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Photorespiration and Photosynthetic Adaptations in Plants

*Simran[1], Aditya Kumar Giri[1], Shivam Singh[1] and Dr. Ankit Singh Bhadauria[2]
[1]M.Sc. Ag. (Hort.) Vegetable Science, C.S.J.M. University, Kanpur (U.P.), India
[2]Subject Matter Specialist (Horticulture), Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Kasganj (U.P.), India
*Corresponding Author's email: vsimran18112@gmail.com

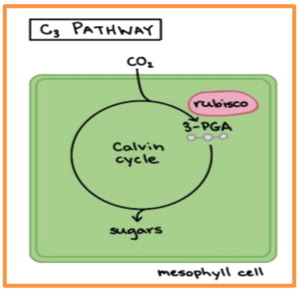
Producing enough food for a growing population depends heavily on how efficiently plants can convert carbon dioxide into sugars. Unfortunately, this process is not always efficient. One major reason is photorespiration, a metabolic pathway that reduces crop productivity globally. In fact, photorespiration alone is responsible for yield losses of around 20% in wheat and more than 36% in soybean. These losses make photorespiration an important issue for agriculture and food security.

Photorespiration and the Role of RuBisCO

Photorespiration begins with a simple mistake made by RuBisCO, the enzyme responsible for fixing CO_2 in the Calvin cycle. Although RuBisCO normally binds CO_2, it can also react with O_2. When this happens, the plant loses previously fixed carbon and spends energy without producing sugars. This problem becomes more severe when plants close their stomata to conserve water, as internal CO_2 levels fall and O_2 becomes more competitive. High temperatures further increase the oxygen-binding activity of RuBisCO, making photorespiration especially damaging in warm climates.

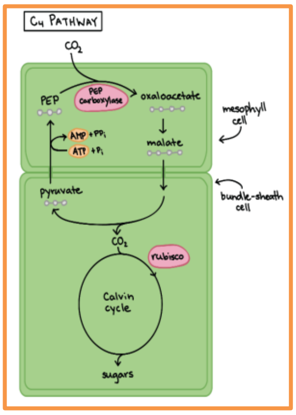
C_3 Photosynthesis: The Conventional Carbon Fixation Pathway

Most plant species, known as C_3 plants, rely entirely on this conventional pathway of carbon fixation. In these plants, CO_2 enters the leaf and is immediately fixed by RuBisCO in the mesophyll cells, producing a 3-carbon compound called 3-phosphoglycerate. About 85% of all plant species, including rice, wheat, soybean and most trees follow this pathway. While C_3 photosynthesis works well under cool and moist conditions, it becomes inefficient in hot or dry environments where photorespiration is high.



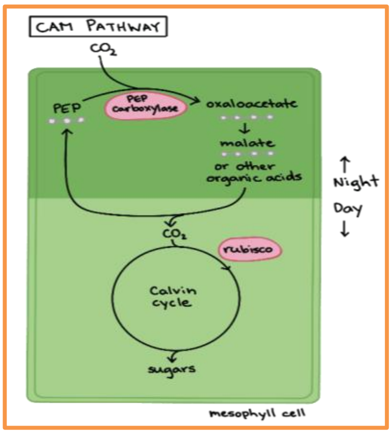
C_4 Photosynthesis: Spatial Separation to Minimize Photorespiration

Some plants have evolved clever ways to reduce these losses. C_4 plants, for example, use a spatial separation of processes to keep RuBisCO away from oxygen. In these plants, CO_2 is first fixed in the mesophyll cells by an enzyme called PEP carboxylase, which does not react with oxygen. This step produces a 4-carbon compound that is transported to the bundle-sheath cells, where carbon dioxide is released in high concentration and then fixed by RuBisCO through the Calvin cycle. Although this system requires extra energy, it greatly reduces photorespiration. As a result, C_4 plants such as maize, sugarcane and sorghum perform exceptionally well in hot or dry environments.



CAM Photosynthesis: Temporal Separation for Water Conservation

Plants living in extremely dry habitats face an additional challenge: conserving water. To meet this challenge, some species use crassulacean acid metabolism (CAM), which separates carbon fixation and sugar production in time rather than space. CAM plants open their stomata at night, when temperatures are cooler and humidity is higher, allowing CO_2 to enter with minimal water loss. The CO_2 is temporarily stored in the form of organic acids. During the day, when the stomata remain closed, these acids are broken down to release CO_2 for photosynthesis. This strategy allows CAM plants such as cacti and pineapple to photosynthesize efficiently while using very little water.



Conclusion

In summary, C_3, C_4 and CAM pathways represent different solutions to the same problem: how to capture carbon efficiently while minimizing energy loss and water stress. C_3 plants thrive in cool, moist environments, while C_4 and CAM plants are better suited to hot and dry conditions. The repeated evolution of C_4 and CAM photosynthesis across many plant lineages shows just how effective these strategies are. Understanding these natural adaptations not only deepens our knowledge of plant biology but also offers valuable insights for improving crop performance under changing climatic conditions.