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Perspective

Biosynthesis and Functions of Secondary Metabolites

Xuanqiang Liang*

Department of Agricultural Sciences, Crops Research Institute, Beijing, China

INTRODUCTION

Secondary metabolites are diverse compounds synthesized by plants, fungi and bacteria that serve various ecological functions and have significant applications in medicine, agriculture and industry. Unlike primary metabolites essential for growth and development, secondary metabolites are often produced in response to environmental stresses or to interact with other organisms. Understanding their biosynthesis and functions provides insights into their ecological roles and potential practical applications.

DESCRIPTION

Biosynthesis of secondary metabolites

The biosynthesis of secondary metabolites involves complex biochemical pathways that branch off from primary metabolic pathways. These pathways are often controlled by specific genes and enzymes, with regulation influenced by environmental cues and developmental stages. Secondary metabolites are classified into several groups based on their chemical structures, including phenolics (flavonoids, tannins), alkaloids (caffeine, nicotine), terpenoids (essential oils, carotenoids) and polyketides (anthocyanins, curcumin).

Phenolic compounds: Phenolic compounds are synthesized from phenylalanine through the phenylpropanoid pathway. This pathway produces flavonoids, lignins and tannins, which contribute to plant defense against UV radiation, pathogens and herbivores. Flavonoids also attract pollinators and seed dispersers, influencing plant reproductive success.

Alkaloids: Alkaloids derive from amino acids like tyrosine or tryptophan and are synthesized through the acetate-mevalonate pathway. They often possess pharmacological activities, such as caffeine in coffee plants (stimulant), nicotine in tobacco (insect deterrent) and morphine in opium poppy (pain relief).

Terpenoids: Terpenoids are synthesized from isoprene units *via* the mevalonate or Methylerythritol Phosphate (MEP) pathways. They include essential oils (menthol, limonene), pigments (carotenoids) and hormones (gibberellins, abscisic acid). Terpenoids function in plant defense, attraction of beneficial insects and as antioxidants.

Polyketides: Polyketides are synthesized by polyketide synthases from acetyl-CoA and malonyl-CoA. They include pigments (anthocyanins), antibiotics (tetracyclines) and anticancer agents (curcumin). Polyketides contribute to plant coloration, protection against pathogens and chemical signaling.

Functions of secondary metabolites

Secondary metabolites serve diverse ecological functions essential for plant survival and interactions with their environment:

Defense mechanisms: Many secondary metabolites function as chemical defenses against herbivores, pathogens and competing plants. For example, alkaloids and terpenoids deter herbivores by causing toxicity or altering feeding behavior. Phenolic compounds and flavonoids strengthen cell walls, inhibit microbial growth and scavenge Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS) produced during stress.

Attraction and repulsion: Secondary metabolites attract pollinators and seed dispersers, enhancing reproductive success. Floral pigments (anthocyanins), volatile terpenoids (flower scents) and nectar phenolics (flavonoids) attract pollinators like bees and butterflies. Conversely, some compounds repel herbivores or competing plants, reducing predation or resource competition.

Allelopathy: Some secondary metabolites inhibit the growth of neighboring plants, a phenomenon known as allelopathy. Allelochemicals like terpenoids and phenolics are released into the soil or air, suppressing seed germination or root growth of competing species, thereby promoting the dominance of certain plant species in ecosystems.

Medicinal and pharmaceutical uses: Secondary metabolites have significant pharmacological properties, making them valuable sources of medicines and drug leads. Examples include the anticancer compound taxol from yew trees (*Taxus* spp.), the pain-relieving morphine from opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) and the antimalarial artemisinin from *Artemisia annua*.

Correspondence to: Xuanqiang Liang, Department of Agricultural Sciences, Crops Research Institute, Beijing, China; E-mail: liang@gmail.com

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Industrial applications: Secondary metabolites find applications in various industries, such as food additives (flavorings, colorants), cosmetics (fragrances, antioxidants) and agriculture (biopesticides, plant growth regulators). Essential oils from aromatic plants and dyes from plant pigments are examples of commercially valuable secondary metabolites.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, secondary metabolites are diverse compounds synthesized by plants, fungi and bacteria that play essential roles in ecological interactions, defense mechanisms and human applications. Their biosynthesis pathways are intricately regulated and influenced by environmental cues, highlighting their adaptive significance in plant survival and adaptation. Exploiting their functional diversity offers opportunities for sustainable agriculture, drug discovery and industrial innovation, ensuring their continued relevance in biological research and practical applications.