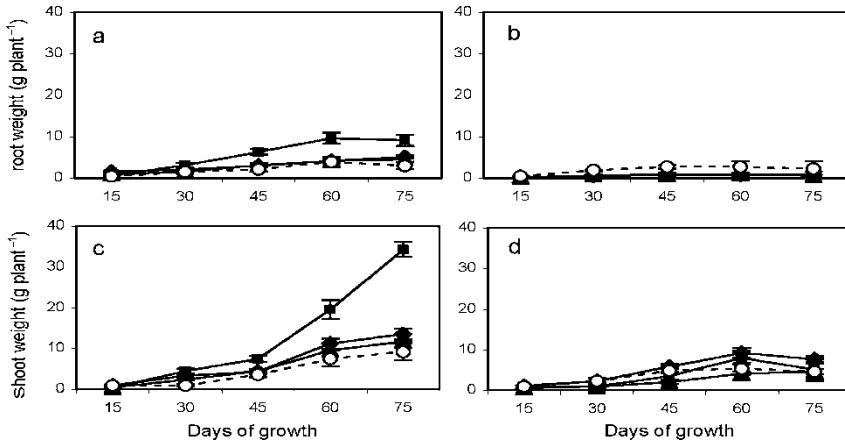


Fig. 13.1 Root and shoot weight of *Pisum sativum* grown during 75 days at two levels of salinity: (a roots without NaCl supply, b roots with 90 mM NaCl supply, c shoots without NaCl supply, d shoots with 90 mM NaCl supply) and with different N forms (filled diamond NO_3^- , filled triangle NH_4^+ , filled square NO_3NH_4 , open circle *Rhizobium* inoculation). Root and shoot fresh weight (g plant⁻¹) values are means \pm standard errors of 16 replicates

NH_4^+ -nourished plants more affected by salt. Other authors also observed that NH_4^+ was the N form causing the highest decreases in plant growth: Leidi et al. (1992) in cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum* L.) and peanut (*Arachis hypogaea* L.), Lewis et al. (1989) in maize (*Zea mays* L.), and Feigin (1990) in muskmelon (*Cucumis melo* L.). Among the different N forms, NO_3^- induced the highest growth of pea plants under moderate salt conditions (Fig. 13.1d), as also reported by Leidi et al. (1992) and Silberbush and Lips (1991a, 1991b).

The high concentrations of inorganic solutes, especially Na^+ and Cl^- absorbed by roots from the salinized media, directly affect plant growth. Above certain levels, the accumulation of ions are toxic to cells and will have a negative impact on plant metabolism and growth (Munns and Tester 2008). In severe cases of toxicity, plants show not only growth decreases but also marginal chlorosis and necrosis in mature leaves. Later on or with increasing salinity, the damaged areas will increase and organ or plant death may occur.

13.4 Salinity and Nitrogen Nutrition Influence on Productivity

13.4.1 The Importance of Seeds

Seeds perpetuate species over time and space, and are especially important in those species that do not propagate vegetatively. Perhaps for this reason, plants spend abundant resources to ensure that enough energy and nutrients exist for germination

and establishment. In *Pisum sativum*, cotyledons contribute actively to the growth of plantlets in the first 2 weeks following germination, losing 88% of their weight during this time (Lovell 1977). The richness of the seeds in minerals and organic compounds such as sugars, starch, fats, and proteins explain their excellent nutritional value and, perhaps for that reason, quickly resulted in their use as a food. Thus, besides the ecological importance that seeds have in the perpetuation of the species, the economic significance related to productivity maximization also became an important issue.

13.4.2 Seed Production

Legumes are generally considered either sensitive or moderately tolerant to salinity (Läuchli 1984; Zahran 1991). For crops, salinity tolerance is normally expressed in terms of the yield decrease associated with a given level of salinity. A yield decrease of 50% is usually considered a critical level for evaluating the relative salt tolerance of crops (Maas and Hoffman 1977). Pea is one of the most tolerant crop legumes, with 50% yield reduction in the presence of 100 mM NaCl (Subbarao and Johansen 1994). When pea plants were grown under different forms of N nutrition and salt conditions, it was observed that, under nonsaline conditions, productivity was two to four times higher when the source of nitrogen was NO_3NH_4 . The highest seed weight in plants grown under this form of N is mainly due to the production of a higher number of seeds per plant, as a result of the increase in pod number (results not shown). Salinity decreased productivity, markedly in NO_3NH_4 and NH_4^+ and only slightly in NO_3^- -nourished plants, where salinity did not change productivity significantly (Fig. 13.2). Doré et al. (1998) also

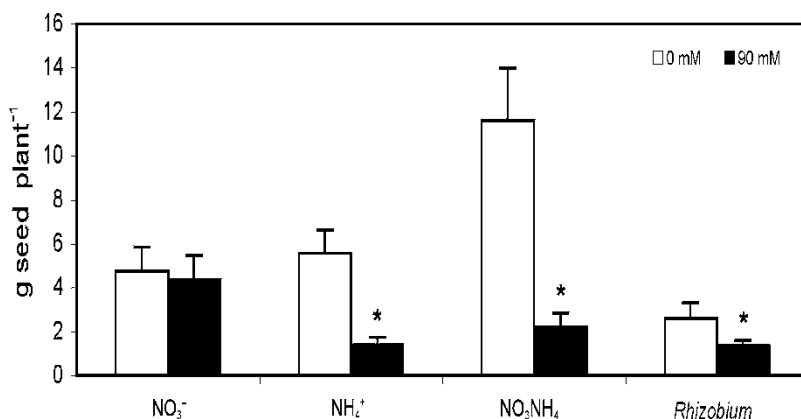


Fig. 13.2 Seed production of *Pisum sativum* grown at two levels of salinity (0 and 90 mM NaCl) and with different N forms (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ , NO_3NH_4 , *Rhizobium* inoculation). Seed fresh weight (g plant⁻¹) values are means \pm standard errors of 12 replicates. Significantly ($P < 0.001$) different values are marked (*)

observed variability in the productivity of pea plants cultivated under different growth conditions, and these authors also found that changes in productivity were related to the number and not the size of the seeds.

The productivity of plants exclusively dependent on N_2 fixation are generally smaller than those fed with inorganic nitrogen, due to the higher energy costs associated initially to anabolic processes leading to the formation of nodules and to the metabolic "machinery" necessary for N_2 fixation, and later to energy costs with the N_2 fixation process itself and with the maintenance of conditions that enable N_2 fixation. The high energy cost of N_2 fixation explains why, in *Pisum sativum* plants grown under different forms of nitrogen nutrition (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ , NO_3NH_4 , *Rhizobium* inoculation), those dependent on symbiotic fixation showed lower productivity (Fig. 13.2). Since inorganic nitrogen uptake is less costly to the plant than maintaining the capacity to reduce atmospheric N_2 (Lee et al. 2003), under conditions of increased soil nitrogen (e.g., fertilization), N_2 fixation is inhibited. NO_3^- generally has a greater inhibitory effect on N_2 fixation than NH_4^+ (Hartwig 1998; Lee et al. 2003). However, fixation has the advantage of freeing plants from the dependence of available nitrogen for their growth and development in N-limited soils, allowing sustainable legume production.

13.4.3 Seed Protein Content

A deficient nitrogen nutrition not only impacts significantly on productivity but also on the seed protein levels, especially in pulses, due to their high protein content (25% of *P. sativum* seed dry weight), indicating that seeds could be an appropriate organ to assess the nutritional status of plants (Atta et al. 2004). Protein synthesis has long been identified as one of the processes strongly affected by salinity (Gibson et al. 1984; Yeo 1998), due to the requirement of ion homeostasis that favors K^+ over Na^+ (Leigh and Wyn-Jones 1984), even in plants with as high salt tolerance as halophytes (Yeo 1998; Greenway and Munns 1980). In most cases, salinity decreases the protein level as a result of reduced protein synthesis. However, in some cases, an increase in the levels of proteins is reported (Dubey and Runi 1987; Joshi 1987; Dubey 1994). *Pisum sativum* plants grown under different nitrogen sources (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ , NO_3NH_4 , *Rhizobium* inoculation) and salinity conditions (0 and 90 mM NaCl) showed that both factors influenced protein levels in peas. Under nonsaline conditions, nutrition with NH_4^+ propitiated the accumulation of 64% more proteins than the other nitrogen treatments (Fig. 13.3a). However, the interaction of salinity with the nitrogen source changed this scenario. The amount of protein increased significantly in NO_3^- - and NO_3NH_4 -treated plants to levels similar to those previously provided by NH_4^+ , but the seed protein content of plants dependent on N_2 remained low (Fig. 13.3a). However, when calculating the total seed protein per plant, the value was lower under salt than under control conditions for all treatments except for NO_3^- , since in the other treatments (NH_4^+ , NO_3NH_4 and *Rhizobium* inoculation) salinity caused a massive reduction in

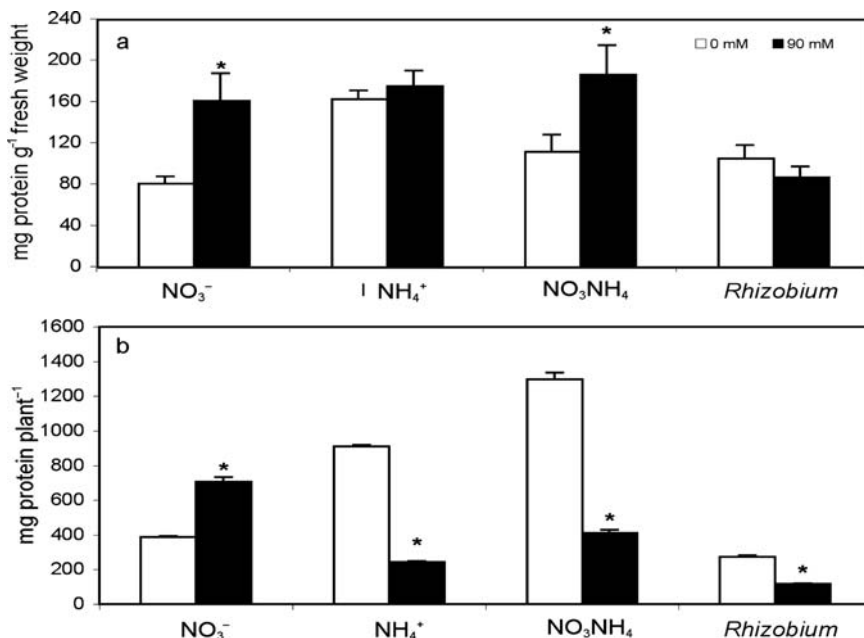


Fig. 13.3 Seed proteins of *Pisum sativum* grown for 75 days under different conditions of salinity (0 and 90 mM NaCl) and nitrogen sources (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ , NO_3NH_4 , *Rhizobium* inoculation): **a** expressed in mg proteins per gram of seed fresh weight, **b** expressed in mg proteins per plant. Values are means of 12 replicates. Significantly ($P < 0.001$) different values are marked (*)

productivity (seed weight per plant) that protein increment did not compensate for (Fig. 13.3b). From a food production perspective, the amount of total protein produced by plants is more important than the protein concentration in the seed. Results clearly show that salinity has a strong impact in pea productivity, except for the NO_3^- nutrition, suggesting that this form of N should be used as a source of N nutrition for pea cultivation in salt-affected areas.

13.5 Salinity Influence and Nitrogen Nutrition on Ion Accumulation

13.5.1 Vegetative Organs

Among the various factors contributing to plant growth, the availability of nutrients plays a vital role. Inorganic elements regulate plant metabolism by integrating organic molecules or acting as cofactors or activators of a large number of enzymes. Their availability for plant growth is influenced by biotic and abiotic factors, by synergistic and antagonistic interactions, and by uptake rates. Many of the

elements are absorbed or excreted actively, using energy supplied mostly by root aerobic respiration at the expense of carbohydrates and O_2 (Velagaleti and Schweitzer 1994).

The form of nitrogen supplied to plants (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ or fixed N_2) has a vast impact on the relationships between anions and cations. Plants nourished with NH_4^+ are characterized by a high ratio of absorption of cations over anions. The opposite situation occurs in plants absorbing NO_3^- , due to the higher consumption of protons used in the cotransport through plasma membrane and to the accumulation of anions within the cell. Thus, in plants supplied with NH_4^+ , absorption of anions is favored over cations. In *Pisum sativum* plants grown in the presence of salt (90 mM NaCl) and different N sources (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ , NO_3NH_4 , fixed N_2), the lower salt tolerance of plants under NH_4^+ nutrition may be related to the lower absorption of K^+ and to the higher accumulation of Na^+ and Cl^- in the shoot (Figs. 13.4, 13.5, 13.6). Other authors also reported a similar influence of NH_4^+ nutrition in plants grown under saline and nonsaline conditions. For instance, Smart and Bloom (1998) observed that exposure of tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum* L.) plants to ammonium led to a lower absorption of K^+ and an increase in the efflux of protons to the apoplast. Martínez and Cerdá (1989) observed that the addition of NH_4^+ to the growing medium decreased the accumulation of K^+ in cucumber (*Cucumis sativus* L.) plants growing in saline conditions. These authors also found that the increase of the ratio NH_4^+/NO_3^- induced plants to accumulate more Cl^- and Na^+ and less K^+ in the leaves. Plants dependent on symbiotically fixed N_2 accumulated lower concentrations of any of the ions analyzed (Figs. 13.4, 13.5, 13.6) than plants grown in inorganic nitrogen nutrition (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ , NO_3NH_4). Thus, the organs

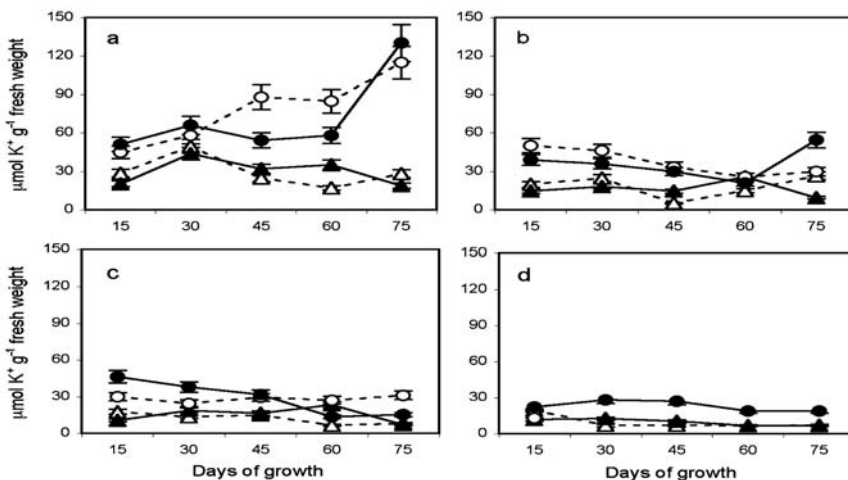


Fig. 13.4 Potassium concentration in roots and shoots of *Pisum sativum* grown for 75 days at two salinity levels (0 and 90 mM NaCl) and with four nitrogen nutrition sources: (a) NO_3^- , (b) NH_4^+ , (c) NO_3NH_4 , (d) *Rhizobium* inoculation): filled circle shoots with 90 mM NaCl, open circle shoots with 0 mM NaCl, filled triangle roots with 90 mM NaCl, open triangle roots with 0 mM NaCl. Values are means \pm standard errors of six replicates

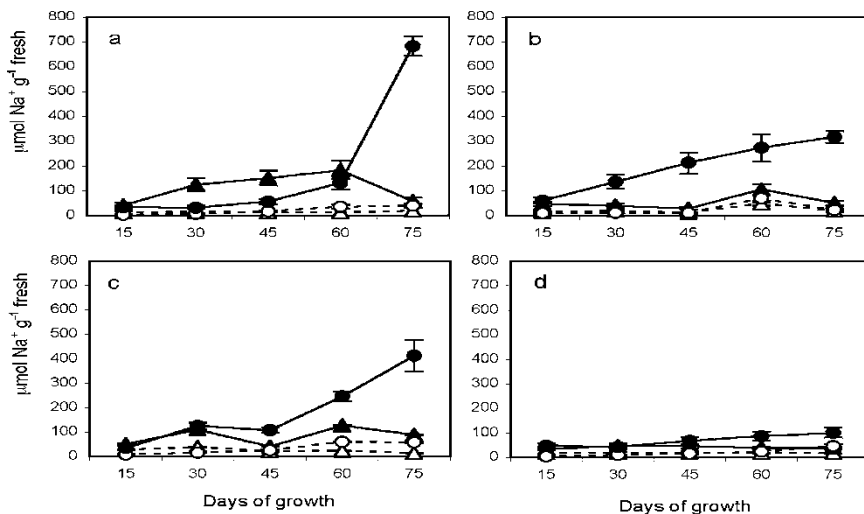


Fig. 13.5 Sodium concentration in roots and shoots of *Pisum sativum* grown for 75 days at two salinity levels (0 and 90 mM NaCl) and with four nitrogen nutrition (a NO_3^- , b NH_4^+ , c NO_3NH_4 , d *Rhizobium* inoculation): filled circle shoots with 90 mM NaCl, open circle shoots with 0 mM NaCl, filled triangle roots with 90 mM NaCl, open triangle roots with 0 mM NaCl. Values are means \pm standard errors of six replicates

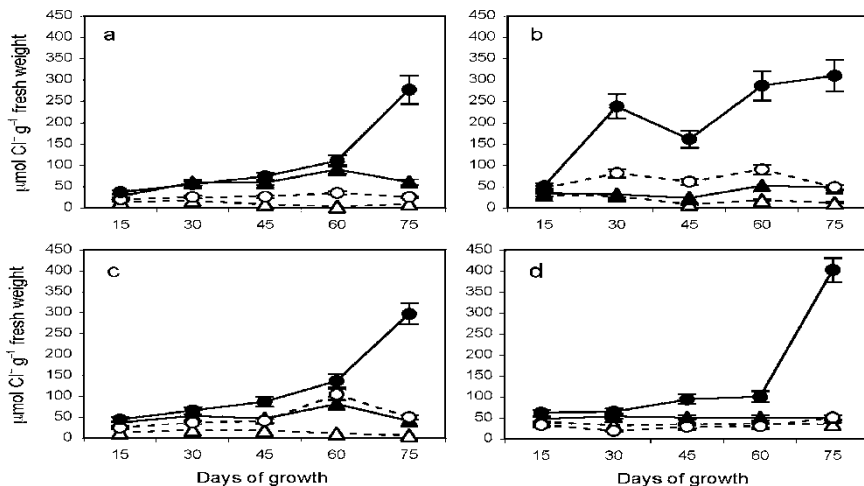


Fig. 13.6 Chloride concentration in roots and shoots of *Pisum sativum* grown for 75 days at two salinity levels (0 and 90 mM NaCl) and with four nitrogen nutrition (a NO_3^- , b NH_4^+ , c NO_3NH_4 , d *Rhizobium* inoculation): filled circle shoots with 90 mM NaCl, open circle shoots with 0 mM NaCl, filled triangle roots with 90 mM NaCl, open triangle roots with 0 mM NaCl. Values are means \pm standard errors of six replicates

of these plants must have experienced lower toxicity, and in turn a smaller inhibition would be caused by salt on vegetative and reproductive growth compared to plants nourished with NO_3NH_4 and NH_4 . However, plants tolerated better salt stress when NO_3^- was the N form provided. In plants nourished with NO_3^- , pH increases, enhancing cations absorption and inhibiting the absorption of other anions, and thus these plants frequently have higher K^+ contents than plants nourished with NH_4^+ (Marschner 1995). In *Pisum sativum* plants grown under different nitrogen sources, plants nourished with NO_3^- showed a higher allocation of Na^+ in the root (Fig. 13.5), and higher K^+/Na^+ ratios and higher Ca^{2+} concentrations (results not shown) in the shoot compared to plants nourished with other forms of N. The first recorded response to an increase in Na^+ around roots is an increase in cytosolic-free Ca^{2+} . (Munns and Tester 2008). The best characterized signaling pathway specific to salinity stress involves increases in cytosolic-free Ca^{2+} (Zhu 2002). Calcium ions play a role in maintaining the integrity of the plasma membrane and the activation effect that Ca^{2+} has on plasmalemma P-ATPases can contribute to facilitate the absorption of K^+ at low pH values (Marschner 1995). The influence that Ca^{2+} has on the maintenance of high K^+/Na^+ rates highlights the important role that Ca^{2+} plays in the maintenance of K^+ concentrations, simultaneously restricting the Na^+ uptake in salt-stressed plants. Martínez and Cerdá (1989) also observed that when NO_3^- was the only source of nitrogen available, the accumulation of K^+ in plants increased under saline conditions compared to plants supplied with mixed nitrogen nutrition. A study conducted by Subbarao et al. (1990) showed that the increase in saline tolerance of three different species of *Alyosa* was linked to a higher efficiency in the regulation of Na^+ and Cl^- acropetal transport and to the maintenance of K^+ selectivity. The shoot exclusion mechanism observed in plants of *Pisum sativum* under NO_3^- nutrition seems to have lost much of its effectiveness in older plants over a 15-day period (between 60 and 75 days), the concentration of Na^+ increased about five times in the shoot and decreased three times in the root (Fig. 13.5). The Cl^- ratio between shoots and roots is kept close to the unit, however, at the end of the growth increases six times (Fig. 13.6). Thus, for most of the growth period, plants dependent on NO_3^- accumulated 20–50% less Cl^- , 30–70% less Na^+ , and 0.4–3.6 times more K^+ in the shoots than plants nourished with other forms of N, which certainly contributed to the higher salt tolerance observed in plants nourished with nitrate.

In most situations, Cl^- influx requires energy and is probably catalyzed by a $\text{Cl}^-/2\text{H}^+$ cotransporter (Felle 1994; Sanders 1980). The cytosolic Cl^- concentration is likely in the range of 10–20 mM, but may be higher in saline conditions (Munns and Tester 2008). Cl^- tissue concentrations as high as 400 mM are tolerated by most species, and even sensitive species can tolerate 250 mM (Munns and Tester 2008). The absorption of Cl^- is often inhibited by NO_3^- (Marschner 1995; Grattan and Grieve 1994), not only because of the influence of pH, but also due to the competition between the two anions (Caldwell et al. 1986; Glikey and Staehelin 1989; Marschner 1995; Tyerman 1992). This competition is of great importance in the tolerance to salinity. Rogers et al. (1997) observed that the difference in salinity

tolerance shown by two populations of white clover (*Trifolium repens* L.) was due to the lower absorption of Cl^- and to an increase of its restriction efficiency from the shoot. Lauchli and Wieneke (1979) recorded that some varieties of *G. max* exhibited different salt tolerances and that these differences could be related to the restriction of Cl^- transport in the xylem. Rogers et al. (1997) and Lauchli and Wieneke (1979) concluded that within these species salt tolerance seems to be related to Cl^- exclusion, in particular from the shoot. Chloride concentration differences in *Pisum sativum* plants grown under different forms of nitrogen nutrition and NaCl concentrations (Fig. 13.6) showed that Cl^- accumulation is not only genotypically fixed but is also dependent on the N source.

13.5.2 Seeds

In pea plants grown in the presence of NaCl, Na^+ concentrations in seeds are about ten times lower than those found in vegetative organs, with the N form supplied

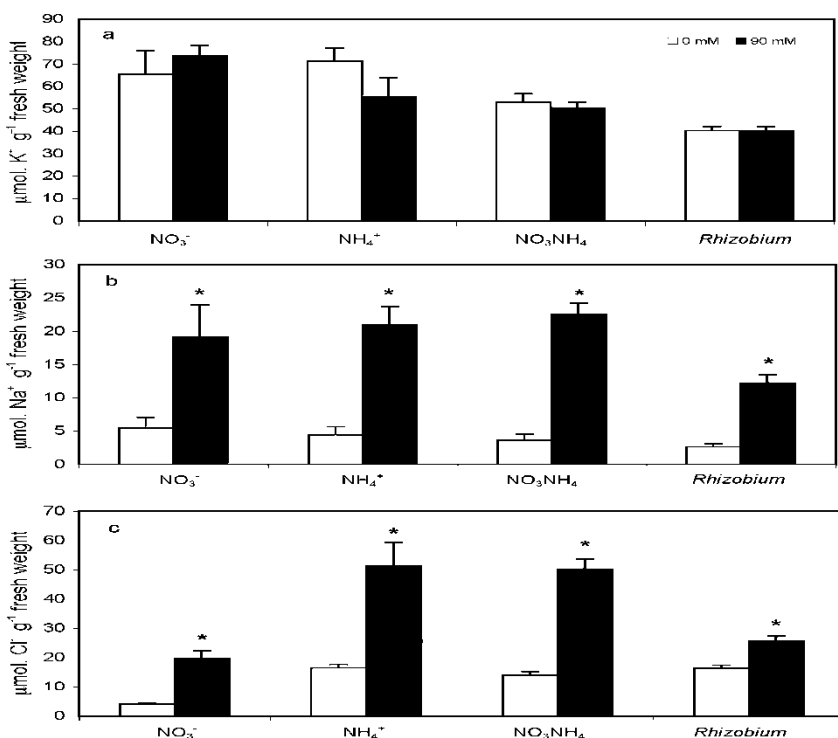


Fig. 13.7 Potassium (a) sodium (b) and chloride (c) concentrations in seeds of *Pisum sativum* plants grown for 75 days under different conditions of salinity (0 and 90 mM NaCl) and nitrogen sources (NO_3^- , NH_4^+ , NO_3NH_4 , *Rhizobium* inoculation). Values are means \pm standard errors of 16 replicates. Significantly ($P < 0.001$) different values are marked (*)

influencing Na^+ levels (Fig. 13.7b), as also reported by Greenway and Munns (1980), Hajibagheri et al. (1987), and Marschner (1995), who suggested that Na^+ is excluded from reproductive and young vegetative organs. Chloride, that was preferentially accumulated in the shoot, was also excluded from seeds, although less effectively than Na^+ , and concentrations varied with the N form supplied to plants (Fig. 13.7c). The large acropetal translocation of ions that occurred at the later stages of *Pisum sativum* plants growth was also described by Pate and Flinn (1977), and was explained by these authors as a physiological process that mobilizes organic nutrients and minerals to the growing seeds. Although this process is advantageous for seeds, it also changes the mechanisms of salt tolerance, with decreases in the efficiency of Na^+ and Cl^- exclusion from the shoot, leaving this organ more vulnerable to salinity, but maintaining low Na^+ and Cl^- concentrations in the reproductive organs and thus not compromising seeds viability.

13.6 Conclusion and Future Prospects

In this chapter, a better knowledge of *Pisum sativum* responses to salinity as well as some of the factors that influence these responses is provided. Plants nourished with NO_3^- experienced lower toxicity in the shoots than those of other N treatments, due to lower accumulations of Na^+ and Cl^- and to higher K^+ concentrations. Thus, it is possible to grow *Pisum sativum* in moderate salinity levels without significant decreases in productivity if plants are provided with adequate levels of nitrogen in the form of nitrate. Plants dependent on symbiotically-fixed nitrogen had lower productivity, but were not as affected by salinity as plants dependent on ammonium or ammonium nitrate.

This chapter also raised some issues that require urgent attention. Can the study of salt tolerance of different *Pisum sativum* cultivars extend the known range of this species tolerance? Would the screening of new *Rhizobium* strains increase the nodulation efficiency in *Pisum sativum* growing in saline and nonsaline conditions? Which are the organic solutes that cells of *Pisum sativum* accumulate in order to adjust the cytoplasm osmotically? What are the concentration gradients of sodium and chloride through tonoplast in each of the plant organs? How are xylem loading and acropetal transport of ions regulated? What will be the growth and yield responses of plants under salt stress to a mixed nutrition of symbiotic nitrogen and low levels of nitrate?

The answer to these questions could be approached in future in order to reach a better understanding of the factors determining salt tolerance in legumes, and allow more efficient pulses cropping in salinized areas without massive reductions in productivity or high inputs of inorganic N fertilization.

Acknowledgments I thank Georgina Hodge for her help and suggestions. This work was supported by the Centre for Cell Biology.

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Chapter 14

Plant Growth-Promoting Diazotrophs and Productivity of Wheat on the Canadian Prairies

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and Jan J. Slaski

Abstract Nitrogen is an essential plant nutrient, which is limiting for wheat production in Canada. To achieve higher yields, farmers often apply large amounts of nitrogen fertilizers at a considerable cost. The prospects of extending biological nitrogen fixation (BNF) to non legume crops, as a way to overcome the high cost and ecological issues of nitrogenous fertilizers, has remained a dream to date. Several studies have reported colonization and N₂ fixation by rhizobia strains in chemically-induced para-nodules (nodule-like structures). The extent to which nitrogen fixation in para-nodules and intercellular spaces benefits plants, especially under field conditions remains unclear. Exploiting the benefits of diazotrophs as plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) appears to be a more promising approach, assuming that issues of lack of consistency of growth stimulation can be resolved. This chapter describes experiences and progress made in Canada towards the application of *Azorhizobium caulinodans* and native rhizobia strains as inoculants for improving wheat production.

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14.1 Introduction

14.1.1 *Wheat in Canada*

Wheat (common, *Triticum aestivum* and durum, *T. turgidum*) is the most important cereal crop in the world, which, together with rice and maize, account for about 73% of world cereal production. Canada is one of the world's largest producers and exporters of wheat. In 2007, Canada ranked as the eighth largest wheat-producing country in the world (Fig. 14.1). Over the last decade, the annual production of wheat in Canada has consistently exceeded 20 million tons, except in 2002 when production dropped to about 16 million tons due to severe drought in the Prairie Provinces. Wheat is Canada's largest crop both in terms of area seeded and production. All Canadian provinces, except Newfoundland and Labrador, grow wheat; Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta, and Ontario are the leading wheat producers in Canada. The annual revenue derived from wheat export in Canada exceeds \$5 billion, making wheat the highest earner of all exported agricultural products. Only one class of durum is grown in Canada, spring amber durum; however, there are several classes of common wheat grown in Canada, based on seed hardness and color, and on sowing time (autumn or spring).

14.1.2 *Nitrogen Use in Wheat Production*

Canadian wheat yields are relatively low averaging 2.4 tha^{-1} between 1998 and 2007 compared to the world average of 2.7 tha^{-1} (FAOSTat, Statistics Canada).

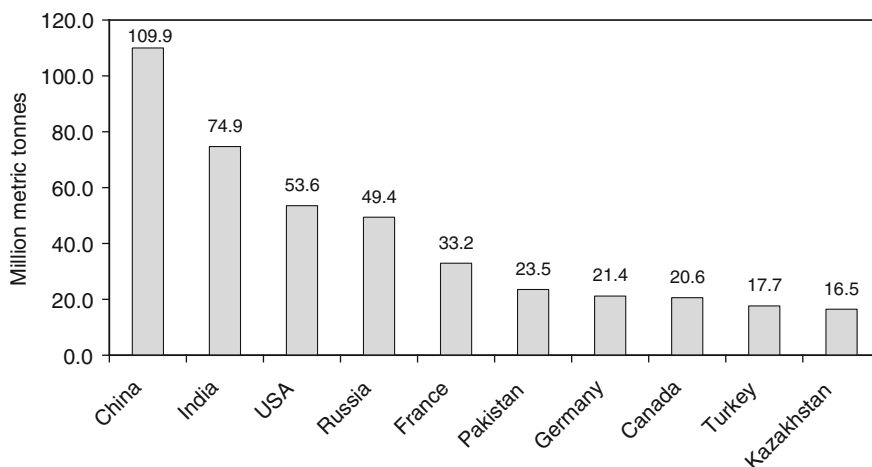


Fig. 14.1 Wheat-producing top 10 countries of the world (FAOSTAT data, 2007)

Nitrogen is a very important plant nutrient whose limitation can affect yield considerably. The emergence of nitrogen-containing synthetic fertilizers is one of the factors that contributed to the “green revolution” in the middle of the twentieth century. The Haber-Bosch process allows for the production of ammonia from nitrogen and hydrogen, which are the main inputs used in the production of all nitrogen fertilizers. The hydrogen used in the Haber-Bosch process is derived from natural gas. Farmers in Canada as in many other countries are highly dependent on nitrogen fertilizers to achieve high yields. In terms of tonnage, nitrogen accounted for about 60% of the total sales of chemical fertilizers in Canada in 2004 (Canadian Fertilizer Institute). Production of chemical nitrogen fertilizers, besides being very cost intensive, also depletes nonrenewable resources and poses human and environmental hazards. To complement and eventually substitute mineral fertilizers with biologically fixed nitrogen would represent an economically beneficial and ecologically sound alternative (Glick et al. 1999).

Analysis of nitrogen use on the Canadian prairies over the last three decades shows a steady increase from approximately 125,000 metric tons per year in 1969 to more than 1.25 million tons per year since 1996. The Canadian Fertilizer Institute reported total sales of nitrogen-containing fertilizers of 2.57 million metric tons in western Canada in the year ending June 30, 2000. Data show that nitrogen applications represent 22.1 and 33%, respectively, of the operating costs of corn and wheat production. In the black soils zone of Alberta, a wheat farmer would spend approximately three times more on nitrogen fertilizer than his counterpart who grows feed peas (*Pisum sativum*) inoculated with rhizobia. This suggests that the introduction of nitrogen-fixing bacteria to wheat could significantly reduce the cost of nitrogen fertilizer input. Norman Borlaug, in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture in 1970, highlighted the need to extend the symbiotic nitrogen fixation of legumes with rhizobia to the world’s major cereals, maize (*Zea mays*), wheat and rice (*Oryza sativa*) to sustain the green revolution (Borlaug 1970). Haber, who invented the famous “Haber-Bosch process” of ammonia production, in his 1920 Nobel Prize acceptance speech noted that “it may be that this solution is not the final one.” Nitrogen bacteria teach us that nature, with her sophisticated forms of the chemistry of living matter, still understands and utilizes methods, which we do not as yet know how to imitate (Cocking 2005).

14.2 Nitrogen Fixation and Non legume Plants

Many researchers have long dreamt of the prospects of extension of biological nitrogen fixation (BNF) to non legume crops. The extension was thought to be able to overcome the high cost and ecological issues of nitrogenous fertilizers. When in 1969 Van Overbeek urged botanists to tackle the problem of nitrogen deficiencies with boldness (Quispel 1991), molecular biology was still in its infancy. Van Overbeek stated then that “we need to device more efficient ecosystems, put root nodules on cereal crops, and put nitrogen-fixing chloroplasts in their leaves.” At

that time, many thought that, with increased knowledge and advances in molecular biology, nitrogen fixation would be easily achieved in non legume crops. Several decades later, nitrogen fixation by non legumes is still only a dream. The complexity of the genes of the nitrogenase enzyme complex involved in nitrogen fixation has so far prevented their successful transfer with function in plant cells. Quispel (1991) concluded that “in the light of our present knowledge the prospect of active nitrogenase in plant cells seems farther removed than it appeared in 1969.” As sad as it may be, the same conclusion still holds today.

A 1987 patent (Publication No.: WO/1987/004182) by NIELSEN, Sven-Erik SO/RENSEN, Grete, Mo/rch, published at the World Intellectual Property Organization claims to have invented “Rhizobia transformants that nodulate and fix nitrogen in non legumes. The nodulated non legume plants can be grown without nitrogenous fertilizer and have at least the same or higher protein content, dry matter content and nitrogen content than their nonnodulated counterparts which are fertilized by the addition of nitrogenous fertilizer. The straw remaining after harvesting the nodulated non legumes is also high in protein content”. There is no indication if these transformants were ever tested in field experiments and how well they performed. As was noted by Quispel (1991) “we are able to select and modify bacterial strains, host plants and bacteria–plant combinations, which are highly efficient under laboratory conditions. Successful field inoculation methods have been developed. Yet results in the field are mostly disappointing since the introduced selected bacteria have to compete with the indigenous *Rhizobium* populations in the soil.”

14.3 Plant Growth-Promoting Effects of Diazotrophs

Bacteria are abundantly present in the rhizosphere and in close vicinity of the root. It has long been recognized that several genera of these rhizobacteria have the ability to promote plant growth, and these have been termed plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria or PGPR. Some of these rhizobacteria interact with the plant in different mutually beneficial ways and may thereby promote plant growth or yield by direct or indirect mechanisms. Direct growth promotion may be through biofertilization by synthesis of elements or compounds utilizable by the plant, or by aiding the plant in uptake of nutrients and/or water. Indirect growth promotion on the other hand may entail biocontrol of infection by phyto-pathogenic organisms. The bacteria that provide some benefit to plants are of two general types: those that form a symbiotic relationship, which involves formation of specialized structures or nodules on host plant roots, and those that are free-living in the soil; the latter are often found near, on, or even within the roots of plants (Kloepper et al. 1988). Examples of symbiotic diazotrophs include: (1) rhizobia (includes soil bacteria of the genera *Rhizobium*, *Azorhizobium* and *Bradyrhizobium*), which interact with leguminous plants (belonging to the Fabaceae family) to form N₂-fixing nodules; (2) *Frankia* – “actinorhizal” nitrogen fixers that form similar symbiosis to rhizobia, with a number of woody plant species; and (3) symbiotic cyanobacteria which,

unlike rhizobia and Frankia, do not form nodules. The host range of cyanobacteria varies widely from fungi, mosses, and liverworts to waterferns (*Azolla*), some Gymnosperms (e.g., *Cycas* and *Macrozamia*) and Angiosperms (*Gunnera*) (Quispel 1991). In these symbioses, the plant supplies energy materials to the diazotrophs, which in turn reduce atmospheric nitrogen to ammonia. This ammonia is transferred from the bacteria to the plant to meet the plant's nutritional nitrogen needs for the synthesis of proteins, enzymes, nucleic acids, and chlorophyll. Some examples of free-living growth-promoting rhizobacteria are *Azobacter* species, *Azospirillum* species, pseudomonads, bacilli, and *Burkholderia* species (Brown 1974; Elmerich 1984; Kloepper et al. 1989; Quispel 1991).

Associative nitrogen fixation in rice was reported to have supplied 20–25% N of the total need in a study at International Rice Research Institute, Philippines (Ladha et al. 1987). Rice seedlings inoculated with *Burkholderia* spp. previously isolated from rice plants contained a relatively higher level of N due to BNF (Baldani et al. 2000). Sevilla and Kennedy (2000) suggested that *Acetobacter diazotrophicus* could promote rice growth, which might be related to the transfer of biologically fixed N, although other factors such as auxin production could be involved. Inoculation of wheat with *Azospirillum brasilense* and *A. lipoferum* significantly increased the biomass and grain yield as well as branching of root hairs (Kennedy and Tchan 1992).

14.4 Beneficial Effects of Rhizobia in Non legume Crops

According to Saikia and Jain (2007) advances in agricultural sustainability will require an increase in the utilization of BNF as a major source of nitrogen for plants. The beneficial effects of legumes in crop rotation have long been known. Albrecht Thier – the famous German pioneer of agricultural research – said this in 1856: “Latterly the practice of sowing white clover (*Trifolium repens*) with the last crop has become very general. Only a very few apathetic and indolent agriculturalists or men who are firmly wedded to their opinions and customs neglect this practice.” Legumes have also been used for soil improvement for centuries because of their N and non-N rotational benefits to non legume crops (Lupwayi et al. 2005). Seeding a non legume crop after legumes in a rotation can reduce the amount of nitrogen required to maintain yield. Noel et al. (1996) suggested that *Rhizobium* not only interacts with the roots of legumes but may also interact beneficially with nonleguminous plants. These authors concluded that “as *Rhizobium* may be found as a free-living rhizobacterium and appears to promote growth of non legumes as well as host legume species, the term PGPR seems to apply.”

Yanni et al. (2001) investigated the benefits of inoculating rice with *Rhizobium leguminosarum* by *trifolii*. The authors exploited the long-term association between this *Rhizobium* and rice in the Egyptian Nile delta where rice has been rotated successfully with berseem clover (*Trifolium alexandrinum* L) for ages. Greenhouse and field inoculation results of these experiments show an increase in plant

performance and grain yield, which was associated more with rhizobial effects on rice root architecture for enhanced uptake of soil nutrients. The authors suggested that some rhizobia may have evolved an additional ecological niche enabling them to form a three-component life cycle including a free-living heterotrophic phase in soil, a N₂-fixing endosymbiont phase within legume root nodules, and beneficial growth promoting endocolonizer phase within cereal roots in the same crop rotation.

Azorhizobium caulinodans is a stem and root nodulating nitrogen-fixing bacteria, which was isolated from the stem nodules of *Sesbania rostrata* (Dreyfus et al. 1988). The nitrogenase enzyme of *A. caulinodans* is reported to be more tolerant of oxygen than other rhizobia studied so far (Dreyfus et al. 1983). Several studies have shown that this bacterium is able to colonize intercellular spaces of cortex, xylem and root meristems of several non legumes through crack entry of emerging lateral roots (Sabry et al. 1997; Reddy et al. 1997; Webster et al. 1997; Cocking 2001). In the studies of Sabry et al. (1997), inoculation of aseptically grown wheat with *A. caulinodans* resulted in stimulation of root development accompanied by increased yield and N content. Since inoculated plants showed some level of acetylene reduction activity (a measure of N₂ fixation), the increase in plant growth and N content were attributed to nitrogen fixation by the bacterium. In follow-up studies with *A. caulinodans* by Mathews et al. (2001) in a “temperate” controlled environment, inoculation of wheat again resulted in increased yield and plant N content. However, application of a non-N₂-fixing strain of *A. caulinodans* or a filter-sterilized supernatant of the bacterium produced similar growth stimulation effects as the N₂-fixing strain. Mathews et al. (2001) concluded that response of wheat to *A. caulinodans* was not due to N₂ fixation but probably related to plant growth substances produced by the bacteria in culture.

14.5 Trials with *A. caulinodans* in Alberta, Canada

In a preliminary greenhouse study with a genetically improved strain of *A. caulinodans* ORS 571 (Geelen et al. 1995) using soil beds to simulate field conditions, Archambault and Li (2002) reported that inoculation of wheat (variety CDC Teal) with *A. caulinodans* increased biomass and grain yield by 49 and 34%, respectively. In subsequent growth chamber and greenhouse experiments, growth of wheat cv. CDC Teal was consistently enhanced by inoculation with *A. caulinodans* ORS 571 (Anyia et al. 2004). In one greenhouse experiment, leaf area, leaf area index, and biomass of inoculated plants were significantly higher in inoculated plants than in the uninoculated controls at 7 weeks after seeding (Table 14.1 and Fig. 14.2). Following successful and consistent positive results with *A. caulinodans* ORS 571 inoculation with wheat, it was thought that similar effects could be achieved under field conditions. During the summer of 2004, field trials were conducted at one location in Vegreville, Alberta, Canada, and in another location at Whitewater, Wisconsin, USA, using seeds of spring wheat pre-inoculated with *A. caulinodans* ORS 571. The trials were repeated in 2005 at four locations in Alberta, Canada,

Table 14.1 Means and standard errors of growth parameters at 7 weeks of inoculated and uninoculated plants of wheat cv. CDC Teal grown in soil beds in a greenhouse

Treatment	Height (cm)	Leaf area (cm ²)	Leaf area index	Tillers	Biomass (g ⁻⁵ plants)
Control	37.72±0.72	52.12±5.01	0.35±0.03	0.83±0.19	4.89±0.50
Inoculated	38.09±0.50	62.11±5.32	0.50±0.04	1.17±0.10	5.63±0.36
Difference (%)	1	19	41	40	15

**Fig. 14.2** Wheat cv. CDC Teal grown in the presence (*right*) and absence (*left*) of *A. caulinodans*

representing different agro-ecological zones. One location in the southern part of the province was irrigated due to low precipitation. *A. caulinodans* inoculant was also tested in eight field locations including five winter wheat and three spring wheat plots in the USA. Results of the 2 years of field testing are presented in Table 14.2. In 2004, inoculated plots at the Vegreville location consistently showed greater biomass production and grain yields than control plots. Overall, across all four nitrogen levels used in the trial, grain yield of inoculated plots increased by 10% over controls (Table 14.1). The yield advantage of inoculated treatments over controls, although consistent at all nitrogen levels used, was however not statistically significant at $p=0.05$. In Whitewater, Wisconsin, inoculated plots showed significant positive effects. Grain yield increased by 6.4% (Table 14.2) while plant vigor increased by 10.6% (data not shown).

In the 2005 trial, grain yield of spring wheat at all locations in Alberta, Canada, except one showed positive effects of inoculation, which was again not statistically significant. Grain yield of inoculated plots were 4% (Vegreville), 8% (St. Vincent) and 14% (Taber) higher than the corresponding uninoculated control plots. In the USA, across all eight trials, inoculation showed an average increase of 1.3%. Considering the Wisconsin trials alone, inoculation with *A. caulinodans* caused an average increase of 6.5%. Half the trial locations (winter and spring wheat) did not respond significantly to inoculation. Although *A. caulinodans* inoculation showed very positive effects at some of the locations tested, the effects were not consistent. Compared with the greenhouse results, which were highly consistent and significant, those of the field trials were disappointing. Results of the

Table 14.2 Field testing of wheat inoculated with *A. caulinodans* in Canada and USA

Location	Year	Control	Inoculated	% increase
Alberta, Canada, trial spring wheat (extrapolated grain yield in kg ha ⁻¹)				
Vegreville	2004	2,664	2,932	10.1
Vegreville	2005	2,975	3,095	4.0
St Vincent	2005	4,199	4,533	8.0
Innisfail	2005	2,712	2,637	-2.8
Taber	2005	4,142	4,705	13.6
Wisconsin and Idaho, USA, trial spring wheat (grain yield in kg/ha)				
Whitewater, WI	2004	1,197	1,273	6.4
Genesee, ID	2005	1,496	1,578	5.5
Moscow, ID	2005	1,768	1,768	0.0
Nezperce, ID	2005	1,605	1,632	1.7
Wisconsin and Idaho, USA, trial winter wheat (grain yield in kg/ha)				
Whitewater, WI	2005	2,068	2,231	7.9
Whitewater, WI	2005	2,422	2,585	6.7
Genesee, ID	2005	2,286	2,258	-1.2
Lewiston, ID	2005	2,912	2,857	-1.9
Nezperce, ID	2005	2,830	2,830	0.0

A. caulinodans trial did not meet the minimum requirement of 95% significance required for registration of new inoculants or soil amendments in Canada.

Several reasons could be responsible for the difference observed between effects of inoculation in greenhouse and field studies. Two obvious ones in the experiments with *A. caulinodans* in Canada would be the methods of inoculation and pretreatment of plant growth medium. Firstly, in the greenhouse and growth chamber experiments, plants were grown in presteamed soil, which eliminated or minimized competition from indigenous soil microbes. Secondly, pre-inoculated seeds were used in field trials while in the greenhouse trials, seeds were pre-inoculated and multiple soil inoculations were performed subsequently. It is common knowledge that inoculation methods usually affect N₂ fixation in traditional rhizobium-legume symbioses. Soil inoculation (e.g., granular inoculants) is usually more effective than seed inoculation for initiating nodulation and N₂ fixation (Lupwayi et al. 2005). Multiple soil inoculations ensured that high number of cells of *A. caulinodans* was introduced to the soil, which perhaps aided this strain in its competition with indigenous soil microbes. In addition to the two obvious differences between the greenhouse and field experiments, it should be mentioned that *A. caulinodans* is adapted to conditions in tropical and subtropical environments. Early spring soil temperatures are usually very cold in the Canadian prairies. Lupwayi et al. (2005) suggested that the most adaptable rhizobia or legume genotypes are usually the ones isolated from similar environments. This might explain why attempts to re-isolate the microbes in inoculated plots during the growing season were not successful. Inconsistency of response is a perennial problem limiting the wide acceptance of PGPR as substitutes for chemical fertilizers in nonleguminous crops. Andrews et al. (2003) noted that the effects of *Azotobacter* and *Azospirillum* inoculants on growth and yield of graminaceous crops have been tested in many experiments in several

countries with inconsistent results obtained. Several reasons were suggested to account for the inconsistent results including unfavorable soil environment, competition with better adapted indigenous soil bacteria, or predation by protozoans (Dowling and Broughton 1986; Quispel 1991; Jjemba and Alexander 1999).

Although most of the effects of *A. caulinodans* inoculation on field grown wheat were positive, the trials were discontinued because the effects were not deemed to be large enough. Irrespective of the inconsistency of response observed in the field, it was obvious that the positive inoculation trends could not be attributed to chance alone. More fundamental research is needed to optimize field inoculation methods and to enhance survival and adaptation of *A. caulinodans* to temperate soil and temperature conditions.

14.5.1 Monitoring of Introduced Microbes in Field Soils

All field locations used for testing of *A. caulinodans* were placed under strict monitoring requirements by the Canadian regulatory authorities. On each trial site, the experimental plots were spatially isolated from other field operations with a 12-m fallowed buffer zone. The buffer zone acted as inoculum trap providing effective trial confinement isolating treated crop and minimizing treatment drift to nontarget plants. The entire perimeter was fenced to restrict access to wildlife or unauthorized personnel. Wheat seeds were inoculated with liquid culture of *A. caulinodans* at a rate of 2.8 mL kg⁻¹. The inoculum was estimated to contain approximately 9.4×10^8 CFU per mL. Rhizosphere soil and root samples collected from the experimental sites at different time intervals during the growing season were analyzed for presence of *A. caulinodans* using BIOLOG[®] system and PCR technology. Soil and plant samples for PCR and BIOLOG[®] analysis were extracted and analyzed using methods described by Yeates et al. (1998) and Slaski et al. (2002), respectively. The substrate utilization pattern of the isolate was detected using an Emax BIOLOG[®] plate reader. The detected pattern was compared to a pattern produced from the original stock culture of *A. caulinodans*. The minimum detection limits of the PCR and BIOLOG[®] were estimated to be about 10 cells and 2,000 cells per gram of soil, respectively. None of the samples tested was positive for *A. caulinodans* suggesting that the microbe did not persist or spread in any of the locations tested. *A. caulinodans* does not produce spores, and thus low soil temperatures (below 0°C) may cause cell rupture and death of the organism. Low soil temperature was suggested as an important environmental factor drastically affecting survival of *A. caulinodans* in temperate climatic conditions of UK soils (Bullard 1999). The author reported that moderate temperatures 18/8°C reduced introduced populations of *A. caulinodans* by an order of magnitude in 35 days. Therefore, it appears that hostile fall and winter conditions of Alberta may have totally exterminated this strain from the environment. The depth of frost in prairie soils is typically greater than that in any other agricultural land in Canada, mostly due to the length of the winter season and the typically shallow snow depths. Frozen soils at depths

below 40 cm have been observed in April on some of the field sites tested, and therefore, for the organism isolated from tropical soils, environmental conditions were not favorable for it to thrive in the test locations.

14.6 Native Canadian Rhizobia and Wheat Production

Empirical data suggest that native rhizobia strains are usually more adapted than introduced strains. In a search for rhizosphere bacteria capable of promoting growth of wheat on the Canadian Prairies, several strains of rhizobia were isolated, identified, and characterized from rangeland ecosystems in the Castor region of central Alberta. This region is prone to drought due to low precipitation and high temperatures in the summer months. Sixteen native rhizobia strains identified as belonging to *Sinorhizobium meliloti* (Bécquer et al. 2008) were isolated from roots of *Melilotus officinalis* and *Medicago sativa*. The host legumes are adapted to the local pedological and climatic conditions prevalent in the region. Plant growth-promoting effects of the isolated rhizobia strains were evaluated in a greenhouse experiment using a Canadian variety of wheat, CDC Teal. The seeds disinfected with alcohol and 8% sodium hypochloride (Webster et al. 1997) were planted in pots containing standard soil mixture with a low N level, while fertilized control received 150 ppm N kg⁻¹ in a form of NH₄NO₃. Three milliliters per plant of inoculum containing approximately 10⁸ cells mL⁻¹ was applied 5 days after seeding. Two subsequent inoculations were performed 20 and 30 days after seeding. Wheat plants were grown to maturity under 29/25°C (day/night) and 14 h of light. In general, inoculation with native rhizobia led to increase in root weight and plant height with no obvious effects on aerial dry matter (Bécquer et al. 2007). All but one of the isolated strains enhanced plant height while 12 strains stimulated root growth. Although changes in root morphology of wheat plants inoculated with rhizobia were not studied, literature data suggest that rhizobial inoculants could induce a higher volume of root hairs and lateral roots, which favors more efficient nutrient extraction (Biswas et al. 2000). Stimulation of root growth accompanied by increased yield and N content by *A. caulinodans* have also been reported (Sabry et al. 1997). Similarly, inoculation of barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) with *Mesorhizobium mediterraneum* (strain PECA21) considerably increased the dry matter yield and the content of macroelements in the plant (Peix et al. 2001). A well-developed root system is advantageous for the wheat plants cultivated in semiarid zones or for crops experiencing periodic soil moisture deficit. Thus, stimulation of root growth by inoculation with rhizobia may increase production of wheat in drought conditions through enhanced efficiencies of water and nutrient uptake/utilization.

The nine best performing native rhizobia strains identified in the greenhouse studies described above were evaluated for wheat growth promotion under field conditions at the Sancti-Spiritus Experimental Station in Cuba. In addition to the nine strains isolated from rangeland ecosystem of central Alberta, another strain (CAS2) isolated from legume grown in soil contaminated with petrochemical

sludge containing high concentration of salts and heavy metals, was tested. The well-described rhizobia strains (USDA 191 and ATCC 10004) were included in the field trial as reference strains. All strains were used to inoculate seeds of wheat (*T. aestivum*, L., var. Cuba-204) provided by the National Institute of Fundamental Research of Tropical Agriculture (INIFAT), La Habana, Cuba. Inoculation was performed by immersion of seeds in a bacterial inoculum containing approximately 10^8 cells mL^{-1} at room temperature for 24 h. Liquid inoculum was reapplied at the base of young seedlings 18 days after sowing to ensure adequate number of rhizobia cells in the rhizosphere. A fertilized and unfertilized control was included for comparison with *Rhizobium* inoculation effects. The fertilized treatment received 150 kg N ha^{-1} NH_4NO_3 . The experimental design was a randomized complete block with four replicates. Since the experiment was conducted on sandy loam soil with low mineral content (P_2O_5 : 2.63 mg/100 g; K_2O : 10.00 mg/100 g; OM: 1.61%; pH: 5.4), a second application of fertilizer (NPK: 9–13–17) was made 21 days after sowing on the basis of 88 kg N ha^{-1} .

Plant growth-promoting and grain yield-enhancing effects of inoculation with nine Canadian native *Rhizobium* strains were observed (Fig. 14.3). Two strains, CAC2 and CAC 5, significantly improved plant agronomic parameters including grain yield, weight of 1,000 seeds, yield of total aboveground biomass, and stem height of the Cuban wheat cv. Cuba-204. Several of the native Canadian strains

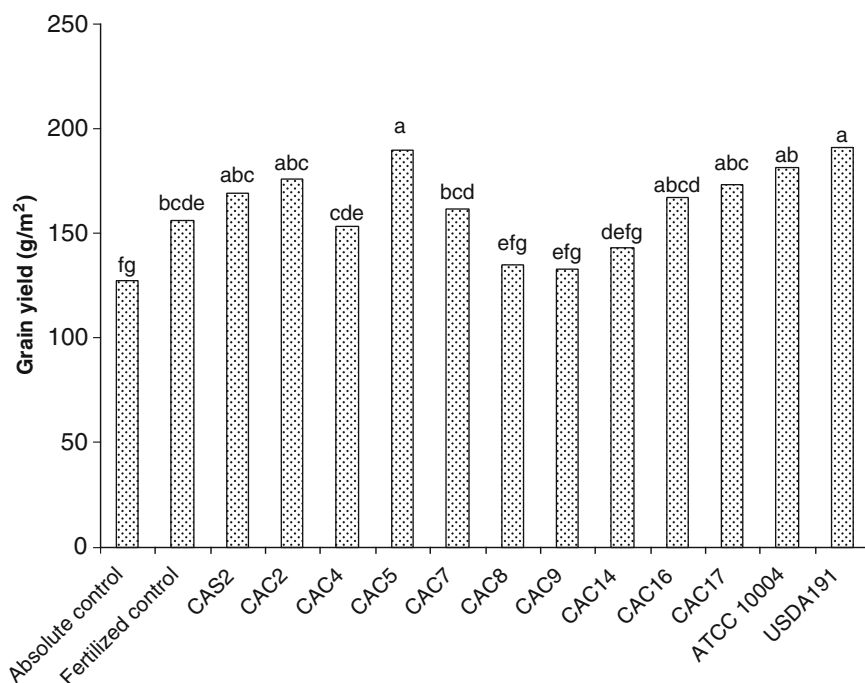


Fig. 14.3 Effects of inoculation with *Rhizobium* strains isolated from forage legumes of Alberta, Canada on grain yield of wheat cv. Cuba 204 (Bécquer et al. 2007, modified)

tested clearly demonstrated plant growth-promoting effects on wheat grown in the field in Cuba. Positive growth-promoting effects of these strains were also observed on sorghum grown at the Sancti-Spiritus experimental station in Cuba (Bécquer, personal communication). The next steps would be to further characterize these strains and test their growth-promoting effects on wheat under field conditions in the Canadian prairies.

14.7 Conclusion

Although the process of BNF offers an economically attractive and ecologically sound means of reducing chemical nitrogen use in agriculture, N₂ fixation by non legumes remains a dream. Quispel (1991) suggested that only in endophytic systems are the prerequisites for effective nitrogen fixation likely to be fulfilled in non legume rhizobial interactions. Colonization and N₂ fixation by *A. caulinodans* in para-nodules (nodule-like) structures induced by plant growth hormones (2,4-D) treatment has been reported (Chen et al. 1993). Intercellular colonization of wheat by *A. caulinodans* has also been reported by several authors. While some levels of nitrogenase activity have been detected in wheat plants inoculated with *A. caulinodans* (Sabry et al. 1997), the extent to which the fixed nitrogen benefits the plant remains to be verified. In the absence of BNF by non legumes, most researchers have focused on the growth-promoting effects of diazotrophs in non legume systems. The theory proposed by Yanni et al. (2001), suggesting that some rhizobia can form a three-component life cycle including a free-living heterotrophic phase in soil, a N₂-fixing endosymbiont phase within legume root nodules, and beneficial growth-promoting endocolonizer phase within cereal roots in the same crop rotation, would need to be further verified. In addition to the known rotational benefits of legumes, optimization of conditions that promote endophytic colonization of cereal roots in rotation with legumes may improve crop performance while decreasing the use of chemical fertilizers required to maintain yield. Despite perennial inconsistencies in the positive effects of PGPR in Canada, the potential for the use of PGPR in non legume crops remains interesting, especially given the potential environmental benefits over the use of conventional agricultural methods. More fundamental research is needed to optimize field inoculation methods that will enhance survival and adaptation of PGPR, especially of *A. caulinodans*, in temperate conditions.

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Chapter 15

Factors Affecting the Variation of Microbial Communities in Different Agro-Ecosystems

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Abstract Soil microbial communities play an important role in supplying essential nutrients to plants by decomposing various organic matters. Composition, structure and functions of microbial communities in soil are, however, under the constant control of the environment including various agricultural management practices. Due to scarcity of convenient methods for exploration, our understanding of the different degrees and dynamics of microbial community variations are limited. An attempt will be made to understand such structural and functional variations employing molecular tools. Earlier it was believed that it is the plant community that exerts control over the microbial community, but recently, some findings have suggested that it is actually the microbial community that acts as a driver of plant community structure and dynamics. Attention will therefore be paid to highlight some of these issues, and the effect of various farm management practices on the composition and functions of microbial communities. This is likely to lead to the development of best management practices for improving soil fertility and, consequently, agricultural productivity to improve the sustainability of agro-ecosystems.

15.1 Introduction

Microorganisms are a fundamentally important component of the soil habitat where they play key roles in ecosystem functioning through controlling nutrient cycling reactions essential for maintaining soil fertility, and also contribute to the genesis and maintenance of soil structure (Kirk et al. 2004). Despite their importance to the functioning of ecosystems, they are rarely explicitly considered in individual ecosystem or global process models. In addition to methodological limitations, a

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primary reason for this gap is their overwhelming diversity. Estimates of soil microbial diversity range from thousands to a million microbial species in a few grams of soil (Torsvik and Øvreås 2002; Gans et al. 2005), and how this diversity affects ecosystem processes is largely unknown (Torsvik et al. 2002; Crawford et al. 2005; Azam and Malfatti 2007). Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to assess, identify and track each individual microorganism in an ecosystem. Due in part to the lack of convenient and appropriate methods for exploration, our understanding of the different degrees and dynamics of microbial community variation as induced by soil type, plant type, or plant development is so far limited (Mahaffee and Klöpper 1997; Duineveld et al. 1998).

Despite all these problems, in recent times, attention has been focused on the impacts that microbial communities have on soil fertility and crop productivity in different agro-ecosystems. In soils, biologically mediated processes are known to exert profound influences on the status of soil health by: (1) degrading organic residues, (2) transformation of organic matter, (3) mineralization of nutrients, and (4) formation of soil aggregates (Haynes 1999). However, a great variety of abiotic and biotic factors shape soil- and plant-associated habitats and modify the compositions and activities of inhabiting microbial communities, which in turn bear upon the quality of their environment, the growth of plants, and the production of root exudates (Bever et al. 1997). For example, changes in physico-chemical variables such as pH and nutrient levels (Kennedy et al. 2004, 2005), floristic community change (Grayston et al. 1998; Grayston et al. 2004), changes in soil physical structure (Ibekwe et al. 2002; Sessitich et al. 2006), and the impacts of grazing animals have all been proposed as principal causes of shifts in microbial community structure, although it is still not fully understood which environmental factors influence microbial community change. Microbial communities in root-associated habitats respond with respect to density, composition, and activity to the abundance and great diversity of organic root exudates, eventually yielding plant species-specific microflora which may also vary during plant development stages (Lynch and Whipps 1990; Bowen and Rovira 1991; Mahaffee and Klöpper 1997; Weisskopf et al. 2006). Thus, interactions between plants and soil microbes are highly dynamic in nature and based on coevolutionary pressures (Reinhart and Callaway 2006). Such microbial communities are greatly influenced by plant species (Innes et al. 2004; Batten et al. 2006), genotypes within species (Kowalchuk et al. 2006), and diversity of carbon substrates and signaling compounds provided by the plants (Zak et al. 2003; Broeckling et al. 2008).

Agricultural improvement by applying chemical fertilizers has become a common practice in different parts of the world. However, the excessive and injudicious application of these fertilizers cause change in the soil chemical and physical properties by disturbing the soil microbial biomass and activities, an early indicator of soil fertility (Brookes 1995; Trasar-Cepeda et al. 1998). For instance, N fertilization has been shown to significantly affect soil microbial biomass and activities (Saliana-Garcia et al. 1997; Li et al. 2002), and long-term application of NH_4^+ or NH_4^+ forming fertilizers may lead to changes in the soil microbial communities in terms of promoting nitrifying populations, enhancing nitrification rates, and

increasing potential risks of groundwater contamination with NO_3^- -N (Tabatabai et al. 1992). Likewise, phosphate application affects soil microbial community structures in grassland ecosystems (Rooney and Clipson 2009). The understanding of interactions between fertilizers, plants and microbial communities in soils, in turn will lead to better understanding of the health of soils and the design of strategies for crop improvement in different agro-ecosystems.

15.2 Microbial Community Structure and Functional Analysis

It has long been recognized that the activity of soil microorganisms plays an intrinsic role in residue decomposition, nutrient cycling, and crop production. And, hence, the microbial diversity at the functional level plays a crucial role in the long-term stability of an ecosystem. Variations in the structure and function of microbial communities in soils have, however, been linked primarily to the quantities and qualities of soil organic materials (Saetre and Bååth 2000), which in turn are greatly affected by the availability and biochemical composition of the litter (Johansson 1995), vegetation (Priha et al. 2001), and root exudates (Grayston and Campbell 1996). A patchy distribution of organic litter may result in a high degree of biochemical compartmentalization (Bauhus et al. 1998; Priha and Smolander 1999; Côté et al. 2000; Priha et al. 2001) and may ultimately cause a spatial aggregation of the forest soil microbiota (Saetre and Bååth 2000). Thus a post-fire successional sequence from deciduous to coniferous species will have a significant impact on the morphological and physiological profiles of soil microbial communities (Bormann and Sidle 1990; Bending et al. 2002; Merilä et al. 2002). This may be due to differences in the structure and composition of leaf and needle litter, which alter nutrient availability in the soil (Priha and Smolander 1997) and cause shifts in microbial populations as the community adapts to new environmental conditions. Understanding microbial community structure shifts following implementation of various land use and management systems, therefore may lead to the development of best management practices for different agro-ecosystems.

Microbial diversity describes complexity and variability at different levels of biological organization. It includes genetic variations within taxons (species), and the number (richness) and relative abundance (evenness) of taxons and functional groups (guilds) in communities. Important aspects of diversity at the ecosystem level are the range of processes, complexity of interactions, and number of trophic levels. Although animal and plant ecologists can quantify and identify different species through (relatively) easily identifiable traits, it is extremely difficult to do this with microbial communities, because microbes vary greatly in their activities. Thus, measures of microbial diversity should include multiple methods integrating holistic measures at the total community-level and partial approaches targeting structural or functional subsets. However, the assessment of the composition and/or function of soil microbial communities still presents a number of challenges, due

to which less than 1% of bacterial species and an unknown percentage of fungi have been so far recovered (Rozak and Colwell 1978; Van Elsas et al. 1997). Unfortunately, changes in microbial community structure and diversity due to seasonal and temporal variations in nutrient or physical conditions are slow and gradual, making it difficult to further interpret the data and obtain conclusive results. Disturbances in microbial community equilibrium influenced by changes in environmental conditions and soil management practices have been reported (Sun et al. 2004). The challenge is how to quantify the changes and link them to the corresponding ecosystems.

In the pre-molecular biology era, microbial communities were determined by isolating and screening them onto commercially available standard laboratory media, and the total numbers and/or species of microbial communities in a particular soil were assessed using conventional methods, such as the most probable number (MPN) and plate-counting techniques. Such methods, however, have certain limitations (Torsvik et al. 1990), such as they address only the culturable populations present in the rhizosphere and provide only limited information about the functional diversity of the microbial communities. Similarly, microscopic techniques can be used to obtain information about numbers and, potentially, spatial distribution, but these approaches lack the discriminating ability to assess diversity and distinguish between multiple microbial populations. Recently, several modern methods including BIOLOGTM analysis, phospholipid fatty acid (PLFA) analysis and nucleic acid-based analysis have been developed to identify and characterize soil microbial diversity. Despite various limitations (Konopka et al. 1998; Garland 1999; Preston-Mafham et al. 2002), the Biolog system has been used to characterize microbial communities associated with boreal forest soils (Staddon et al. 1998b; Adkins et al. 2001), various crop types (Garland and Mills 1991; Garland 1996), grasslands (Zak et al. 1994), tree species (Grayston and Campbell 1996), plant rhizospheres (Grayston et al. 1998; Kent and Triplett 2002), and environmental samples. In addition, differences between soil microbial communities along a climatic gradient (Staddon et al. 1998a) and bacterial communities affected by soil types have also been analyzed (Winding 1994).

Garland and Mills (1991) compared the patterns of carbon source utilization at community-level for microbial communities of different habitats, such as samples from freshwater, saltwater, estuarine, and hydroponic solutions, from the rhizosphere of hydroponically grown wheat, and from soils, using commercially available microtiter plates that contain 95 carbon substrate. This and other studies suggest that, in addition to establishing ecologically relevant classifications of microbial communities, substrate utilization profiles might offer information with regard to community function, metabolic potential (Winding 1993), or functional diversity (Zak et al. 1994; Haack et al. 1995). When inoculum density was controlled, patterns of positive and negative responses exhibited by microbial communities to each of the carbon sources were reproducible. Even so, the rates and extents of substrate oxidation by the communities were reproducible but were not simply the sum of those exhibited by community members when tested separately. Replicates of the same model community clustered when analyzed by principal

components analysis (PCA), and model communities with different compositions were clearly separated on the first PCA axis, accounting for >60% of the dataset variation. However, the substrates were interpreted by PCA to be most significant in distinguishing the communities that changed with reading time, reflecting the nonlinearity of substrate oxidation rates. Although whole-community substrate utilization profiles were reproducible signatures for a given community, the extent of oxidation of specific substrates and the numbers or activities of microorganisms using those substrates in a given community were not correlated.

Compared to substrate utilization profiles, PLFA profiles have been shown to be more sensitive and can be used as biomarkers to identify and quantify microbial biomass as they are essential components of microorganisms (Priha and Smolander 1999; Waldrop et al., 2000; Grayston et al. 2003). The two community-based microbiological measurements, namely potential C source utilization patterns in Biolog microtiter plates and PLFA profiles, have been employed to examine metabolic fingerprints of soil microbial communities and changes in species composition of Palouse and Ritzville silt loams collected from the rhizosphere of wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.), barley (*Hordeum vulgare* L.), pea (*Pisum sativa* L.), jointed goatgrass (*Aegilops cylindrica* L.), and downy brome (*Bromus tectorum* L.) grown under field and greenhouse environments. PCA of PLFA profiles and C source utilization patterns were used to describe changes in microbial biomass and metabolic fingerprints from the two soil types. Biomass measurements from extractable PLFA profiles per g dry weight ranged from 28.8 nmol in wheat soil in the greenhouse to 71.4 nmol in pea soil in the field. In general, biomass was higher in all the field samples than in the greenhouse samples. PCA of the two soils with different plants in the field and greenhouse showed clear separation. PCA of C utilization patterns on the effects of environment on soil microbial community yielded similar results with PLFA measurements. However, higher variability observed among different plants with the Biolog data resulted in the low amount of variance for Biolog data explained by the first two dimensions of the PCA suggesting that PLFA may be more sensitive for community analysis than the Biolog technique (Ibekwe and Kennedy 1998).

Furthermore, the introduction of bio-molecular approaches like nucleotide sequence analysis of ribosomal RNA genes (the 16S rRNA genes in bacteria and 18S rRNA genes in fungi) into microbial ecology has allowed characterization of microbial communities without pure cultures. In such approaches, the total microbial community DNA can be directly extracted from soils; hence, the repeated subculturing of microbial communities could be avoided. Such DNA is used as a template for amplification of ribosomal genes from all the members of that community in the polymerase chain reaction (PCR), a technique that allows for high resolution analysis of the microbial community structure. The resulting individual gene products can then be cloned and sequenced to affirm the identity of the microbial species from which the original target sequence was amplified (Giovannoni et al. 1990; Hugenholtz et al. 1998). Furthermore, the heterogeneous mix of PCR products recovered from the environment by specific amplification of bacterial 16S rDNA sequences can be separated by a culture-independent method,

denaturing gradient gel electrophoresis (DGGE), which separates the DNA fragments based on their nucleotide content rather than size alone (Muyzer et al. 1993). The benefit of this approach is that a molecular fingerprint of the community structure is generated for each soil, such that each band in each lane of the gel theoretically represents a different bacterial species. Molecular approaches, in general, are rapid, specific and more reliable, compared to conventional culturing techniques, and have provided a further insight into the identification of the remaining 99% of microbial species.

Both conventional and molecular approaches have been employed to assess the impact of management practices, changes in seasons, and environment stress on microbial community structure and functions. For instance, de Lima et al. (1999) isolated 82 bacterial strains from the sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) agro-ecosystem and grouped them in 16 different genera and 35 species of bacteria. The microbial diversity was found greater in wastewater collected from the stabilization ponds and in the soil sample collected from the sugarcane plantation burned before harvesting. Such variations in microbial communities supported the very concept of Odum's (1971) classical observation that communities with low energy cost for maintaining the entropy (high respiration: biomass ratio) divert their energy supply into diversity, which may be happening to the microbiota of the environments. A high respiration:biomass ratio observed in unproductive soil irrigated with vinasse in the tableland soil of the Usina Japungu (de Luna and Grisi 1996) also supported this theory. However, Atlas (1984) further pointed out that diversity changes in response to environmental stress may lead to an increase in diversity by selective toxicity causing elimination of dominant organism, or diversity may decrease by elimination of many species. To substantiate this further, Torsvik et al. (1997) observed a substantial reduction in diversity in perturbed soil due to agriculture, as compared to undisturbed environments. Also, molecular analysis using PCR amplification of small-subunit rRNA of microbial diversity in Amazonia soils, demonstrated microbial population shifts related to deforestation in the Amazonian forest, with predominance of *Bacillus* and high G+C Gram-positive-like sequences in pasture and predominance of *Clostridium* and unclassified bacteria in the forest (Borneman and Triplett 1997). Of these organisms, *Bacillus* seems to be a natural indicator of inhospitable environmental conditions whose endospore-forming ability certainly explains their occurrence in these situations.

15.3 Factors Causing Change in Microbial Community Structure and Function

Soil microbial communities are subjected to a range of factors that can be broadly classified as: (1) stress factors that constantly limits microbial growth and do not change markedly over time, and (2) disturbance factors that involves rapid changes and often causes destruction of organism biomass. Although both stress

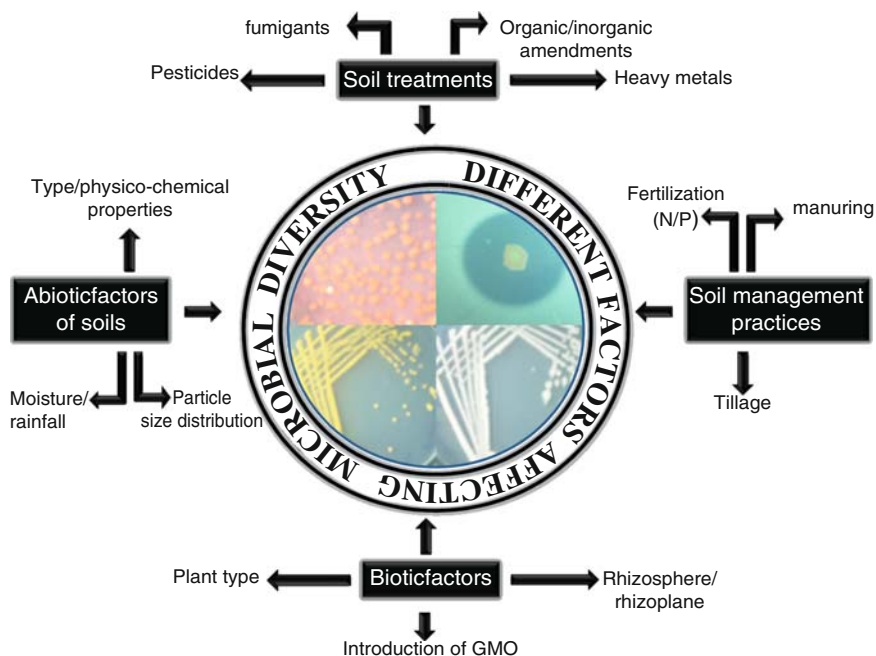


Fig. 15.1 Environmental factors influencing the microbial structure and functions

and disturbance are strong drivers of the microbial community, they exert their effects independently from one another (Williamson and Wardle 2007). The factors causing changes in microbial community structure and functions (Fig. 15.1) are reviewed and discussed in the following section.

15.3.1 Rhizosphere, Root Exudates and Soil pH

The plant rhizosphere, a term introduced by Hiltner to denote the region of the soil that is subjected to the influence of plant roots (Hiltner 1904), is a dynamic environment in which many factors affect the structure and composition of the microbial communities that colonize the roots. The rhizosphere communities vary spatially in a radial direction from the root surface, including the endorhizosphere, rhizoplane, and rhizosphere zones (Assmus et al. 1995; Bosse and Frenzel 1997; Gilbert and Frenzel 1998), as well as in specific root locations along the root axis (Gilbert and Frenzel 1998; De Leij et al. 1994). Microbial communities associated with the rhizosphere also vary depending on the plant species (Grayston et al. 1998), the soil type (Campbell et al. 1997), and cultural practices (Table 15.1) such as crop rotation or tillage (Lupwayi et al. 1998). Understanding the structure and

Table 15.1 Effect of plant and soil types on microbial community structure

System and factors studied	Methods used	Results and conclusion	References
Plant cultivar (maize) and soil-effect on a specific bacterial group <i>Paenibacillus</i>	PCR-TGGE	Soil type showed higher effect than plant cultivar on <i>Paenibacillus</i> communities	Da Silva et al. (2003)
Plant species (chickpea, rape, and Sudan grass); soil type (sandy, sandy loam, and clay); root zone location	PCR-DGGE	Bacterial community structure in the rhizosphere was affected by a complex interaction between soil type, plant species, and root zone location	Marschner et al. (2001)
Soil type, plant type (clover, bean, alfalfa), plant age	PCR-TGGE	The plant species type had the greatest effect on microbial community structure	Wieland et al. (2001)
Microbial community in the spermosphere as affected by soil type and seed type	Biolog-CLPP; FAME	Soil type affected microbial community structure more than seed type	Buyer et al. (1999)
Soil type, plant type (wheat, ryegrass, bentgrass, and clover)	Biolog-CLPP	Plant effect with significant difference in microbial communities from the different plant species	Grayston et al. (1998)
Plant (maize) development, cultivar, and soil-effect	Cultivation–plating enumeration	Between the factors studied, soil had the dominant effect on microbial diversity	Chiarini et al. (1998)
Plant type (canola, wheat); soil type	FAME	Effect of plant type stronger than that of soil type soil-effect stronger than plant effect	Germida et al. (1998)
Plant (flax, tomato) and soil type; effect on fluorescent pseudomonads	Cultivation; REP-PCR, RFLP	Soil-effect stronger than plant effect	Latour et al. (1996)

Adapted from Garbeva et al. (2004)

species composition of these communities is fundamental to understanding how soil biological processes are influenced by such factors.

Generally, the microbes that inhabit the rhizosphere serve as an intermediary link between the plant, which requires soluble inorganic nutrients, and the soil, which contains the necessary nutrients but mostly in complex and inaccessible forms. However, the magnitude of the rhizosphere effect depends mainly on the nature and amount of root exudates, a complex mixture of chemicals and organic compounds secreted into the soil by the roots that affects microbial interactions (Bais et al. 2004). Root exudate concentrations are determined by many factors including species and nutritional status of the plant, plant age, and edaphic and climatic factors (Marschner 1995). About 5% to 60% (Marschner 1995) of the photosynthetic carbon fixed by the plant is released into rhizosphere by exudation through plant roots. Root exudates may consist of water soluble compounds such as amino acids, sugars, hormones, and vitamins that leak from the root surfaces, or actively secreted polymeric carbohydrates and enzymes. The products of the roots

may also include gases such as CO₂ and ethylene, lysates released when cells autolyse, solid materials including cell walls, sloughed cells and root border cells, and eventually parts as large as root hairs or roots themselves (Kang and Mills 2004) (Table 15.2). The effect of root exudates on the rhizosphere microbes is likely to be more intense, stimulatory or inhibitory. Depending on the composition of the exudates, plant may be able to: (1) enhance the possibilities and success of symbiotic relationships, (2) affect the soil microbial community, (3) alter the physical and chemical properties of the soil, and (4) inhibit the propagation or growth of another plant species. In fact, most rhizosphere bacteria and fungi are highly dependent on associations with plants that are clearly regulated by root exudates (Yang and Crowley 2000; Bais et al. 2004), and in the rhizosphere, density of microorganisms can reach 10¹⁰–10¹² organisms g⁻¹ soil. The influence of individual plants is reflected in the rhizosphere as the R:S (rhizosphere to nonrhizosphere ratio). For bacteria and fungi, values commonly range from 5 to 20. Actinomycetes, a somewhat less affected group of microorganisms of the rhizosphere, may reveal R:S ratios between 2 and 12.

Based on differences in root exudation and rhizodeposition in different root zones, rhizosphere microbial communities can vary in structure and composition in different root locations or in relation to soil type, plant species, nutritional status, age, stress, disease, and other environmental factors (Griffiths et al. 1999; Mahaffee and Klöpper 1997). As an example, Wieland et al. (2001) observed while studying 32 microcosms in three habitats, namely soil, rhizosphere, and rhizoplane, that the type of plant species (clover, bean, or alfalfa) had the greatest effect in plant-associated habitats and also affected soil patterns through the variation of microbial communities as represented by the patterns of a sequence-specific separation of rRNA target sequences. Plant development demonstrated a minor habitat-dependent effect that was partly obscured by replicate variation. Ruiyu et al. (2007), while investigating the dynamics of microbial populations and their functional diversities in the seedling rhizospheres of rice (*Oryza sativa*) cultivars with varied allelopathic activities by employing agar plate bioassay, fumigation, and Biolog analysis, concluded that the rice cultivars significantly affected the microbial carbon content in their associated rhizospheric soil. Moreover, microbial carbon contents and the respiration rate of the soils varied with the type of cultivar. The microbial flora in the rhizospheric soil of different rice cultivars was dominated by bacteria (58.4–65.6%), followed by actinomycete (32.2–39.4%) and fungi (2.2–2.8%). Moreover, Biolog analysis showed that the value of average well color development (AWCD) differed significantly among rice cultivars. It was always the highest in the rhizospheric soil of the strongly allelopathic rice cv. PI312777 and the lowest in the rhizospheric soil of the poorly allelopathic rice cv. Lemont. The AWCD value reached the maximum in all the sampled soils after 144 h of incubation. The AWCD values from the rhizospheric soils of PI312777, IAC47, Iguape Cateto, and Lemont were 1.89, 1.79, 1.60, and 1.43 times higher than that of the control soil, respectively. PCA identified three principal component factors (PCF) in relation to carbon sources, accounting for 70, 11, and 7% of the variation, respectively, and 19 categories of carbon sources were positively correlated to the three principal

Table 15.2 Components of root exudates, functions in the rhizosphere, and examples identified in root exudates of different plant species

Exudate component	Rhizosphere functions	Specific compounds identified in root exudates
Organic acids	Nutrient source	Citric, glutaric
	Chemoattractant signals to microbes	Oxalic, malonic
	Chelators of poorly soluble mineral nutrients	Malic, aldonic
	Acidifiers of soil	Fumaric, erythronic
	Detoxifiers of Al <i>nod</i> gene inducers	Succinic, ferulic Acetic, butanoic, butyric syringic, valeric, rosmarinic, Glycolic, <i>trans</i> -cinnamic, piscidic, vanillic, formic tetriconic, aconitic, lactic, pyruvic
Amino acids	Nutrient source	α - and (β -alanine, proline
	Chelators of poorly soluble mineral nutrients	Asparagine, valine
	Chemoattractant signals to microbes	Aspartate, tryptophan, cystein, ornithine, cystine histidine, glutamate, arginine, glycine, homoserine, isoleucine, phenylalanine, leucine, aminobutyric acid, lysine, aminoadipic acid, methionine, serine, threonine
Sugars and vitamins	Promoters of plant and microbial growth	Glucose, deoxyribose
	Nutrient source	Fructose, oligosaccharides, galactose, biotin, maltose thiamine, ribose, niacin, xylose, pantothenate, rhamnose, riboflavin, arabinose, raffinose
Enzymes	Catalysts for P release from organic molecules	acid/alkaline phosphatase
	Biocatalysts for organic matter transformations	Invertase, amylase, protease
Purines	Nutrient source	Adenine, guanine, cytidine, uridine
Inorganic ions and gases	Chemoattractant signals to microbes	HCO_3^- , OH^- , H^+ , CO_2 , H_2
Phenolics	Nutrient source	Liquiritigenin, luteolin
	Chemoattractant signals to microbes	Daidzein, 4',7-dihydroxyflavone
	Microbial growth promoters <i>nod</i> gene inducers in rhizobia	Genistein, 4',7-dihydroxyflavone Coumetrol, 4,4'-dihydroxy -2'-methoxychalcone
	<i>nod</i> gene inhibitors in rhizobia	Eriodictyol, 4'-7-dihydroxyflavone
Root border cells	Produce signals that control mitosis, produce signals controlling gene expression, stimulate microbial growth, release chemoattractant, synthesize defense molecules for the rhizosphere, act as decoys that keep root cap infection-free, release mucilage and proteins	

Compiled from Dakora (2003), Dakora and Phillips (2002), and Bais et al. (2004)

components. In addition, the total microbial population in the rhizospheric soil was significantly positively correlated with AWCD, microbial biomass carbon, microbial respiration, and Shannon index. There was a significantly positive correlation between the total microbial population and the inhibition rate (IR) on the root length of lettuce owing to the different allelopathic activities of the rice cultivars. The results suggested that changes in microbial population, activity, and functional diversity in the rhizospheres are highly cultivar-dependent.

During the growth of new roots, exudates secreted in the zone of elongation behind the root tips support the growth of primary root colonizers that utilize easily degradable sugars and organic acids. In the older root zones, carbon is deposited primarily as sloughed cells and consists of more recalcitrant materials, including lignified cellulose and hemicellulose, so that fungi and bacteria in these zones are presumably adapted to crowded, oligotrophic conditions. Other nutritionally distinct sites include the sites of lateral root emergence and the secondary, nongrowing root tips, which are relatively nutrient-rich environments colonized by mature communities. Soil chemical changes related to the release of organic and inorganic compounds, and the respective products of their microbial metabolism, are important factors affecting microbial populations, availability of nutrients, solubility of toxic elements in the rhizosphere, and thereby the ability of plants to cope with adverse soil chemical conditions. Organic compounds in root exudates are continuously metabolized by root-associated microorganisms and in the rhizosphere. Mobilization of micronutrients or heavy metals in the rhizosphere has also been related to rhizosphere acidification and to complexities with organic acids in root exudates (Marschner 1995; Pinton et al. 2001; Waisel et al., 1991).

Soil pH is an important factor affecting the functioning of soil microbial communities in soils, and may influence rates of substrate utilization; the values of substrate utilization were significantly higher in soils of higher pH (Anderson and Joergensen 1997). And, hence, soil pH has been found as the most influential environmental factor responsible for discrimination among microbes (Grayston et al. 2003). For example, soil acidity has shown a considerable decrease in the availability of carbon to microbial communities (Anderson and Domsch 1993; Baath et al. 1995), and to slower bacterial growth rates (Baath 1998). However, studies have also shown optimum pH for growth of bacterial communities to be correlated with soil pH from which the communities are extracted, indicating that different bacterial communities are adapted to different pH values (Baath 1996; Andersson and Ingvar Nilsson 2001). For instance, bacterial communities associated with coniferous forest soils may contain larger proportions of Gram-positive bacteria adapted to the acidifying environment; in contrast, increases in soil pH may result in larger proportions of Gram-negative bacteria (Frostegard et al. 1993; Pennanen 2001). Additionally, numbers of bacteria have been shown to decrease in acidified soils (Baath et al. 1980), possibly because bacteria are less adapted to acidic conditions in soil compared to fungi (Matthies et al. 1997). However, microbial biomass C and inorganic N do not respond to changed soil moisture while N₂O and CO₂ efflux and respiration increase after increasing moisture in the agricultural soils. Moreover, in the agricultural systems, reductions in both

the measures of microbial diversity and the resistance of the microbial community to change after a perturbation have been found to be associated with lower microbial responses to increased moisture availability (Steenwerth et al. 2005).

15.3.2 Soil Management Practices

Agricultural management practices have strong impacts on soil microbes including both the indices related to biomass and activity as well as those related to community composition (Follett and Schimel 1989; Aon et al. 2001; Steenwerth et al. 2003; Potthoff et al. 2006). Therefore, in recent times, attention has been focused on the influence that agricultural management practices have on biological and biogeochemical properties of soils (Gregorich et al. 1994; Franzluebbers et al. 1995). Soil microbial biomass and activities are frequently used as an indicator of changes in soil chemical and physical properties resulting from soil management and environmental stress in agricultural ecosystems (Brookes 1995; Trasar-Cepeda et al. 1998). Understanding how management practices influence soil fertility and agricultural productivity is essential to improve the sustainability of agro-ecosystems (Wardle et al. 1999). The effect of different management regimes and perturbations on the soil microbial community (e.g., crop rotations, manure applications, and tillage) has been studied in a wide range of soil and management systems.

15.3.2.1 Tillage

Cultivation and tillage practices profoundly disrupt the soil by: (1) breaking up soil aggregates, (2) increasing soil compaction, (3) exposing previously protected organic matter, and (4) mixing soil horizons (Beare 1997; Allison et al. 2005). In turn, such alterations lead to a significant decline in microbial biomass, reduce the abundance of fungi, aerobic microorganisms, and facultative anaerobes, while increasing the relative abundance of Gram-negative bacteria (Doran 1980; Beare 1997). Tillage practice in agricultural soils not only affects the microbial diversity but also influences species composition, N transformation processes mediated by microbes, and interactions between organisms and the soil pore network, and modulates the role of soil structure in mediating oxygen movement to sites of microbial activity in soil (Young and Ritz 2000). The agricultural soils which are tilled frequently and subjected to crop rotations have shown lower microbial diversity compared to those observed in soils which are either not tilled or have been infrequently tilled (Øvreås and Torsvik 1998). For example, by extracting microbial RNA, Buckley and Schmidt (2001) found that the abundance of groups comprising of Gram-positive bacteria (aerobes) and fungi were significantly lower in fields abandoned from agriculture 7 years earlier. In another study, Fraterrigo et al. (2006) reported that old farms had similar compositional patterns, despite

having experienced relatively little tillage and having been abandoned since 1930. The high bulk density of former farms (Fraterrigo et al. 2005) and the elevated abundance of Gram-negative bacterial markers suggest that these enduring microbial patterns may be partly due to a continued state of soil hypoxia; a common condition in highly managed soils. Moreover, tillage events contribute to decreased soil quality by increasing emissions of greenhouse gases (i.e., CO₂, NO, or N₂O), and increasing the potential for nitrate leaching to groundwater. Such negative aspects require proper attention before considering the benefits of tillage for increasing the health and productivity of crops (Jackson et al. 2003). In addition, research is also needed to assess potential effects of long-term agricultural management practices that may mask microbial responses to recent management change, as well as to identify conditions that lead to high microbial community resiliency in response to management so that communities remain similar under a given crop despite different preceding crops (Stromberger et al. 2007).

15.3.2.2 Nutrient Management

Agricultural improvement through fertilizer application by the field practitioners is being practised around the world to achieve maximum plant productivity; but this practice is not only expensive, but the repeated and injudicious application of chemical fertilizers also leads to the loss of soil fertility (Gyaneshwar et al. 2002) by disturbing microbial diversity and catabolic activity (Zhang et al. 2007; Guanghua et al. 2008), and consequently reduces yield of crops. For instance, N fertilization has been shown to significantly affect soil microbial biomass and activities (Ladd et al. 1994; Saliana-Garcia et al. 1997). Long-term application of NH₄⁺ or NH₄⁺-forming fertilizers may lead to changes in the structure of soil microbial communities in terms of promoting nitrifying populations, enhancing nitrification rates, and increasing potential risks of groundwater contamination with NO₃⁻-N (Tabatabai et al. 1992). However, such deleterious effects of N fertilizers could be reduced by controlled release and deep application (0–10 cm) of mineral fertilizers (Chu et al. 2005). Similarly, the long-term effect of different sources of phosphate fertilizers, like single superphosphate, North Carolina phosphate rock, partially acidulated North Carolina phosphate rock, and diammonium phosphate, on microbial activities, like basal respiration, substrate-induced respiration, inhibition of substrate-induced respiration by streptomycin sulfate (fungal activity) and actidione (bacterial activity), and microbial biomass C of pasture soils, has been reported (Bolan et al. 1996). The fertilizer addition caused an initial decrease in basal and substrate-induced respiration but had no effect on total microbial biomass. The initial decline in basal and substrate-induced respiration with the fertilizer addition was restored within 8 weeks after incubation. In the field experiment, the fertilizer addition had no significant effect on basal respiration but increased substrate-induced respiration and microbial biomass C (Bolan et al. 1996). Similarly, the application of triple superphosphate (at 94 kg ha⁻¹) has produced a substantial

reduction in microbial respiration and metabolic quotient (qCO_2) (Chandini and Dennis 2002). Recently, multidimensional scaling plots and canonical correspondence analysis revealed that phosphate (K_2PO_4 at 25 kg P ha^{-1}) addition and its interaction with upland grassland plant species (*Agrostis capillaries*, *Festuca ovina*, *Lolium perrene*) resulted in considerable changes in the fungal and bacterial communities of upland soil. Both fungal and bacterial community structures were significantly affected by phosphate suggesting that phosphate application may be an important contributor to microbial community structural change during agricultural management (Rooney and Clipson 2009). Similarly, Vineela et al. (2008) studied the long-term effect of fertilization on soil microbial communities and found that the bacterial counts were higher in treatments where combinations of organic and inorganic fertilizers were applied compared to control. Fungal population was higher in treatments under continuous inorganic fertilization whereas a high number of bacteria were found in integrated use of organic and inorganic fertilizers. At most of the locations, soil organic C and microbial biomass C showed a significant ($p \leq 0.05$) positive correlation with microbial populations. In contrast, Sun et al. (2004) while examining 16S rRNA gene fingerprints of bacterial communities in six agro-ecosystems soils treated with manure for over a century or different fertilizers for over 70 years reported that the bacterial community structure and diversity in the manure-treated soil was more closely related to the structure in the untreated soil than that in soils treated with inorganic fertilizers. In addition, soils treated with P and N-P had bacterial community structures more closely related to each other than to those of soils given other treatments, suggesting that bacterial community structure was closely related to agro-ecosystem management practices conducted for over 70 years. In contrast, application of mineral fertilizers (e.g., N, P, K) in combination with farmyard manure (FYM) had greater numbers of soil microbes and more complex structure of the ammonium-oxidizing bacteria (AOB) community than those receiving mineral fertilizers alone, suggesting that mineral fertilizers along with FYM could be more effective for increasing the quantity of soil microbes, enriching the AOB community, and improving the soil bio-fertility (Guanghua et al. 2008).

15.3.3 Impact of Seasonal Variations

Another important issue to elucidate is how seasonal variations influence qualitative variation in community composition. In this regard, the impact of seasonal variations on soil microbial communities of wheat grown under a field of an experimental farm in The Netherlands was assessed in different seasons over a 1-year period, using both cultivation-based and molecule-based methods (Smit et al. 2001). Fatty acid-based typing of bacterial cultures obtained via plating revealed a diverse community including predominantly Gram-positive bacteria, and only a few isolates represented *Proteobacteria* and green sulfur bacteria. Interestingly, *Micrococcus*, *Arthrobacter*, and *Corynebacterium* were detected throughout the year, while

Bacillus was found only during the month of July. The isolate diversity was lowest in July, and the most abundant bacteria, *Arthrobacter oxydans*, and members of the genus *Pseudomonas*, were found in reduced numbers in July. Moreover, molecular analysis suggested that diversity of cloned 16S ribosomal DNA (rDNA) sequences was greater than the diversity among cultured isolates. In addition, based on analysis of 16S rDNA sequences, there was a more even distribution among five main divisions, *Acidobacterium*, *Proteobacteria*, *Nitrospira*, cyanobacteria, and green sulfur bacteria, but no clones were found belonging to the Gram-positive bacteria, which dominated the cultured isolates. Cluster analysis of the patterns revealed that the bacterial community observed in July was clearly different from those observed in the other months. Thus, both molecular- and cultivation-based methods indicated that the community present in July had the largest difference from the communities of the other months. Based on the distribution of 16S rDNA sequences among the bacterial divisions found in this study and in literature, it was suggested that the ratio between the number of *Proteobacteria* and *Acidobacterium* organisms might be indicative of the trophic level of the soil. Effects of seasonal shifts on rhizosphere microbial populations of pea, wheat, and sugar beet (*Beta vulgaris* var. *amethyst*) have also been determined by culturing, rRNA gene density gradient gel electrophoresis, and Biolog. Culturable bacterial and fungal rhizosphere community densities were stable in pea and wheat rhizospheres, with dynamic shifts observed in the sugar beet rhizosphere. Successional shifts in bacterial and fungal diversity as plants mature demonstrated that different plants select and define their own functional rhizosphere communities. Assessment of metabolic activity and resource utilization by bacterial community-level physiological profiling demonstrated greater similarities between different plant species rhizosphere communities at the same rather than at different developmental stages. Marked temporal shifts in diversity and relative activity were observed in rhizosphere bacterial communities with the developmental stage for all plant species studied. Shifts in the diversity of fungal and bacterial communities were more pronounced in maturing pea and sugar beet plants. This extensive study demonstrates that plant species select for specialized microbial communities that change in response to plant growth and plant inputs (Houlden et al. 2008).

15.3.4 Pesticides

A wide variety of pesticides including herbicides, fungicides and herbicides are used in agricultural practices in order to improve the yield of various crops. The use of such pesticides beyond recommended concentrations or their accumulation into soil following continuous application leads to changes in microbial populations agro-ecosystem. For instance, the application of endosulfan, profenophos with alphamethrin, and methamidophos has shown considerable inhibition in bacterial population in cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum*) agro-ecosystem while monocrotophos and bifenthrin with acetamiprid enhanced the bacterial population of soil. Fungal

population was depressed with endosulfan while monocrotophos, methamidophos, endosulfan with dimethoate, fenpropathrin, bifenthrin with acetamiprid, or with ethion or with a mixture of carbosulfan and chloropyrifos and profenophos alone or with ethion or cypermethrin or alphamethrin stimulated fungal counts (Iqbal et al. 2001). In another study, Ekundayo (2003) investigated the effect of 11 pesticides on the populations of bacteria, actinomycetes, fungi, and protozoa by treating a garden soil with their recommended rates. Phenylmercuric acetate (agrosan) at $50 \mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ inhibited bacterial density severely. Pentachloronitrobenzene (PCNB) at $240,000 \mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ reduced bacterial population from 4.6×10^6 to 2.1×10^2 cells g^{-1} , whereas tetramethylthiuram disulphide (thiram) at $100 \mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ suppressed it by twofold. Soil application of 1-naphthylmethylcarbamate (Vetox 85) at $100 \mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ and 1,2,3,4,5,6-hexachlorocyclohexane (Gamalin 20) at $1,300 \mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ repressed the bacterial numbers by two orders each. PCNB reduced the actinomycetes density from 3.4×10^5 to 3.2×10^2 cells g^{-1} and completely eliminated all fungal and protozoan propagules from the soil. The Gammalin 20 completely wiped out all the fungi, whereas phenylmercuric acetate totally eliminated all the protozoa and reduced the fungal population from 3.4×10^4 to 60 cells g^{-1} . In general, protozoa and fungi were more susceptible to fungicides than bacteria and actinomycetes. PCNB, 1,2,3,4,5,6-hexachlorocyclohexane and phenylmercuric acetate were toxic particularly to soil microorganisms, whereas the herbicides dacthal, preforan and dual were quite harmless in soil at application rates of 0.1, 0.06 and $0.02 \mu\text{g g}^{-1}$, respectively. Wang et al. (2006) showed that both a low and a higher dose of methamidophos (0, S-dimethyl phosphoroamidothioate) in soil significantly decreased microbial biomass C (C_{mic}) by 41–83% compared to control. In contrast, the respiration activity of the applied soils was significantly higher than the control. Pesticide application also significantly increased the soil total of N and P. In addition, substrate richness, Shannon and Simpson indices of microbial communities under chemical stresses increased significantly. Moreover, the populations of methamidophos-metabolized bacteria also increased significantly. It was concluded that methamidophos reduces microbial biomass and enhances functional diversities of soil microbial communities; meanwhile, some species of bacteria may be enriched in soils under methamidophos stress. Similarly, Ratcliff et al. (2006) reported that commercial formulation herbicide (glyphosate) applied at the recommended field rate to a clay loam and a sandy loam forest soil has a benign affect on community structure and produced a nonspecific, short-term stimulation of bacteria at a high concentration.

15.4 Resilience of Microbial Communities

Although microbial communities are highly sensitive to both natural and artificial disturbance, the community might still be resilient and quickly return to its pre-disturbed composition. Microorganisms in general possess a number of features that help them to acquire resilience against several adverse environmental variables.

Such factors that protect them from disturbances include, firstly, the fast growth rates of microorganisms; if their abundance is suppressed by a disturbance, they have the potential to recover quickly. Secondly, their high degree of physiological flexibility; for example, purple nonsulfur bacteria, which act as a phototroph under anoxic conditions are a heterotroph under aerobic conditions suggesting that if the relative abundance of some microbes decreased initially, such organisms possess the ability to acclimatize rapidly to the new abiotic conditions over time and could return to their original abundance. And thirdly, their rapid evolution potential; if physiological adaptation is not possible, then the rapid evolution (through mutations or horizontal gene exchange) could allow microbes to adapt to new environmental conditions and recover from disturbance (Allison and Martiny 2008). Thus, there are three ways in which microbial composition might not matter substantially to ecosystem functioning even if there are any disturbances in the agro-ecosystems: (1) ability of microbial communities to resist changes; however, in the majority of cases microbial communities have been found sensitive to elevated CO₂, mineral fertilization, temperature changes, and C amendments (Allison and Martiny 2008), (2) microbial composition might be resilient and quickly return to its original state, and (3) even if microbial composition changes, the new community might be functionally similar to the original one. Although this hypothesis is currently difficult to test, recent studies suggest that many microbial communities are probably not functionally redundant and different communities are not functionally similar (Allison and Martiny 2008).

15.5 Conclusion

Soil microbial communities are integrally involved in biogeochemical cycles and their activities are crucial to maintaining soil fertility and productivity and improving the functioning of the soil ecosystem. A reasonable selection of sensitive and robust soil indicators is, however, required to distinguish the trends in improvement and deterioration of soil quality in various agro-ecosystems. Novel methods and approaches enable us to explore the variation in compositions and functional diversity of microbial communities. Studies of sequence information from organisms in soil microhabitats and their gene expression under different conditions will provide guidelines for designing new and improved culturing methods that resemble their natural niches. However, despite the importance of soil microorganisms, little is known about the distribution of microorganisms in the soil or the manner in which microbial community structure responds to changes in environmental conditions and farm management practices that have shown a considerable impact on soil biota, affecting nutrient cycling processes and ecosystem functioning. Understanding the mechanisms that regulate microbial community structure and activity following implementation of various management practices may lead to the

development of best management practices for improving soil fertility and, consequently, agricultural productivity to improve the sustainability of agro-ecosystems.

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Chapter 16

Strategies for Utilizing Arbuscular Mycorrhizal Fungi and Phosphate-Solubilizing Microorganisms for Enhanced Phosphate Uptake and Growth of Plants in the Soils of the Tropics

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Abstract One of the major constraints for plant productivity in tropical regions is low soil phosphate (Pi) availability. Phosphate ions are rendered unavailable for plant uptake due to adsorption onto the surface of soil minerals and precipitation by free aluminum and iron ions. In highly weathered soils, this is so intense that plant crops commonly exhibit Pi-deficiency. High rates of soluble Pi-fertilizers are employed to meet plant P demands. However, the large quantity of Pi required in order to offset the high Pi-retention capacity of the soils and the high cost associated with it makes it inaccessible to the vast majority of growers in the region. An alternative means of improving plant Pi-uptake from insoluble native and applied rock phosphate is the use of arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi. These fungi form a symbiotic association with most plants and improve the efficiency of associated plants to take up Pi from the soil solution. Other soil microorganisms commonly known as phosphate-solubilizing microorganisms (PSM) can replenish soil solution Pi by solubilizing complex phosphorus compounds found in soil or added to it, mostly through the release of organic acids. In this chapter, an attempt is made to highlight the interactions of these two distinct groups of soil microorganisms and the mechanisms by which they facilitate plant available Pi and enhance plant growth in the soils of the tropics.

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16.1 Introduction

Phosphate (Pi)-fixation is a serious problem in agricultural soils, particularly in highly weathered soils and those formed from volcanic ash (Trove et al. 2003; Sanchez and Uehara 1980). It is estimated that the soils that exhibit high Pi-fixation capacity occupy 1,018 million ha in the tropics (Sanchez and Logan 1992). In tropical America, there are 659 million ha affected by high Pi-fixation, 210 in Africa, and 199 in Asia. The term Pi-fixation is used to describe reactions that remove bioavailable Pi from the soil solution into the soil solid phase (Barber 1995). There are two types of reactions: (1) Pi-sorption onto the surface of soil minerals, and (2) Pi-precipitation by cations such as Al^{3+} and Fe^{3+} in the soil solution (Havlin et al. 1999). Of these, phosphate sorption is particularly strong on iron and aluminum hydrous-oxides (crystalline or noncrystalline) that predominate in the highly weathered soils of humid regions and acid savannas (Mattingly 1975). Jones (1981) characterized the Pi-sorption by 11 Puerto Rican soils and found that the surface area of Goethite was a primary factor accounting for Pi-sorption, with Gibbsite and Hematite contributing little to Pi-sorption. A similar result for Hawaiian soils has been reported (Jackman et al. 1997). Thus, soil Pi-sorption was satisfactorily predicted by soil mineralogical composition. In soils derived from volcanic parent materials, humus-Al/Fe complexes, Allophanes, Ferrihydrite, and Goethite are the soil minerals responsible for the strong Pi-sorption (Jackman et al. 1997; Shoji et al. 1993; Schwertmann and Herbillon 1992; Parfitt 1989). On the other hand, in calcareous soils, Pi is sorbed on the surface of calcium carbonate (Mattingly 1975).

In acidic soils, Pi-precipitation occurs with active forms of aluminum [Al^{3+} , $\text{Al}(\text{OH})^{2+}$, $\text{Al}(\text{OH})_2^+$] and iron (Fe^{3+}), while in neutral and alkaline soils, it occurs mostly with calcium (Ca^{2+}) (Bohn et al. 1985). The extent of dominance of these cations depends mainly on the degree of soil weathering and soil pH. Phosphate ions precipitate to form initially amorphous (noncrystalline) compounds, becoming much more stable as crystalline forms are formed over time (Brady and Weil 1999). Amorphous minerals are slightly more soluble than their crystalline forms because they have smaller particle size, and consequently greater surface area. For instance, the crystalline mineral variscite ($\text{AlPO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$) has a surface area of $1.54 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$ (Taylor and Gurney 1964) whose solubility product (K_{sp}) is $10^{-30.5}$ (Bache 1963). In contrast, its amorphous aluminum-phosphate counterpart has a surface area of $10.5 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$ (Juo and Ellis 1968) and its K_{sp} is $10^{-28.1}$ (Veith and Sposito 1977). In alkaline soils, Pi-compounds are similarly transformed to more insoluble forms. Initially Pi-ions precipitate to calcium-monohydrogen-phosphate ($K_{\text{sp}} = 10^{-6.6}$) (Stumm and Morgan 1995), which is then converted to calcium-orthophosphate ($K_{\text{sp}} = 10^{-24}$), and finally to apatite ($K_{\text{sp}} = 10^{-55.9}$) (Snoeyink and Jenkins 1980). Fox and Kamprath (1970) showed that the degree of P fixation varies among soils, with Andisols, Oxisols, and Ultisols (USDA soil taxonomy) having a high Pi-fixation capacity (Buol et al. 1997). These soils are usually acidic and generally have higher amounts of exchangeable Al and clay minerals that can sorb high

Table 16.1 Categories of soil Pi-sorption as measured by Pi-sorption isotherms following the method of Fox and Kamprath (1970) and usual mineralogy in each category

Category	P _{0.2} (P: mg kg ⁻¹) ^a	Usual mineralogy
Very low (VL)	<10	Quartz, organic materials
Low (L)	10–100	2:1 clays, quartz, and 1:1 clays
Medium (M)	100–500	1:1 clays with oxides
High (H)	500–1,000	Oxides, moderately weathered ash
Very high (VH)	>1,000	Desilicated amorphous materials

^aAmount of P required to achieve a soil solution P of 0.2 mg L⁻¹

amounts of Pi (Sanchez and Uehara 1980). Juo and Fox (1977) proposed several categories for soil Pi-sorption capacity in tropical soils as measured by Pi-sorption isotherms and the usual mineralogy of each category (Table 16.1).

The immediate Pi-source for plants is the soil solution, which usually contains a low Pi-concentration (P: 0.001–0.01 mg L⁻¹) (Barber 1995; Fox 1979). When Pi is removed from the soil solution by roots and/or by Pi-fixation reactions, a gradient of Pi-concentration is created between the solid phase and the soil solution around the roots. Sorbed Pi on the soil solid surfaces must desorb in order to replenish Pi in the soil solution (Do Carmo Harta and Torrent 2007). Hence, Pi diffuses from the solid phase, where it is more concentrated, to the soil solution around the root surface where its concentration is continuously being depleted. However, the rate of Pi-diffusion is quite slow (10^{-12} – 10^{-15} m²s⁻¹) (Schachtman et al. 1998) which limits the Pi-supply and creates a depletion zone of Pi around the roots of approximately of 1–2 mm (Barber 1995). Phosphate ions beyond the zone of depletion cannot be accessed by the root surface (Barber 1995). Phosphate ions that slowly diffuse into the soil solution originate mainly from Pi weakly sorbed on soil colloids and from those freshly precipitated (Lindsay 2001; Stevenson 1986). Soil Pi-supply depends on the Pi-buffering capacity of soils (Pypers et al. 2006), which can be estimated from the relationship between the concentration of Pi in soil solution (intensity factor, I) and the quantity of labile Pi in the solid phase (quantity factor, Q) (Holdford 1997; Barber 1995).

16.2 Phosphate Fertilizer Management

Sanchez and Uehara (1980) discussed different strategies to increase soil Pi-availability of acidic tropical soils with high Pi-fixation capacity. One strategy consists of applying a high dose of soluble Pi-fertilizers (500–1,000 mg kg⁻¹), followed by small amounts of annual application. Although a great part of the added Pi is fixed, it may be released over several years, thus generating a residual effect. These Pi-fertilization rates are, however, not added by most farmers in developing countries due to its high cost. The proportion of the added Pi taken up by the first crop is quite low, ranging from 5 to 10%, suggesting that 90–95% of the added phosphatic fertilizer could be fixed in the soils in chemical forms that slowly release Pi for uptake by plants (Engelstad and Terman 1980).

Rock phosphates (RP) are highly recommended for acid soils with a high Pi-fixation capacity because other more soluble Pi forms are quickly fixed and are more expensive (Yusdar et al. 2007; Randhawa et al. 2006; Msolla et al. 2005). However, the greater the reactivity of a RP, the greater is its desirability, because less reactive minerals are very insoluble (Shrivastava et al. 2007; Ojo et al. 2007; Hammond and Leon 1992). There is an increasing interest in tropical countries to use organic amendments and RP concurrently. In this context, several studies conducted across the globe have shown that the effectiveness of RP to increase plant growth and crop yields could be enhanced by mixing it with farmyard manures, compost, and green manures (Msolla et al. 2007; Yusdar et al. 2007; Shrivastava et al. 2007). Moreover, added manures can also facilitate desorption of sorbed Pi from soil particles (Redding et al. 2006). Some treatments on RP such as “fine grinding,” thermal alteration, and fusion with silica, sodium or magnesium carbonate have been satisfactorily used (Sanchez and Uehara 1980). These treatments are oriented to increase solubility (due to a lower particle size) and/or reduce Pi-sorption by including silicates that compete for the Pi sorption sites. On the other hand, since RP are more soluble in acidic conditions, their acidulation with strong acids has been employed to produce more soluble fertilizers, such as superphosphates (Young and Davies 1980). Partial acidulation has also been applied; however, it increases the cost of production (Havlin et al. 1999). The direct application of nonacidulated RP is recommended for acid soils but not for neutral and alkaline soils. However, several authors have used RP successfully in alkaline soils with simultaneous inoculation of P-solubilizing microorganisms, which can release Pi rapidly and, in turn, increases plant Pi-uptake (Khan et al. 2007; White-law 2000; Kucey et al. 1989). For instance, Bar-Yosef et al. (1999) tested *Pseudomonas cepacia* for P-solubilizing activity on a RP and recorded that it produced superphosphate. These researchers found that this bacterium produced gluconic acid and 2-ketogluconic acid using glucose as the sole carbonaceous substrate. Once these acids were dissociated in solution, the protons reacted with the RP and released Pi into the solution that was then reprecipitated with Ca^{2+} to form superphosphate fertilizers.

The use of mycorrhizal fungi to increase the efficiency of Pi-uptake by plant is also reported (Habte and Osorio 2001). For instance, Manjunath et al. (1989) evaluated the effectiveness of AM-fungus (*Glomus aggregatum*) to enhance plant Pi-uptake of *Leucaena leucocephala* grown in an Oxisol fertilized with RP (P: 340–5,440 mg kg^{-1}). Although plant dry weight and shoot P concentration did not increase significantly in uninoculated soils, when soil was inoculated with *G. aggregatum*, a significant increase in plant dry weight and tissue P concentration was observed. However, in order to obtain adequate growth of mycorrhizal plants, it was necessary to apply a high (at least 2,720 mg kg^{-1}) P level. Despite the benefits of mycorrhizal inoculation, it is clear that it is necessary to apply a high rate of RP. This imposes economic limitations on use of the mycorrhizal association as a strategy to manage Pi-deficient soils. It is clear that AM fungi absorb only Pi from the soil solution, as plant roots do, and there is no evidence of their ability to solubilize insoluble soil P minerals (Bolan 1991). The use of

Pi-solubilizing microorganisms may increase the amount of available Pi in soil solution and, consequently, enhance the effectiveness of AM fungi to increase plant Pi-uptake.

16.3 Arbuscular Mycorrhizal Pi-Uptake

Some plants adopt different strategies to grow in P deficient soils: (1) changes in root morphology such as the production of an elongated root system with fine roots and abundance of root hairs, (2) release of phosphatase enzymes that release Pi from organic compounds, and (3) production and release of organic acids that solubilize Pi-compounds (Radersma and Grierson 2004; McCully 1999; Hetrick 1991). Plants with less root plasticity need to form symbiotic associations with mycorrhizal fungi that colonize the cortical tissue of roots (Smith et al. 2003; Smith 2002; Sylvia 1999) if they are to grow normally in Pi-deficient soils. During plant-AM fungal interactions, the plant supplies carbonaceous compounds to the fungus, while the fungus provides nutrients, particularly diffusion-limited ones such as Pi, Cu^{2+} , and Zn^{2+} (Lynch and Ho 2005; Hamel 2004; Marschner 1995; Barber 1995; Habte and Manjunath 1991). It is clear that AM fungi can only take up soluble Pi from the same Pi-pool that is available for uptake by roots (Cardoso et al. 2006; Bolan 1991). In turn, roots can absorb available Pi from distances not exceeding a few millimeters from their surface while mycorrhizal hyphae can extend to several centimeters from the root surface, exploring a greater volume of soil (Jeffries et al. 2003; Habte and Osorio 2001; Miyasaka and Habte 2001). For example, 47 days after mycorrhizal inoculation of *Trifolium subterraneum*, Jacobsen et al. (1992) found mycorrhizal hyphae spreading from the root surface to 11 cm with the proportion between mycorrhizal hyphae and root length of $1\text{--}10\text{ mcm}^{-1}$ of infected root while Barber (1995), however, reported a lower value of 0.8 mcm^{-1} of root.

Mycorrhizal hyphae have a higher affinity for absorbing Pi than roots. Schachtman et al. (1998) reported that the hyphae of *Gigaspora margarita* had an affinity constant for Pi (K_m) of $2.5\text{ }\mu\text{M}$ ($\text{P: }0.077\text{ mg L}^{-1}$), while many plants usually exhibited a K_m of $6\text{--}44\text{ }\mu\text{M}$ ($\text{P: }0.19\text{--}1.36\text{ mg L}^{-1}$), particularly those highly dependent on the mycorrhizal association (Barber 1995; Nye and Tinker 1977). In addition, Barber (1995) affirmed that due to the small radius of the mycorrhizal hypha ($1\text{--}3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$) there is no Pi-depletion zone around the hypha which allows the mycorrhizal hypha to take up Pi more effectively due to a higher and more constant Pi concentration. In comparison, Li et al. (1991) found a very narrow Pi-depletion zone around the mycorrhizal hypha. Roots with a greater radius ($150\text{ }\mu\text{m}$), however, generate a zone of depletion of at least 1 mm, resulting in low Pi concentration around the root surface. Smith and Read (1997) reported P influx in mycorrhizal roots of 3- to 5-fold higher than nonmycorrhizal roots ($10^{-11}\text{ mol m}^{-1}\text{ s}^{-1}$).

Plant species exhibit different degrees of mycorrhizal dependency (MD) to produce maximum growth at a given level of soil fertility (Plenchette et al.

1983). Habte and Manjunath (1991) found that the MD of several plant species was determined by root characteristics, such as root length, root density, root surface area, and incidence and length of hair roots of the host species, which help them to explore and absorb Pi from the soil solution. Since MD was significantly affected by soil solution Pi-concentration, they proposed that MD should be estimated at different levels of available Pi, particularly at the soil solution P of 0.02 mg L^{-1} .

16.4 Phosphate-Solubilizing Microorganisms

Many soil microorganisms can solubilize inorganic soil P compounds, reversing the process of Pi-fixation (Khan et al. 2007; Gyaneshwar et al. 2002; Rao 1992). Soil bacteria of the genus *Pseudomonas*, *Enterobacter*, and *Bacillus* are particularly active as Pi-solubilizers (Canbolat et al. 2006; Pandey et al. 2006; Xavier and Germida 2003; Kim et al. 1998a, 1998b). Soil fungi especially those of the genus *Penicillium* and *Aspergillus* have also been demonstrated to be effective phosphate-solubilizing microorganisms (PSM) (Reddy et al. 2002; Whitelaw 2000). Kucey et al. (1989) found in Mollisols of Canada that 0.5 and 0.1% of the total population of bacteria and fungi, respectively, exhibited the ability to solubilize insoluble Pi-compounds. Although Pi-solubilizing bacteria have received greater attention, Whitelaw (2000) and Kucey (1983) indicated that Pi-solubilizing fungi are more effective in solubilizing P compounds. Moreover, bacteria on repeated subculturing can lose their ability to solubilize P, while subcultures of Pi-solubilizing fungi maintain this ability (Rashid et al. 2004; Whitelaw 2000). Apparently, there are some bacterial genes that could be repressed by high levels of Pi that control the production of some organic acids (e.g., gluconic acid); however, in spite of the progress made in the genetic control of Pi-solubilizing bacteria (Rodriguez et al. 2006), this is not completely understood and requires more study.

During the 1950s and 1960s, inoculation with *Bacillus megaterium* var. *phosphaticum* (phosphobacterin) in Russian soils (mainly Mollisols) was the best-known use of PSM (Kucey et al. 1989; Stevenson 1986). The mechanisms of Pi-solubilization were not fully understood, but the mineralization of organic P was proposed as the major mechanism. Trials carried out in many locations demonstrated little consistency in plant response; apparently other factors such as liming and/or organic material addition affected the effectiveness of phosphobacterin. The lack of response to phosphobacterin in many locations pointed to a possible intensified organic matter decomposition, and the poor understanding of the mechanisms of P solubilization carried out by this microorganism discouraged its use. Since then, the focus on microbial solubilization of P has been directed towards understanding the mechanisms of the dissolution of inorganic P compounds (Kucey et al. 1989).

Inoculation with PSM has produced positive results on growth, yield, and Pi-uptake in several plant species (Wani et al. 2007; Khan and Zaidi 2007; El-Azouni

Table 16.2 Effect of PSM inoculation on plant Pi-uptake of mycorrhiza-free and mycorrhized plants grown in temperate soils

Soil type/plant	P added	PSM	Increase of plant P uptake due to PSM inoculation (%)		Reference		
			– AMF	+ AMF			
Mollisol pH 7.7 Plant: wheat	None	Penicillium bilaji	73		Kucey (1988)		
	RP		47				
Mollisol pH 8.0	None	Penicillium bilaji	25		Asea et al. (1988)		
Mollisol pH >7.0 Plant: wheat	None	Penicillium bilaji	62		Kucey et al. (1989)		
	RP		36				
	MAP		19				
Calcareous TypicTorrifluent pH 8.2	RP	Penicillium sp.	17		Salih et al. (1989)		
	RP	<i>Aspergillus foetidus</i>	19				
	TSP	Penicillium sp.	8				
	TSP	<i>Aspergillus foetidus</i>	4				
Mollisol pH 7.6	None	Penicillium bilaji	39		Gleddie (1993)		
	TSP		18				
	TSP		18				
	TSP		7				
Hapludoll pH 6.2	None	Aspergillus	58 (grain)		Singh and Singh (1993)		
	RP	awamori	13 (grain)				
Calcareous mixed with sand, pH 6.7 Plant: kudzu	RP	<i>Azospirillum</i>	33	0–33	Toro et al. (1996)		
		<i>Penicillium</i>	33	0			
		Unidentified	33	22			
		<i>Pseudomonas</i>	33	33			
Calcareous, pH 7.5 Plant: wheat	None	<i>Aspergillus</i>	30	39	Omar (1998)		
		<i>Penicillium</i>	24	26			
		<i>Aspergillus</i> + <i>Penicillium</i>	78	49			
	RP	<i>Aspergillus</i>	116	24			
		<i>Penicillium</i>	118	11			
		<i>Aspergillus</i> + <i>Penicillium</i>	151	57			
Vertic Epiaqualf mixed with sand and vermiculite, pH 5.9 Plant: Tomato	RP	Enterobacter agglomerans	54 (35 days) ^a	124	Kim et al. (1998a)		
			27 (55 days)	27			
			8 (75 days)	11			
Sandy soil pH 7.6 Plant: wheat	None	<i>Bacillus</i>	26	52	Singh and Kapoor (1999)		
		<i>Cladosporium</i>	47	69			
		<i>Bacillus</i> + <i>Cladosporium</i>	73	98			
		<i>Bacillus</i>	–	248			
	RP	<i>Cladosporium</i>	–	301			
		<i>Bacillus</i> + <i>Cladosporium</i>	51	344			
		None	<i>Mortierella</i> sp.	9		13	Osorio and Habte (2001)
				14		73	

(continued)

Table 16.2 (continued)

Soil type/plant	P added	PSM	Increase of plant P uptake due to PSM inoculation (%)		Reference
			– AMF	+ AMF	
Alluvial sandy loam pH 7.2 Plant: wheat		<i>Azotobacter chroococcum</i>	39	99.6	Khan and Zaidi (2007)
		<i>Bacillus</i> sp.	77	120	
		<i>Penicillium variable</i>	94	–	
Typic Haplustox Plant: leucaena	None	<i>Mortierella</i> sp.	0	0	Osorio (2008)
	RP ^b	(150 mg P kg ⁻¹)	0	40	
	RP ^c	(300 mg P kg ⁻¹)	0	66	
Typic Haplustoll Plant: leucaena	None	<i>Mortierella</i> sp.	155	26	Osorio (2008)

^aDays after planting; ^b, ^c150 and 300 mg of P kg⁻¹ of soil, respectively

2008) (Table 16.2). Some effective Pi-solubilizing fungi that have shown a substantial increase in plant growth and P uptake by different plants including *Aspergillus niger* (Omar 1998), *Aspergillus flavus* (Rashid et al. 2004), *Penicillium bilaji* (Kucey et al. 1989), *Penicillium italicum* (El-Azouni 2008), *Penicillium radicum* (Whitelaw 2000), and *Mortierella* sp. (Osorio 2008). Salih et al. (1989) inoculated a calcareous soil (Typic Torrifluent, pH 8.2) with two PSM, *Penicillium* sp. and *Aspergillus* sp. They observed that, when the soil was fertilized with RP, the PSM inoculation increased sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) Pi-uptake by 17 and 19%, respectively, compared to the sole application of RP. Also, Kucey (1988) inoculated a Mollisol (pH 7.7) of Canada with *P. bilaji*, the soil was either fertilized or unfertilized with RP (Table 16.2). Wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) Pi-uptake increased only by 4% with RP alone, 14% with the PSM inoculation alone, and 12% with a combination of RP and *P. bilaji*. In a similar experiment on a Mollisol (pH 8), Asea et al. (1988) found that the addition of RP increased wheat plant Pi-uptake by only 2%; *P. bilaji* inoculation alone significantly increased it by 26%, and the combination of both (RP and *P. bilaji*) by 28% (Table 16.2).

Several authors have reported that soil microorganisms can increase soil P availability (Table 16.3). Although in some soils this increase does not have practical implications, it has been important in other soils (Marschner et al. 2006). For instance, the increases in soil P availability reported by Goenadi (1995) and Goenadi et al. (1995) in two acidic Ultisols fertilized with RP were significant. The effectiveness of PSM to enhance plant Pi-uptake has been questioned by some authors (Bolan 1991, Tinker 1980) due to several reasons: (1) organic substances required for these microorganisms are scarce in nonrhizospheric sites, (2) antagonism and competition by other microorganisms in the rhizosphere can reduce the effectiveness of PSM, and (3) low translocation of solubilized Pi through the soil because it can be refixed by soil components. Of these, the latter point is more important in soils with a high Pi-fixation capacity as discussed earlier.

Table 16.3 Enhancement of the soil Pi-available by phosphate-solubilizing microorganisms

PSM	Soil	P source	SAP increase (mg kg ⁻¹)	Reference
<i>Aspergillus niger</i>	Fluvaquent, pH 5.4 SAP: 9 mg kg ⁻¹	Nil P fertilizer	2	Banik and Dey (1981b)
<i>A. fumigates</i>	Fluvaquent, pH 7.4 SAP: 7 mg kg ⁻¹	RP and farmyard manure	3	Banik and Dey (1982)
<i>Penicillium bilaji</i>	Mollisol, pH 7.7 SAP: 4 mg kg ⁻¹	RP	2	Kucey (1988)
<i>Penicillium</i> sp.	Torrifluent, pH 8.2 SAP: 4 mg kg ⁻¹	RP	2	Salih et al. (1989)
<i>A. foetidus</i>		TSP	9	
		RP	1	
<i>A. awamori</i>	Hapludoll, pH 6.2 SAP: 27 mg kg ⁻¹	TSP	5	
		Nil P fertilizer	8	Singh and Singh (1993)
		RP	3	
<i>Aspergillus</i> sp.	Ultisol, pH 3.9 SAP: 37 mg kg ⁻¹	RP	24	Goenadi et al. (1995)
<i>Aspergillus</i> sp.	Ultisol SAP: 0.5 mg kg ⁻¹	Nil P fertilizer	14	Goenadi (1995)
		RP	38	

Source: Whitelaw (2000). SAP Soil available P, TSP triple superphosphate

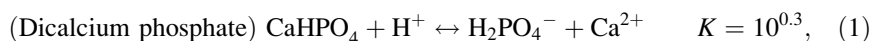
16.4.1 Mechanisms of Microbial Pi-Solubilization

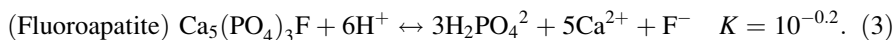
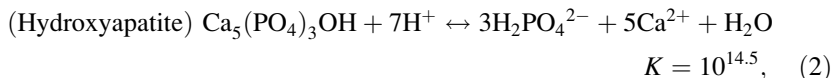
Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain the microbial solubilization of P compounds. The mechanisms include: -(1) release of organic acids produced during organic residue decomposition (Hameeda et al. 2006; Bar-Yosef et al. 1999), (2) excretion of protons due to NH₄⁺ assimilation by microorganisms (Whitelaw 2000; Illmer and Schinner 1995; Abd-Alla 1994; Asea et al. 1988; Roos and Luckner 1984; Kucey 1983), (3) formation of complexes between organic acids/anions with cations (Al³⁺, Fe³⁺, Ca²⁺) (Welch et al. 2002), and (4) desorption of Pi-sorbed onto soil clay and/or oxides (Osorio 2008). Nitric and sulfuric acid produced by *Nitrosomonas* and *Thiobacillus* species, respectively, have also been reported to dissolve Pi-compounds (Azam and Memon 1996). Equally, P compounds may be solubilized by carbonic acid formed as a result of organic matter decomposition (Memon 1996). An increase in soil P availability may be caused by several reactions involving microorganisms that produce organic acids and humic substances (Stevenson 1986). Presumably, these substances can replace or compete with Pi-ions for sorption sites.

Kim et al. (1997) found that the production of acidity was a major mechanism in the solubilization of hydroxyapatite by *Enterobacter agglomerans* under in vitro conditions. For comparison, Kim et al. (1997) employed citric acid, oxalic acid, lactic acid, and HCl at the same pH produced by *E. agglomerans*. They found that at pH 4.0–4.1 (and a shaking time of 48–50 h), there were no significant differences among P solubilization produced by this bacterium and that produced by the application of citric acid, oxalic, and HCl. However, lactic acid exhibited a

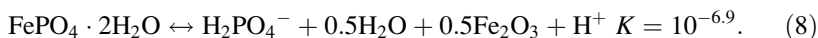
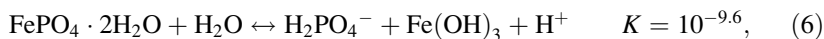
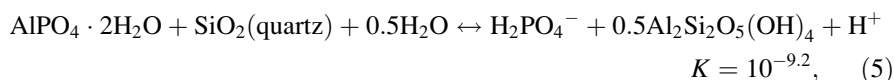
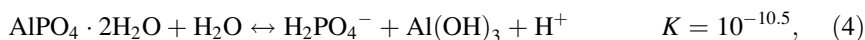
significantly ($P \leq 0.05$) lower capacity for solubilizing hydroxyapatite. Illmer et al. (1995) reached the same conclusion while studying AlPO_4 solubilization by several PSM. For instance, *A. niger* produced organic acids but other PSM species did not produce detectable amounts of the organic acids. Under in vitro conditions, the pH of the growth medium decreased as a result of acid production by PSM. Osorio and Habte (2001) found an inverse relation between culture medium pH and Pi released from RP by PSM (*Mortierella* sp.) isolated from Hawaiian soils.

Some of the organic acids (or their respective anions) commonly associated with microbial solubilization of Pi are gluconic acid (Bar-Yosef et al. 1999; Di-Simine et al. 1998), oxalic acid, citric acid (Kim et al. 1997, Kucey et al. 1989), lactic acid, tartaric acid, and aspartic acid (Venkateswarlu et al. 1984). These acids are products of microbial metabolism, in some cases by oxidative respiration or by fermentation of carbonaceous substrates (e.g., glucose) (Trolove et al. 2003; Jones et al. 2003; Gyaneshwar et al. 2002; Prescott et al. 1999; Atlas and Bartha 1997). The reactions of P solubilization are believed to occur in the rhizosphere where carbonaceous compounds are released and where solubilized Pi may be taken up by the root or mycorrhizal system. Amos and Walters (2006) estimated that for maize (*Zea mays*) up to 29% of the total carbon fixed by photosynthesis could be excreted into the rhizosphere. According to Nguyen (2003), on average, 17% of the net C fixed by photosynthesis is lost by roots and recovered as rhizosphere respiration (12%) and soil residues (5%). Many rhizosphere microorganisms are heterotrophs and might use these carbonaceous substrates to produce organic acids. Recently, Hameeda et al. (2006) found that the type of carbon source affected the effectiveness of RP-solubilizing bacteria and, for *Serratia marcescens* and *Pseudomonas* sp., the more favorable carbon source for RP solubilization followed the order, glucose > galactose > xylose > mannose = maltose > cellobiose > arabinose. However, no solubilization of RP was detected with the last carbon source of this series. In addition, *Serratia marcescens* and *Pseudomonas* sp. were capable of solubilizing RP using different kinds of composted crop residues including rice (*Oryza sativa*), pigeon pea (*Cajanus cajan*), and a grass. Furthermore, Reyes et al. (2006) also compared the effect of the carbon source on RP solubilization and found that *Penicillium* sp. and *Azotobacter* sp. were more effective when the medium contained sucrose rather than dextrose. When PSM were inoculated in neutral or alkaline soils, the production of acids decreased rhizosphere pH, favoring the solubility of soil native calcium-phosphate and added RP (Kim et al. 1998a). These results have commonly been found in temperate-zone soils of Europe and North America (Kucey et al. 1989; Kucey 1983, 1987, 1988) and other countries, like Egypt (Omar 1998) where calcareous soils are abundant. The following reactions (1)–(3) suggest that the increase in H^+ activity leads to a substantial increase in solubilization of calcium-phosphates. Moreover, if Ca^{2+} is chelated by organic anions, the dissolution of both solids is favored. For example, Welch et al. (2002) found that organic acid/anions produced by microorganisms were capable of dissolving apatite by forming a complex with Ca either in solution and/or directly at the mineral surface.





On the other hand, in highly weathered acidic soils, P solubility is controlled by other compounds, mainly variscite ($\text{AlPO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$) and strengite ($\text{FePO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$) (Bohn et al. 1985). In this case, the decrease in soil pH may not increase the dissolution of strengite and variscite (Lindsay 2001) and, hence, Pi is not released. This happens because gibbsite [$\text{Al}(\text{OH})_3$] and kaolinite [$(\text{Al}_2\text{Si}_2\text{O}_5\text{OH})_4$] can control the solubility of Al in these soils, while goethite (FeOOH), hematite (Fe_2O_3) and soil- $\text{Fe}(\text{OH})_3$ control the solubility of Fe. Reductions in the soil pH would release more Al and Fe ions, which would precipitate Pi. Thus, if soil pH decreases, Pi-solubility is likely to decrease, as shown in reactions (4)–(8) (Lindsay 2001).



The microbial solubilization of soil P seems to be associated with the presence of calcium-phosphates. In fact, most of the research on microbial solubilization has been done with solubilizers of RP (mixture of hydroxy- and fluor-apatites) (Osorio and Habte 2001; Kim et al. 1998b) or tricalcium phosphate (Ca_3PO_4) (Vyas et al. 2007; Wani et al. 2007; Banik and Dey 1981a, 1981b, 1981c; Paul and Rao 1971; Agnihorti 1970; Louw and Webley 1959; Sperber 1957, 1958; Pikovskaia 1948). However, researchers on PSM no longer accept isolation of PSM using culture medium with Ca_3PO_4 because it can supply free Pi. Some authors reported that in vitro microbial solubilization not only occurred with calcium-phosphate but also with Al and Fe phosphates. However, the solubilization was higher with calcium phosphates (Illmer et al. 1995; Banik and Dey 1983; Rose 1957).

Solubilization of Al and Fe phosphates could be easily observed under in vitro conditions where no soil minerals interfere with Pi-solubility (9) and (10). Illmer

et al. (1995) found that *A. niger*, *Penicillium simplicissium*, *Pseudomonas aurantiogriseum*, and *Pseudomonas* sp. were effective in solubilizing AlPO_4 under in vitro conditions via organic acid production or proton excretion due to NH_4^+ assimilation. Aluminum and Fe ions in solution may be chelated by organic anions, such as oxalate and citrate (Bolan et al. 1994), favoring the dissolution of Al and Fe phosphates. However, the role of organic acids released by PSM in solubilizing Pi from Al- and Fe-phosphate under acidic soil conditions must be thoroughly investigated.



On the other hand, organic anions produced by PSM can also compete with phosphate for Pi-sorption sites onto the surface of soil minerals. In this regard, He and Zhu (1997, 1998) suggested that Pi-sorbed onto the surfaces of some minerals was displaced when a culture medium was inoculated with soil samples containing microorganisms (unidentified) that presumably excreted organic acids. Similarly, Osorio (2008) found that *Mortierella* sp., a PSF, was capable of desorbing Pi-sorbed from soil by releasing oxalic acid. The effectiveness of this fungus to desorb Pi was controlled by the type of soil and followed the order: mollisol > oxisol > ultisol > andisol. Moreover, the effectiveness of *Mortierella* sp. to desorb Pi-sorbed from soil minerals decreased in the order: montmorillonite > kaolinite > goethite > allophane.

16.4.2 Role of Organic Acids in Pi-Solubilization

Many organic acids have been found effective in solubilizing soil P compounds (Hue 1991) and other soil minerals (Calvaruso et al. 2006; Welch et al. 2002). These acids or anions are produced by roots (Corrales et al. 2007; Radersma and Grierson 2004; Kirk et al. 1999; Marschner 1995) and by microbial activity during decomposition of organic matter or induced by Pi-deficiency stress (Jones et al. 2003; Fransson et al. 2004; Bohn et al. 1985). In accordance with these, Bolan et al. (1994) found organic acids or anions in high concentrations in poultry manure, lesser amounts in the rhizosphere soil, very little in the bulk soil, and trace amounts in leaf litter. Also, Le Bayon et al. (2006) reported a relatively higher production of organic anions (citrate, fumarate, and malate) in the rhizosphere of *Lupinus albus* under Pi-starvation. Furthermore, to substantiate the role of such organic anions in P solubilization, Bolan et al. (1994) assessed the influence of monocarboxylic (acetic, formic, and lactic), dicarboxylic (malic, tartaric, and oxalic), and tricarboxylic (citric) acids/anions in the solubilization and sorption of Pi on an andisol (Hydric Dystrandept) and an alfisol (Typic Fragiaqualf) of New Zealand. The

Table 16.4 Stability constant of organic anions with aluminum (Log K_{Al}) and calcium (Log K_{Ca}) and their effects on soil Pi-sorption and solubilization of two Pi-fertilizers

Organic acid	Log K_{Al} ^a	Log K_{Ca} ^b	Sorbed P (mmol kg ⁻¹ soil)	Dissolved MCP ^c (%)	Dissolved NCRP ^f (%)
Water (control)	–	–	52	2.35	1.28
Formic	1.36	1.43 ^b	47	12.27	11.86
Acetic	1.60	1.18 ^b	45	10.35	12.57
Lactic	2.41	1.63 ^c	46	8.71	13.92
Malic	5.40	2.25 ^c	37	32.65	31.98
Tartaric	5.62	2.80 ^b	35	30.49	32.31
Oxalic	6.16	3.44 ^d	32	36.44	34.02
Citric	7.98	4.87 ^b	18	83.78	86.41

Source: Bolan et al. (1994)

^aHue et al. (1986); ^bMINTEQA2 (a model for equilibrium speciation in geochemical environments, accessed at www.epa.gov on March 15, 2008); ^cBazin et al. (1995); ^dFinlayson et al. (1972); ^eMonohydrogen calcium phosphate; ^fNCRP North Carolina rock phosphate

addition of these organic acids significantly decreased Pi-sorption on allophane surface. The effectiveness of such acids followed the order: tricarboxylic > dicarboxylic > monocarboxylic. This was explained by the formation of complexes between Al with the conjugated anion of each organic acid and by their respective stability constant (Log K_{Al}) (Hue et al. 1986), as depicted in Table 16.4. The addition of organic acids or anions also favored the solubilization of North Carolina rock phosphate (NCRP) and monohydrogen calcium phosphate (MCP), increased dry matter yield of ryegrass (*Lolium rigidulum*), and enhanced plant Pi-uptake (Bolan et al. 1994).

Hue (1991) obtained similar results on the availability of soil Pi when organic acids/anions were added to two andisols, an oxisol, an ultisol, and a vertisol of Hawaii. The effectiveness of the acids to reduce Pi-sorption from a soluble source (KH₂PO₄) was higher with malic acid (monohydroxy dicarboxylic), followed by protocatechuic acid (dihydroxy monocarboxylic), and acetic acid (monocarboxylic). The effect was higher when the acid was applied first and Pi last. The dry weight of lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*) was significantly higher when the soils received organic acids or anions plus Pi compared to those that received only Pi. The magnitude of this effect was much higher in the two andisols and in the oxisol whereby plant dry weight was 5- to 15-fold higher than control plants, whereas in the vertisol the increase was only 1.3- to 1.72-fold. Such variations in effects were suggested to be due to differences in clay mineralogy that determines the soil Pi-sorption capacity. From this study, it was concluded that the efficiency of Pi-fertilizers might be enhanced if they are added with organic acids or anions or, more practically, with green manures or animal wastes. Results of recent studies have also shown that RP could be more effective if it is applied with manures, composts, and crop litters (Reddy 2007; Bah et al. 2006; Singh et al. 2006).

The phenomenon of Pi-desorption by organic anions is widely accepted by soil scientists. Recently, Sato and Comerford (2006) used organic anions to model the Pi-desorption from a Brazilian soil. They concluded that the organic anions can increase soluble Pi by two process: (1) the desorption of P sorbed onto soil surface (ligand exchange), and (2) the dissolution of soil P compounds (ligand dissolution)

(e.g., calcium phosphates). Since PSM can release the same organic acids as reported by Hue (1991) and Bolan et al. (1994), these microorganisms can presumably reduce the activity of Al ions in the rhizosphere, decrease Pi-sorption, and enhance plant Pi-uptake. Miyasaka et al. (1991) found that the Al tolerance of plants is associated with the ability of roots to release organic acids/anions (citrate and oxalate, in particular) into the rhizosphere. Since some soil microorganisms are able to produce organic acids, it is possible that such microorganisms could help plants to grow in soils with toxic levels of Al³⁺. In a series of experiments, De la Fuente and Herrera (1999) isolated a gene that encodes for citrate synthetase overproduction in the TCA cycle of a phosphate solubilizing strain of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. This gene was then transferred to tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) cells of Al-intolerant plants. Transgenic plants were able to produce high amounts of citric acid and citrate, its conjugated anion, and grew in solutions with high concentration of Al. The process was successfully replicated with papaya (*Carica papaya*) plants. Although these experiments were aimed at enhancing Al tolerance of these plants, they also tested mechanisms proposed for the microbial solubilization of soil Pi. However, Delhaize et al. (2001) reported that they were not able to repeat the results obtained by De la Fuente and Herrera (1999) and, hence, suggested that the expression of *P. aeruginosa* genes are either sensitive to environmental conditions or that the observed Al tolerance and improved Pi-nutrition were due to other factors. Generally, the roles of organic acid/anion production in the rhizosphere on Pi-desorption and Pi-solubilization has been accepted. However, experimental results indicate that its efficiency in increasing plant Pi-uptake depends on plant species, age, physiological state, and soil mineralogy (Trove et al. 2003). The concentration of these organic compounds is relatively low in most soils because they can be precipitated with free ions (e.g., Al³⁺, Fe³⁺, Ca²⁺) or sorbed on soil clay reactive surfaces. Also, their persistence in rhizosphere soil is very low because they can be used as carbon sources by soil microorganisms (Jones et al. 2003). Thus, competent rhizosphere microorganisms capable of producing organic acids or anions can play an important role in the management of Pi-deficient and high Pi-sorbing soils.

16.5 Interactive Effect of Arbuscular Mycorrhizal Fungi and Phosphate-Solubilizing Microbes on Plant Pi-Uptake

The dual inoculation of PSM and AM fungi may overcome the limitations on the effectiveness of PSM to enhance plant Pi-uptake in soils with high Pi-fixation capacity. During this interaction, mycorrhizal plants release higher amounts of carbonaceous substances into the rhizosphere (Rambelli 1973; Linderman 1988) which is used as a carbon source by PSM (Azcon and Barea 1996). Moreover, the extensive mycorrhizal hyphae network formed around roots can efficiently take up Pi released by PSM, thus minimizing its re-fixation. As long as PSM grow in the rhizosphere (or mycorrhizosphere), there is a great opportunity to satisfy their

Table 16.5 Effects of *E. agglomerans* (PSM) and *G. etunicatum* (AMF) inoculation on growth and Pi-uptake in tomato plants 75 days after inoculation

Treatment	Shoot dry weight (g per plant)	Root dry weight (g per plant)	Shoot P content (mg per plant)
Control	42.2 (100) ^a	4.3 (100)	116.6 (100)
PSM	48.5 (115)	5.1 (118)	125.3 (107)
AMF	47.6 (113)	5.6 (130)	120.9 (104)
PSM+AMF	54.6 (129)	6.8 (158)	134.4 (115)
LSD ($P \leq 0.05$)	1.96	0.5	9.8

Source: Kim et al. (1998a)

^aValues in parenthesis indicates percentage increase over control.

carbon requirement and deliver Pi into the soil solution. Synergistic effects have been found in sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) with the triple inoculation of two PSM (*Azotobacter chroococcum* and *Penicillium glaucum*) and the AM fungus *G. fasciculatum* (Gururaj and Mallikarjunaiah 1995). Similar effects were found in cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum* L.) with the inoculation of *Pseudomonas striata* and *Azospirillum* sp. (PSM) and the arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF) *G. fasciculatum* (Prathibha et al. 1995). In rice (*O. sativa*), favorable effects were also reported with *P. striata* (PSM) and *Bacillus polymyxa* (PSM) and the AM fungus *G. fasciculatum* (Mohod et al. 1991). In chili (*Capsicum annum*), synergistic effects were reported with two AMF, *G. fasciculatum* or *G. macrocarpum*, and a PSM *P. striata* (Sreenivasa and Krishnaraj 1992). In tomato (*Lycopersicon lycopersicum*), beneficial results were found with *E. agglomerans* and *G. etunicatum* (Kim et al. 1998a) (Table 16.5). Moreover, positive results have been obtained in wheat with multiple combinations that included *P. striata* (PSM) and *G. fasciculatum* (AMF), *P. putida*, *P. aeruginosa* and *P. fluorescens* (PSM) with *G. clarum* (AMF), *P. striata* and *Agrobacterium radiobacter* (PSM) combined with two AMF, *G. fasciculatum* and *G. margarita* (Gaur et al. 1990).

Kopler et al. (1988) indicated that more legume nodulation was obtained with concurrent inoculation of *Rhizobium* and *Pseudomonas* spp. (PSM). Sturz et al. (1997) found that nodulation by *Rhizobium leguminosarum* b.v. *trifolii* in red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) was promoted when it was coinoculated with the PSM *Bacillus insolitus*, *B. brevis* or *Agrobacterium rhizogenes*. Similar results were obtained with the inoculation of *G. mosseae* (AMF) and *Azorhizobium caulinodans* (PSM) for *Sesbania rostrata* (Rahman and Parsons 1997). In soybean (*Glycine max*), the combination of *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* (N₂ fixer) with *P. fluorescens* (PSM) and *G. mosseae* (AMF) showed equally good results (Shabayey et al. 1996). Lately, El-Azouni (2008) also found that the dual inoculation of *A. niger* and *P. italicum* significantly increased the plant dry weight and yield of soybean. Such results are likely to be due to a higher plant Pi-uptake promoted by the combined action of PSM and AMF, which may satisfy the high Pi requirements of the N₂-fixing process (Azcon and Barea 1996; Young et al. 1990). More recently, Khan and Zaidi (2007) found synergistic effects with the triple inoculation of two plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria *A. chroococcum* and *Bacillus* sp. and *Glomus fasciculatum* on plant growth, yield and nutrient uptake of wheat plants under field conditions.

Peix et al. (2001) found that the N_2 -fixing bacterium *Mesorhizobium mediterraneum* was able to solubilize $Ca_3(PO_4)_2$ under in vitro and soil conditions. Inoculation with *M. mediterraneum* of seeds of chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*) and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) planted in a Calcic Rhodoxeralf significantly increased plant growth and total N- and Pi-content in both plants, which were increased even further when *M. mediterraneum* and Ca_3PO_4 were applied simultaneously. Such enhancement in the overall performance of the tested crops was not only due to the symbiotic N_2 fixation but also to the availability of soluble P to the plants. Apparently, there is a certain degree of specificity among PSM, AMF, and P source. Toro et al. (1996) studied the combined effect of AMF (*Glomus* spp.) and eight PSM (bacteria) on plant growth and Pi-nutrition of a tropical legume, kudzu (*Pueraria phaseoloides*). The PSM were isolated from an oxisol and were characterized by their ability to solubilize RP, Al- and Fe-P compounds. In general, the combined inoculation of PSM, *Rhizobium* and AMF increased growth, yield, and nutritional properties of kudzu plants. However, such response was not observed for all combinations of AMF and PSM. For instance, the three PSM namely, *Azospirillum* sp., *Bacillus* sp., and *Enterobacter* sp., had a greater effect when they were coinoculated with *G. mosseae*. In contrast, *Pseudomonas* sp. and an unidentified isolate demonstrated a better performance when they were combined with *G. fasciculatum*. On the other hand, Fe-P solubilizers were more effective if they were used alone, while Al-P and RP solubilizers performed better when they were concurrently inoculated with AMF. Reasons for these differences may be due to the interactions found between the microorganisms. For instance, some of these PSM could be more effective in stimulating a rapid mycorrhizal colonization, and enhancing the length, distribution, and/or survival of external fungal mycelium. Mycorrhizal fungi might differ in the amount and type of hyphal exudates released into the mycorrhizosphere. In addition, a high capacity to solubilize Pi might stimulate plant growth and favor mycorrhizal activity. Kucey (1987) inoculated a mollisol (pH 7.2) of Canada with *P. bilaji*, in which either mycorrhizal or nonmycorrhizal wheat or beans were grown. In the case of wheat, mycorrhizal inoculation alone increased Pi-uptake significantly by 30%, while *P. bilaji* alone did not do so. However, *P. bilaji* increased Pi-uptake of mycorrhizal wheat by 10% in the unfertilized soil, but not in the soil fertilized with RP. In the case of bean, mycorrhizal inoculation alone did not increase plant Pi-uptake, but *P. bilaji* alone was able to increase it significantly by 31%. Dual inoculation, however, did not increase Pi-uptake beyond the level obtained with *P. bilaji*. In other words, no synergism was established between the inoculated microorganisms and, hence, Pi-uptake by bean plants grown in unfertilized and RP-fertilized soil did not increase. Mollisols usually exhibit a low Pi-fixation capacity. For this reason, it is not surprising that inoculation with this PSM alone increased bean Pi-uptake. However, the differences in the effect on wheat and bean plants could also be due to the release of different types and amounts of root exudates that otherwise stimulate acid production in the rhizosphere by PSM. The interactive effect of both PSM and AMF on plant P-uptake is explained in Fig. 16.1 (Osorio 2008). Once the plant releases

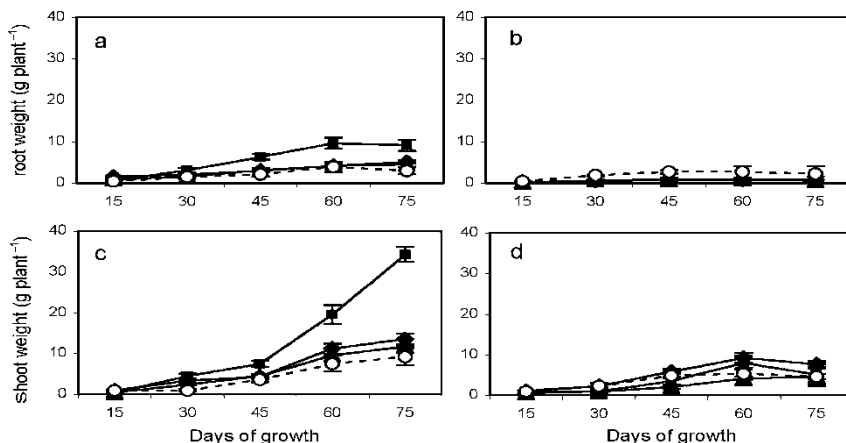


Fig. 16.1 Diagram showing the microbial solubilization of soil and added P by *Mortierella* sp. and the mycorrhizal Pi-uptake (Osorio, original drawing)

organic compounds into its rhizosphere, the PSM produces organic acids that dissolve insoluble calcium phosphate compounds (added or native). Also, such organic acids can desorb Pi sorbed from soil minerals, which is controlled by the soil Pi-sorbing capacity. The Pi-release can be efficiently taken up by the mycorrhizal hyphae favoring in this way the plant growth.

16.6 Microbial Pi-Solubilization in Temperate and Tropical Soils

Currently, *P. bilaji* is commercially available in North America under the name of ProvideTM, which has been successfully tested to enhance plant Pi-uptake of some crop plants (Whitelaw 2000). However, the tests have been conducted in mollisols of low Pi-fixation capacity. In contrast, little research on PSM has been conducted in highly weathered and volcanic ash soils of the tropics with high Pi-fixation capacity. Toro et al. (1996) isolated various effective PSM from an oxisol of Venezuela. However, they were not tested in this soil from which they were originated but in a calcareous soil of Spain in which they were able to improve plant growth and Pi-uptake of tropical kudzu (*Pueraria phaseoloides*). Whitelaw et al. (1997) inoculated an acidic Pi-deficient soil of Australia (pH 4.6) with *P. radicum* in combination with several levels of KH_2PO_4 (P: 0–20 kg ha⁻¹). The inoculation with this PSF increased wheat Pi-uptake by 8% in the unfertilized soil. When the fungus was coinoculated with Pi-fertilizer, plant Pi increased between 2 and 28%; increase was highest when the rate of added P was 15 kg ha⁻¹. Young

Table 16.6 Effect of AM fungus, phosphate-solubilizing microbes and rock phosphate on peanut yield (kg ha^{-1}) in two soils of Taiwan

Treatment	Hualain soil (pH 4.2)	Yuanchang soil (pH 5.4)
Control	1,875 b (100)	3,667 c (100)
RP (660 kg ha^{-1})	2,250 a (120)	6,167 a (169)
AMF	2,350 a (125)	6,208 a (140)
PSM	2,259 a (120)	6,333 a (173)
AMF+RP	2,367 a (126)	5,125 b (140)
PSM+RP	2,275 a (121)	6,083 ab (166)

Letters indicate mean separation by Duncan's multiple range test ($P \leq 0.05$). Values in parenthesis indicate percentage increase over control.

Source: Young et al. (1990)

Table 16.7 Effect of AM fungus and phosphate solubilizing microbes on growth (g per pot) of leucaena grown in three soils of Taiwan

Treatment	Hinshe (pH 5.0; P: 2 mg kg^{-1})	Wunfun (pH 5.5; P: 3 mg kg^{-1})	Taitung (pH 7.8; P: 95 mg kg^{-1})
Control	8.4 c (100)	13.7 b (100)	22.0 b (100)
PSM	10.4 b (124)	12.9 b (94)	30.8 a (140)
AMF	13.1 a (156)	27.3 a (199)	26.8 b (122)
PSM+AMF	12.8 a (152)	26.0 a (190)	23.6 b (107)

Letters indicate mean separation by Duncan's multiple range test ($P \leq 0.05$). Values in parentheses indicate percentage increase over control.

Source: Young et al. (1990)

et al. (1990) found that inoculation with either PSM or AMF significantly increased peanut (*Arachis hypogea*) production in two subtropical-tropical acidic soils of Taiwan. Inoculation with either AMF or PSM in unfertilized soils was as effective as the addition of RP alone (Table 16.6). Inoculation with AMF or PSM of RP-fertilized soils did not increase peanut yield above that obtained with AMF or PSM inoculation in unfertilized soils. Unfortunately, dual inoculation of AMF and PSM was not evaluated. Interestingly, PSM inoculation alone increased peanut yield by 73% in the less acidic soil (Yuanchang soil), but the increase was only 20% in the strongly acidic soil (Hualain soil). In addition, Young et al. (1990) found that the responses to single or mixed inoculations with PSM and/or AMF had variable effects on plant growth of *Leucaena* grown in three soils of Taiwan. Inoculation with PSM was not as effective as AMF inoculation in enhancing plant growth in the soil with the lowest available Pi-level (Hinshe soil) (Table 16.7). In the Wunfun soil (also with a low soil available Pi-level), PSM inoculation was ineffective in increasing plant growth unlike AMF. In the alkaline soil containing the highest soil available Pi (presumably rich in calcium-phosphates), PSM inoculation alone significantly increased plant growth (40%) above the AMF inoculation effect, which did not increase growth.

Effectiveness of PSM inoculation alone to enhance plant Pi-uptake in subtropical and tropical acidic soils is relatively low and variable. The increases recorded were 8% (Whitelaw et al. 1997), 13% (Osorio and Habte 2001), and 24–25% (Young et al. 1990) compared with those reported in less weathered soils (mostly

Mollisols) of the temperate zone, where soil Pi-fixation capacity is low. By contrast, effectiveness of PSM inoculation to enhance plant Pi-uptake of mycorrhizal plants grown in tropical or subtropical soils can be relatively higher compared to data reported in temperate soils (Table 16.7). Mycorrhizal colonization in combination with PSM is often needed to obtain improvements in plant P uptake in highly weathered soils, in contrast to results obtained in less weathered soils. In these less weathered soils that normally exhibit low soil P sorption, the inoculation of PSM alone has been found effective to increase plant P-uptake of nonmycorrhizal plants (Peix et al. 2001; Omar 1998; Kucey 1983, 1987, 1988; Asea et al. 1988; Kucey et al. 1989; Gleddie 1993). Most of the soils used by these authors were mollisols, calcareous soils, or sandy soils, which are characterized by a low P-sorption capacity and relatively high soil Ca–Pi content (Cross and Schlesinger 1995). Therefore, the freshly released Pi by PSM can remain longer in the soil solution until its absorption by the roots. For instance, Toro et al. (1998) found that the PSM *Enterobacter* sp. alone was as effective as the mycorrhizal fungus *G. mosseae* when used alone, and increased the P uptake of alfalfa grown in a calcareous soil of Spain by twofold. Duponnois et al. (2006) found that single inoculation of fungus *Arthrobotrys oligospora* increased the P uptake and shoot dry weight of *Acacia holoserica* grown in a sandy soil of Senegal by 56 and 46%, respectively. The increase in plant P uptake and growth were even higher when RP was added with the PSM (74 and 103%, respectively). The application of RP alone, however, did not significantly increase growth and plant P uptake. Similar results were observed by Wakelin et al. (2004a, 2004b) for *Penicillium radicum*-inoculated wheat grown in sandy soils in Australia with neutral to alkaline soil reactivity. In these soils, Wakelin and coworkers observed increases in plant growth between 34 and 76%. Furthermore, *Penicillium thomii* has shown a threefold higher increase in plant P uptake of mint (*Mentha piperita*), grown in a soil-less medium (vermiculite–perlite) fertilized with RP compared to those observed for uninoculated plants and unfertilized control (Cabello et al. 2005). The RP alone was, however, ineffective. The impressive increase in plant P uptake is understandable given the very low P sorption on this kind of substrates.

The results obtained recently by Osorio (2008) indicate that the effectiveness of *Mortierella* sp., a phosphate-solubilizing fungus (PSF), in enhancing plant Pi-uptake and growth was controlled by the type of soil, particularly by the Pi-sorption capacity of the soil (Table 16.8). In a mollisol (low Pi-sorption capacity) *Mortierella* sp. alone was capable of increasing shoot dry weight of *Leucaena*. However, the effect was significantly higher in the presence of the mycorrhizal fungus *G. fasciculatum*. On the other hand, in two oxisols (medium Pi-sorption capacity), the PSF stimulated dry matter accumulation in shoots only in the presence of the mycorrhizal fungus. In contrast, the PSF was ineffective in increasing plant Pi-uptake in an andisol (very high P sorption capacity) even in the presence of the mycorrhizal association. The $P_{0.2}$ value (Tables 16.1 and 16.8) seems to be a good predictor of the effectiveness of PSM to increase plant Pi-uptake via Pi-desorption, RP solubilization, and Pi-uptake by mycorrhizal roots.

Table 16.8 Effect of AM fungus (AMF) and phosphate-solubilizing fungus (PSF) on growth (g per pot) of leucaena grown in three tropical soils of Colombia

Treatment	Mollisol ($P_{0.2} = 45 \text{ mg kg}^{-1}$)	Oxisol ($P_{0.2} = 417 \text{ mg kg}^{-1}$)	Andisol ($P_{0.2} = 2,222 \text{ mg kg}^{-1}$)
Control	0.73	0.32	0.26
PSF	1.18	0.30	0.28
AMF	1.36	0.84	0.28
PSF + AMF	1.48	0.97	0.26
LSD	0.09	0.12	0.09

Vertical comparisons (LSD test, $P \leq 0.05$).

Adapted from Osorio (2008)

16.7 Conclusion

One of the major limiting factors for plant productivity in the tropics is low soil Pi-availability. Phosphorus is rendered unavailable for plant uptake due to adsorption onto the surface of soil minerals and precipitation by free Al^{3+} and Fe^{3+} ions. As a result, the efficiency of Pi-fertilization becomes quite low and hence, require application of high rates of soluble P fertilizer. A viable alternative to overcome dependance on chemical phosphatic fertilizer is the use of phosphate rocks (RP), which are locally available and are cheaper. The use of rhizosphere PSM has received greater attention to increase the agronomic effectiveness of RP. The most accepted mechanism is the production and release of organic acids (e.g., citric acid, oxalic acid, gluconic acid, among others). The released protons decrease the rhizosphere pH, while the organic anions can form complex with calcium favoring thus the dissolution of RP. In addition, it has been demonstrated that organic anions produced by PSM can also desorb Pi from soil minerals. However, given the high Pi-sorption capacity in highly weathered soils of the tropics the effectiveness of PSM to increase plant Pi-uptake and growth can be low. Synergistic effects of PSM and AMF on plant nutrition, growth, and yields have been reported. This dual inoculation seems to be more relevant in the case of soil exhibiting high Pi-sorption capacity (e.g., oxisols, ultisols, andisols) that are abundant in the tropics. Further studies are, however, required in tropical soils in order to establish an effective use of PSM inoculants in a more predictable and sustainable manner.

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