

PLANT SCIENCE RESEARCH AND PRACTICES

Plants and Microbes in an Ever-Changing Environment

Satya Shila Singh
Editor



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ISBN: 978-1-53610-928-3

Categories: **Biology, Life Sciences, Microbiology, Plant Science Research and Practices**

Tags: **9781536109184, 9781536109283, microbiology**

Table of Contents	Additional information	Help
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Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Preface

Chapter 1. Bioremediation Potential of Soil Fungi in Arsenic Contaminated Soils

Vivek Kumar Singh, Chandra Bali Patel, Arti Tiwari, Punam Kumari and Ram Sanmukh Upadhyay (Centre of Advanced Study in Botany, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India)

Chapter 2. Biodiversity of Indian Medicinal Plants as a Source for Anticancer Drugs

Kavindra Nath Tiwari, Awadhesh Kumar Mishra, Chandrashekhar Singh, Pradeep Kumar, and Jasmeet Singh (Department of Botany, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India, and others)

Chapter 3. Bioremediation of Airborne Hazardous Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCS)

Sudhir Kumar Pandey, Triratnesh Gajbhiye, Sweta Tiwari and Tanzil Gaffar Malik (Department of Botany, School of Life Sciences, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalya, Bilaspur, India)

Chapter 4. How Microbial Consortium Enhances the Stress Tolerance in Plants During Various Environmental Conditions

Shatrupa Ray, Sudheer Kumar Yadav, Birinchi Kumar Sarma, Harikesh Bahadur Singh, and Surendra Singh (Department of Botany, Institute of Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India, and others)

Chapter 5. Deciphering the Basis of Salt Tolerance and Agricultural Utility of Frankia Strains Isolated from Hippophae salicifolia D. Don

Amrita Srivastavaa (Life Science Programme, Central University of South Bihar, Patna, India)



Chapter 6. NtcA Transcriptional Factor: A Global Nitrogen Regulator and Connecting Link Between Nitrogen

Botany, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India)

Chapter 7. Prospects of Antibiotic Producing Microorganisms in Agriculture

Pragya Saxena, Alok Kumar Srivastava, Prem Lal Kashyap, and Hillol Chakdar (National Bureau of Agriculturally Important Microorganisms, Kusmaur, Maunath Bhanjan, India)

Chapter 8. Alleviation of Drought Stress in Plants through Microbial Interventions

Richa Raghuwanshi, Shilpam Sinha and Sandeep Kumar Gupta (Department of Botany, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India)

Chapter 9. Aluminium Toxicity and Defence Mechanisms in Plants

Sindhunath Chakraborty, Satya Shila Singh, Ekta Verma, Balkrishna Tiwari, and Arun Kumar Mishra (Laboratory of Microbial Genetics, Department of Botany, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India, and others)

Chapter 10. Iron Uptake Strategies, Transportation and Storage Relevant to Plants and Microorganisms

Kikku Kunui, Robin Anigo Minj and Satya Shila Singh (Department of Botany, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India)

Chapter 11. Genomic Revolution in Crop Disease Diagnosis: A Review

Shikha Sharma, Pallavi Rai, Shalini Rai, Madhumita Srivastava, Prem Lal Kashyap, Abhishek Sharma, and Sudheer Kumar (Department of Plant Pathology, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana (Punjab), India, and others)

Chapter 12. Cyanobacterial Taxonomy and Systematics: A Brief Review

Prashant Singh (Microbial Culture Collection (MCC), National Centre for Cell Science (NCCS), Pune, India)

Chapter 13. Advancements in the Physiological and Biochemical Characterization of Cyanobionts from the Aquatic Pteridophyte Azolla

Ravindra Kumar Yadav, Pawan Kumar Singh, Pramod Wasudeo Ramteke, Keshawanad Tripathi, and Gerard Abraham (Centre for Conservation and Utilization of BGA, Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi, India, and others)

Chapter 14. Molecular Mechanisms of Heavy Metal Resistance in Bacteria

Vibhay Nath Tripathi (Department of Botany, Guru Ghasidas University, Bilaspur, India)

Chapter 15. Plants and Microbes Diversity at High Altitude

Vineeta Dixit and Dhananjay Shukla (DLS PG College, Ashok Nagar, Sarkanda, Bilaspur (CG), India, and others)

Chapter 16. Microbes and Cancer: A Mutual Intimacy



Shalini Singh (Department of Botany, Kamla Nehru Institute of Physical and Social Sciences, Sultanpur, India)

Chapter 18. Efficacy Assessment of Cyanobacterial Biofertilizer in Maize Cropping in Indo-Gangetic Plains

Usha Pandey and Jitendra Pandey (Department of Botany, Faculty of Science and Technology, Mahatma Gandhi Kashividyapith University, Varanasi, India, and others)

Chapter 19. Biochemical Mobilization of Cyanobacteria Towards Sustainable Development

Kaushal K. Choudhary, Guddi Kumari and Ranjana Kumari (Department of Botany, Dr Jagannath Mishra College (Affiliated to B.R. Ambedkar Bihar University, Muzaffarpur), Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India, and others)

Chapter 20. Plant-Bacterial Interactions and Sustainable Crop Production: Physiological and Molecular Mechanisms

Ekta Verma, Savita Singh, Sindhunath Chakraborty, Niveshika and Arun Kumar Mishra (Department of Botany, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India)

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Index

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Chapter 14

MOLECULAR MECHANISMS OF HEAVY METAL RESISTANCE IN BACTERIA

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ABSTRACT

Metals are an integral part of all ecosystems, occurring in elemental as well as locked in an ore form. On the basis of their density, metals are divided in to two groups. Metals with density more than 5g/cm^3 are called heavy metals while those with density less than 5g/cm^3 are called light metals. Heavy metals are often required by the cell in trace amount for different biochemical reactions; however, at higher concentrations they can have toxic effects. The cell may use the low concentrations of some heavy metals (such as iron, copper and nickel) in redox reactions, or other heavy metal ions (such as magnesium or zinc) to stabilize electrostatic forces, in enzymes and DNA binding proteins. Many ions (including Fe^{2+} , Mg^{2+} , Ni^{2+} and Co^{2+}) also form complex compounds such as iron-sulfur clusters that have diverse functions. The mechanism of metal ions toxicity can be divided in to three main categories, according to whether the metal ion (1) block essential functional groups of biological molecules, (2) displace an essential metal ion in biomolecules, or (3) modify the active confirmation of biomolecules. Heavy metals can also interfere with the metabolism of a structurally related metal, since the cellular metal binding sites are never entirely specific for a single metal and metals with similar structure and charge can often bind competitively. The occurrence of highly concentrated pockets and the concentration build-up of many metals in the environment have provided a selection pressure for the evolution of metal resistance mechanisms in many life forms and a number of such examples are commonly found in bacterial kingdom too. The genes responsible for encoding these mechanisms of heavy metal resistance in bacteria are often found on plasmids. Moreover since metals are hardly ever present in isolation, this usually gets reflected in multi-metal resistance phenotype. There is no single mechanism for resistance to all heavy metals in bacteria. The important mechanisms proposed for heavy metal resistance in bacteria and other microorganisms are as follows: active efflux, intracellular physical sequestration, extracellular sequestration or bioprecipitation,

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