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Recent Advances in Plant-Water Relationship for Developing Climate-Resilient Cultivars

*Alka[1], Dr. Arunima Paliwal[1], Dr. Gargi Goswami[2], Diksha Negi[1] and Sargam Kumola[1]
[1]Veer Chandra Singh Garhwali Uttarakhand University of Horticulture and Forestry, College of Hill Agriculture, Chirbatiya, India
[2]College of Horticulture, VCSGUUHF, Bharsar, Pauri, Garhwal, Uttarakhand, India
*Corresponding Author's email: alkar370@gmail.com

Climate change has exacerbated abiotic stresses such as drought, salinity, heat waves and erratic rainfall patterns, leading to major challenges in sustainable crop production worldwide. Among the multitude of stressors, inadequate water availability is a dominant factor constraining plant growth, yield stability and agricultural sustainability. The plant-water relationship encompassing water uptake, transport and cellular regulation is central to plant resilience under variable climatic conditions. Recent research has revealed significant progress in understanding physiological and molecular adaptations that enhance water relations in plants. This article reviews three major advances in plant-water relationship research: osmoregulation, aquaporins and rhizosphere engineering, with emphasis on their roles in developing climate-resilient cultivars.

Osmoregulation: A Key Adaptation to Water Stress

Fundamentals of Osmoregulation

Osmoregulation refers to the process by which plants maintain cellular water balance and turgor under stressful conditions such as drought and salinity. Water deficit leads to decreased soil water potential, forcing plant cells to adjust their internal osmotic potential to maintain water uptake and avoid dehydration. Plants achieve this by accumulating compatible solutes (osmolytes) such as proline, glycine betaine, sugars and polyols, which do not interfere with metabolic processes but contribute to lowering the cellular osmotic potential. This mechanism helps sustain cell turgor and metabolic activity under stress **(IJFMR, 2025).**

Physiological Impacts of Osmoregulation

Under drought stress, reduced soil moisture limits water absorption, adversely affecting nutrient diffusion and uptake. Accumulated osmolytes play a dual role: they enhance water uptake by lowering cellular osmotic potential and they stabilize proteins and membranes against stress-induced damage. For example, proline has been shown to protect root growth by maintaining enzymatic functions and cell wall flexibility in dry soils. Similarly, glycine betaine enhances photosystem stability during dehydration, improving overall water stress tolerance **(IJFMR, 2025).**

Salinity stress creates an external hyperosmotic environment that both reduces water availability and causes ion toxicity. Excess sodium ions (Na^+) compete with potassium ions (K^+), disrupting ionic balance crucial for enzyme activities and cellular homeostasis. Plants respond by restricting Na^+ accumulation, enhancing K^+ uptake and synthesizing osmolytes to maintain osmotic balance. Thus, osmoregulation is crucial not only for drought resilience but also for salt tolerance, which is vital given the increasing salinization of agricultural lands due to climate change.

Molecular Regulation of Osmoregulation

Advances in molecular biology have identified key genes and transcription factors associated with osmotic adjustment pathways. For instance, genes encoding enzymes in proline biosynthesis (e.g., P_5CS) are upregulated under drought and salinity, driving osmolyte accumulation. Genetic engineering approaches that overexpress such genes have shown enhanced drought tolerance in transgenic plants, suggesting potential routes for developing climate-resilient cultivars. However, the complex regulation of osmoregulation necessitates integrated studies that couple gene expression with whole-plant physiology.

Aquaporins: Dynamic Regulators of Water Flow

Aquaporin Structure and Function

Aquaporins are integral membrane proteins belonging to the major intrinsic protein (MIP) superfamily. They facilitate rapid and regulated transport of water molecules across biological membranes, significantly contributing to cellular and whole-plant water balance. Aquaporins are classified into subfamilies such as plasma membrane intrinsic proteins (PIPs), tonoplast intrinsic proteins (TIPs), nodulin-26 like proteins (NIPs) and others, each with specific localization and functions **(Maurel *et al.*, 2020).**

Aquaporins operate by forming tetrameric water-permeable channels and adjusting their activity through gating mechanisms influenced by phosphorylation, pH, divalent cations and reactive oxygen species. This highly regulated mechanism enables plants to fine-tune water transport in response to environmental cues.

Role in Plant Water Relations and Drought Tolerance

Research has established the pivotal role of aquaporins in plant hydraulic conductance-the movement of water from soil through roots to stems and leaves. Aquaporin activity can account for significant proportions of water transport efficiency in roots. For instance, drought conditions alter aquaporin expression and activity, affecting radial water movement and overall plant water uptake capacity **(Chaumont & Tyerman, 2014).**

In rice (*Oryza sativa*), aquaporin contribution to root hydraulic conductivity increased under drought stress, suggesting that these channels adaptively regulate water fluxes during stress periods. Aquaporin expression levels were correlated with variations in root water transport and drought tolerance across diversified rice varieties, indicating their functional importance in developing drought-resilient rice cultivars.

Moreover, aquaporins also mediate conductance in stems and leaves, influencing stomatal behaviour and transpiration rates. They serve as checkpoints that coordinate water uptake with evaporative demand, thus maintaining water use efficiency under stress. Aquaporins have also been implicated in facilitating CO_2 transport, linking water relations directly to photosynthetic performance under water-limited conditions.

Genomic Resources and Breeding Implications

With the development of genomic tools, researchers have catalogued numerous aquaporin genes across plant species. In rice, investigators identified hundreds of aquaporin-encoding genes, revealing diverse regulatory regions and stress-responsive promoter elements. This genomic resource forms a valuable foundation for genomics-assisted breeding aimed at enhancing water-use efficiency and stress tolerance in rice and other crops.

Biotechnological interventions, such as gene editing (e.g., CRISPR/Cas9) or transgenic overexpression of specific aquaporins, offer potential strategies to tailor crop water relations for future climates. Such innovations could optimize hydraulic conductance without compromising growth, thereby producing cultivars capable of enduring prolonged droughts or fluctuating water availability.

Rhizosphere Engineering: Harnessing the Microbial Interface

The Rhizosphere as a Critical Zone

The rhizosphere the soil zone immediately surrounding plant roots is a dynamic interface where plants interact with soil biota, nutrients and water. Engineering the rhizosphere involves manipulating this microenvironment to enhance plant stress tolerance, nutrient acquisition and water use efficiency.

Beneficial microbes, such as plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) and mycorrhizal fungi, contribute significantly to plant resilience. These microbes colonize root surfaces and the adjoining soil, mediating stress tolerance through various mechanisms including hormone production, nutrient solubilization and improved water relations.

Role of PGPR and Microbial Interactions

Recent advances in PGPR research have highlighted the multifaceted ways in which these microbes assist plants under drought and salinity stress. PGPR strains produce phytohormones like indole-3-acetic acid (IAA), which stimulates root elongation and branching, improving soil exploration and water acquisition. Some PGPR also synthesize exopolysaccharides that improve soil aggregation and water retention around roots, thereby reducing water stress on plants.

Microbial conditioning of the rhizosphere has demonstrated lasting effects on plant water use traits. For example, soil microbiomes shaped under drought conditions enhance subsequent plant responses to water deficit by promoting root traits such as longer roots and higher soil dissolved organic carbon, which help conserve water in the rhizosphere.

Further, symbiotic relationships with mycorrhizal fungi enhance access to water and nutrients deep in the soil profile. Mycorrhizae extend the effective root area through fungal hyphae, facilitating water and nutrient uptake beyond the root depletion zone. These interactions are particularly valuable under drought conditions when water is scarce near the root surface.

Rhizosphere Engineering for Climate Resilience

Engineering the rhizosphere encompasses both biological and agronomic strategies. Inoculation of crops with selected PGPR or mycorrhizal fungi can be integrated into seed treatments, soil amendments or biofertilizer formulations tailored for drought or salinity prone environments. Moreover, molecular insights into plant-microbe signalling pathways have revealed how plants recruit beneficial microbes under stress, opening avenues for breeding cultivars with enhanced recruitment capacity.

Recent research has further explored genetic engineering of microbes themselves to improve their stress-adaptive functions, such as enhancing phytohormone production or nutrient solubilization. Combining microbe engineering with plant breeding promises synergistic improvements in climate resilience.

Synergies and Integrated Approaches

A holistic approach to plant-water relations integrates osmotic regulation mechanisms, aquaporin function and rhizosphere engineering. These components do not act in isolation. For example, osmotic adjustment enhances cellular water retention, aquaporins regulate water transport and rhizosphere microbes influence root hydraulics through structural and biochemical modulations. Breeding programs that consider these interlinked processes will yield cultivars better suited to unpredictable climatic conditions.

Furthermore, advanced phenotyping and modelling tools such as root phenomics, imaging technologies and systems biology frameworks can accelerate the identification of key traits and their genetic determinants. This multi-disciplinary integration is crucial to address the complexity of plant responses to combined stresses, such as drought and heat.

Conclusion

Understanding and enhancing the plant-water relationship is paramount to sustaining agricultural productivity in the face of climate change. Advances in elucidating mechanisms of osmoregulation, aquaporin-mediated water transport and rhizosphere engineering represent promising avenues toward developing climate-resilient cultivars. Continued research leveraging genomics, biotechnology and soil microbial ecology will advance crop breeding and cultivation strategies, thereby enhancing food security in an increasingly water-limited world.

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