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BEYOND GREEN: THE SURPRISING DIVERSITY OF PLANT PIGMENTS AND THEIR ROLES

Email

prati.6068@gmail.com

Prathibha M.D.

Division of Basic Sciences, ICAR-Indian Institute of Horticultural Research, Bengaluru-560065, India

Plants, the primary producers, utilize sunlight in the photosynthesis process, converting it into chemical energy. Key to this conversion is chlorophyll, a green pigment that captures light energy and kick-starts carbohydrate synthesis. However, plants boast a wide array of pigments beyond chlorophyll, each with distinct properties and roles. These pigments lend vibrant hues to flowers, fruits, and leaves, enhancing the natural world's visual appeal (Lee, 2017). Plant pigments serve multiple functions—they regulate photosynthesis, plant growth, and development, attract pollinators like insects, birds, and animals, aid in seed dispersal, and shield plants from UV and visible light damage (Lev-Yadun, 2016). Many pigment-rich fruits are integral to the human diet. Chlorophylls, carotenoids, flavonoids, and betalains constitute major plant pigments. While chlorophylls drive photosynthesis, the other three act as supplementary pigments and secondary metabolites, offering diverse structures and functions in plants⁵. For more insights into these pigments, explore further at this link.

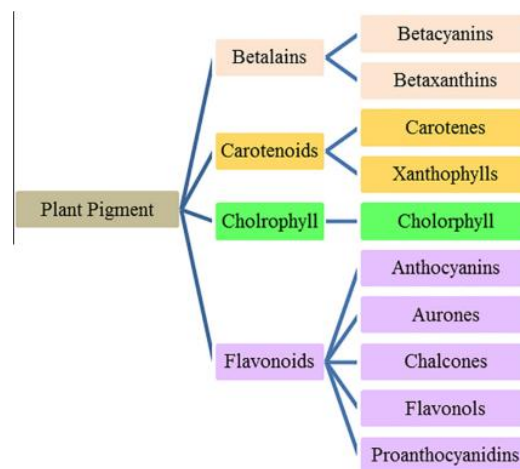


Fig.1: Types of plant pigment system

i. Chlorophylls

Chlorophyll, the vibrant green pigment nestled within plant chloroplasts, serves as the cornerstone of photosynthesis, the remarkable process enabling plants to harness sunlight and convert it into vital chemical energy. Acting as nature's solar panels, chlorophyll molecules absorb light, particularly in the red and blue spectrums, while reflecting the green wavelengths that give plants their distinctive color (Scholes, Fleming, Olaya-Castro, & Van Grondelle, 2011). This absorbed light energy initiates a transformative journey within plants, powering the intricate dance of photosynthesis. Chlorophyll plays a pivotal role in this process, facilitating the conversion of light energy into usable chemical forms, essential for the production of glucose from carbon dioxide and water. Its involvement in splitting water molecules releases oxygen into the atmosphere, a crucial byproduct supporting life on our planet. Beyond sustaining plant growth and development, chlorophyll acts as a health indicator, with its presence and quantity reflecting a plant's vigor (Swoczyna, Kalaji, Bussotti, Mojski, & Pollastrini, 2022). Sensitivity to temperature changes and its role in photoprotection further underscore its significance in ensuring plant vitality. Chlorophyll's profound function extends far beyond its role as a pigment, it's a key player in the intricate web of life, fueling the very foundation of our ecosystems and sustaining life as we know it.

ii. Carotenoids

Carotenoids, found in plants, are crucial pigments that perform various essential functions beyond providing vibrant colors to fruits and vegetables. These compounds serve as key players in photosynthesis, complementing chlorophylls by capturing light across a wider spectrum. This aids in efficient energy production for plants. Additionally, carotenoids act as powerful antioxidants, shielding plant cells from damage caused by excess light and reactive oxygen species. They also contribute to hormone synthesis vital for plant growth and help plants endure stressful conditions (Swapnil, Meena, Singh, Dhuldhaj, & Marwal, 2021). Nutritionally, carotenoids offer valuable benefits, serving as precursors to essential vitamins and supporting human health. Their diverse roles underscore their significance in plant biology, ecosystem resilience, and human nutrition.

iii. Anthocyanins

Anthocyanins, a subgroup of flavonoids, are vibrant pigments responsible for the red, purple, and blue colors seen in various parts of plants, such as leaves, flowers, fruits, and

stems. Beyond their visual allure, anthocyanins play diverse and essential roles in plants. These pigments act as a defense mechanism against various environmental stresses, including UV radiation and extreme temperatures. They function as antioxidants, helping plants combat oxidative stress caused by factors like high light intensity or pollution. Anthocyanins also attract pollinators and seed dispersers through their vivid colors, aiding in reproduction (Liu et al., 2018). Moreover, they contribute to regulating plant growth and development, impacting traits like leaf coloration, fruit ripening, and even resistance to pathogens. Their multifaceted role in plant physiology highlights the significance of anthocyanins not only in adding visual beauty to the natural world but also in ensuring plant health, resilience, and successful reproduction (Pervaiz, Songtao, Faghihi, Haider, & Fang, 2017).

iv. Betalains

Betalains represent a unique class of pigments found in some plants, primarily in the order Caryophyllales, and are responsible for providing vibrant red, violet, and yellow hues to various plant tissues, such as flowers, fruits, and stems (Khan & Giridhar, 2015). Unlike other common plant pigments like chlorophylls and carotenoids, betalains do not coexist with them in the same plant tissues. These pigments possess antioxidant properties, aiding in protecting plant tissues from oxidative stress induced by environmental factors like excessive sunlight or pollutants. Additionally, betalains are believed to play a role in the plant's defense mechanisms against pathogens and herbivores, although further research is ongoing to elucidate their precise functions in this regard. Moreover, betalains have attracted attention due to their potential health benefits for humans. Some studies suggest that betalains may possess anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and potentially even anti-cancer properties (Rahimi, Abedimanesh, Mesbah-Namin, & Ostadrahimi, 2019). Consequently, certain betalain-rich fruits and vegetables are considered valuable additions to the human diet, contributing to overall health and well-being.

v. Flavonoids

Flavonoids, a diverse class of plant secondary metabolites, play multifaceted roles in the physiology and defense mechanisms of plants. These compounds are renowned for their vibrant pigmentation, contributing to the rich colors of flowers, fruits, and leaves. Beyond their visual allure, flavonoids serve pivotal functions in plants. They act as UV filters, shielding plants from the harmful effects of ultraviolet radiation, thus preventing DNA damage and cell degradation. Additionally, flavonoids participate in plant defense against

various stresses, including pathogens and herbivores, by acting as antioxidants and antimicrobial agents. Their antioxidant properties help neutralize harmful free radicals, protecting plant cells from oxidative stress. Moreover, flavonoids aid in signaling processes, influencing plant growth, development, and reproduction (Samanta, Das, & Das, 2011). They also play a role in regulating auxin transport, affecting plant hormone levels crucial for growth and organ development. Furthermore, these compounds contribute to plant-pollinator interactions, attracting beneficial insects and animals for pollination and seed dispersal through their appealing colors and scents. Overall, flavonoids showcase a remarkable versatility in plants, offering protection, support in growth and reproduction, and fostering ecological interactions essential for plant survival and propagation.

vi. Phycobilins

Phycobilins, pigment molecules found in certain photosynthetic organisms like cyanobacteria, red algae, and some cryptophytes, serve pivotal roles in photosynthesis. These pigments play a crucial role in capturing light energy in regions of the spectrum where chlorophylls are less efficient, such as in deep water or low-light environments. They absorb light wavelengths that chlorophylls cannot, transferring this energy to chlorophyll for photosynthesis. Phycobilins also act as antenna pigments, funneling captured light energy towards the photosystems within cells, enhancing the overall efficiency of photosynthesis in these organisms (Stadnichuk & Kusnetsov, 2023). Additionally, their unique spectral properties make them valuable tools in various scientific fields, including fluorescence microscopy and biotechnology applications. These pigments, by expanding the range of light absorption and energy transfer in photosynthetic organisms, contribute significantly to their survival and productivity in diverse environmental conditions.

Conclusion

The diverse array of plant pigments reveals their critical roles beyond adding vibrant colors to our natural world. Chlorophyll, the cornerstone of photosynthesis, powers plants' conversion of sunlight into chemical energy, sustaining life as we know it. Carotenoids complement chlorophylls, contributing to energy production, acting as antioxidants, and supporting plant growth. Anthocyanins, vibrant pigments in red, purple, and blue hues, offer defense against stress, aid in reproduction, and regulate growth. Betalains, known for their striking colors, safeguard plants from environmental stress and potentially provide health benefits for humans. Flavonoids, versatile compounds, protect against UV radiation, defend

against pathogens, and aid in signaling and pollination. Phycobilins, found in specific photosynthetic organisms, optimize light capture and energy transfer, essential for survival. These pigments collectively underscore the intricate balance and resilience of plants, influencing ecosystem dynamics, human nutrition, and scientific advancements. Understanding their roles unlocks the potential for sustainable agriculture, ecological preservation, and innovative applications in various fields.

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