



AGRI MAGAZINE

(International E-Magazine for Agricultural Articles)

Volume: 03, Issue: 03 (March, 2026)

Available online at <http://www.agrimagazine.in>

© Agri Magazine, ISSN: 3048-8656

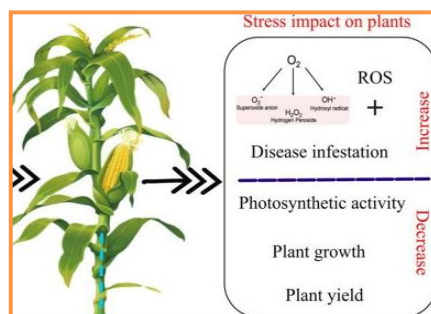
Metabolomics: Reading the Silent Signals of Sick Plants

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Plant diseases arise from intricate interactions between the host plant and invading pathogens such as fungi, bacteria, and viruses. These interactions trigger a series of biochemical changes within the plant system. **Plant metabolomics** provides a powerful approach to study these changes by analyzing the complete set of metabolites present in a plant at a given time. It reflects the **actual physiological and pathological condition** of the plant.

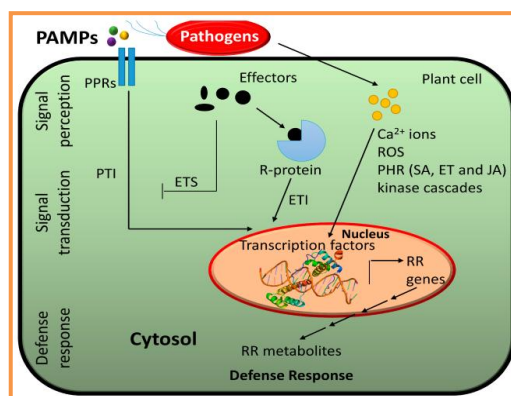


What is Metabolomics?

Metabolomics is the comprehensive and quantitative study of **metabolites**, which are low molecular weight compounds such as sugars, amino acids, organic acids, lipids, and secondary metabolites like phenols and alkaloids. In diseased plants, metabolomics helps in identifying **specific metabolic signatures** associated with pathogen attack.

How metabolomics helps in studying plant diseases?

- 1. Early Disease Detection:** Metabolomics detects subtle changes in sugars, amino acids, and organic acids, enabling identification of infections before visible symptoms appear. **Example:** Increase in specific amino acids in plants infected with *Fusarium sps*.
- 2. Disease Biomarkers:** It identifies unique metabolic fingerprints where specific metabolites act as biomarkers for accurate disease diagnosis and large-scale screening. **Example:** Accumulation of **sakuranetin** is a biomarker for *rice blast* disease caused by *Magnaporthe oryzae*.
- 3. Plant Defense Mechanisms:** It reveals plant responses such as phytoalexin production, increased phenolics/flavonoids, and activation of defense pathways like salicylic acid. **Example:** In grapevine infected with *Plasmopara viticola*, increased **resveratrol** (a phytoalexin) is observed.
- 4. Plant-Pathogen Interaction:** It helps understand disease progression by identifying pathogen toxins and host metabolic alterations during infection. **Example:** In *Alternaria* infection, toxins like **alternaric acid** alter host metabolism and cause disease symptoms.
- 5. Resistance vs Susceptibility:** It differentiates resistant and susceptible varieties based on the level and efficiency of defense metabolite production.



Example: Resistant wheat varieties show higher **phenolic compounds** against *rust disease* compared to susceptible ones.

6. **Disease Progression Monitoring:** It tracks metabolic changes across stages of infection, from early invasion to active disease and recovery.

Example: In *powdery mildew* of cucumber, gradual increase in sugars and decrease in chlorophyll-related metabolites is observed during progression.

7. **Disease Management Strategies:** It supports development of biocontrol and metabolite-based treatments, aiding precision agriculture approaches.

Example: Use of **jasmonic acid sprays** induces defense metabolites to control fungal infections.

8. **Integration with Omics:** It complements genomics and proteomics to provide a holistic understanding of plant disease biology.

Example: In *Arabidopsis Pseudomonas* interaction, integrating omics reveals salicylic acid-mediated resistance pathways.

Methods of Plant Disease Detection in Metabolomics

Mass Spectrometry-Based Techniques (MS)

Mass spectrometry is the most widely used detection method in plant metabolomics due to its high sensitivity and ability to analyze a large number of metabolites simultaneously. It works by measuring the mass-to-charge ratio of metabolites and is often coupled with separation techniques. **LC-MS (Liquid Chromatography–Mass Spectrometry)** is ideal for detecting polar and non-volatile compounds such as phenolics and flavonoids, while **GC-MS (Gas Chromatography–Mass Spectrometry)** is used for volatile and thermally stable compounds like sugars and organic acids. These techniques are crucial for identifying disease-related metabolic changes.

Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) Spectroscopy

NMR spectroscopy detects metabolites based on the magnetic properties of atomic nuclei. It is a non-destructive method requiring minimal sample preparation and provides detailed structural information about metabolites. This technique is particularly useful in studying metabolic variations in plants under pathogen stress and helps in identifying unknown compounds involved in disease response.

Chromatographic Techniques (HPLC & GC)

Chromatographic methods such as **High-Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC)** and **Gas Chromatography (GC)** are used to separate complex mixtures of metabolites before detection. HPLC separates compounds based on polarity, whereas GC separates volatile substances. These techniques improve the accuracy and resolution of metabolite detection in diseased plant samples.

Capillary Electrophoresis (CE)

Capillary electrophoresis separates metabolites based on their charge and size, making it particularly effective for analyzing ionic compounds like amino acids and organic acids. It provides high-resolution separation and is useful in studying metabolic changes during plant–pathogen interactions.

Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR)

FTIR detects metabolites based on molecular vibrations and functional groups present in compounds. It is a rapid and cost-effective technique that provides a metabolic fingerprint of plant tissues, allowing differentiation between healthy and diseased plants.

Imaging Techniques (MALDI-MSI)

Advanced imaging methods such as **Matrix-Assisted Laser Desorption Ionization Mass Spectrometry Imaging (MALDI-MSI)** enable visualization of the spatial distribution of metabolites within plant tissues. This helps in identifying where specific defense compounds accumulate at infection sites, providing insights into localized plant responses.

Targeted and Untargeted Approaches

Metabolomics studies can be classified into **targeted** and **untargeted** approaches. Targeted metabolomics focuses on quantifying specific known metabolites such as salicylic acid

involved in plant defense, while untargeted metabolomics analyzes the entire metabolome to discover new biomarkers and unknown compounds associated with plant diseases.

Limitations

1. **Complex Metabolome:** The plant metabolome is highly complex and varies with species, tissue, and environment.
2. **Metabolite Identification Issue:** Lack of complete databases makes identification of unknown metabolites difficult.
3. **High Cost:** Advanced instruments like LC-MS and NMR are expensive and require skilled operation.
4. **Sample Preparation Sensitivity:** Improper handling can lead to degradation or loss of metabolites.
5. **Data Complexity:** Generates large datasets requiring advanced bioinformatics tools for analysis.
6. **Low Reproducibility:** Results vary due to environmental and experimental conditions.
7. **Quantification Limitations:** Accurate quantification of all metabolites is challenging, especially in untargeted studies.
8. **Lack of Standardization:** No universal protocols lead to variability in results across studies.
9. **Biological Interpretation Difficulty:** Linking metabolites directly to disease pathways is complex.
10. **Time-Consuming:** The entire process from sampling to analysis is labor-intensive and slow.

Future line of work

1. Development of early and precise metabolic biomarkers for rapid disease detection.
2. Integration of metabolomics with other omics for holistic plant disease analysis.
3. Application of AI and machine learning for predictive disease modeling.
4. Use in precision agriculture for real-time plant health monitoring.
5. Support in breeding disease-resistant and climate-resilient crop varieties.

Conclusion

Plant metabolomics has emerged as a transformative tool in plant pathology by offering deep insights into the biochemical alterations that occur during plant–pathogen interactions. By enabling early disease detection, identification of specific biomarkers, and understanding of plant defense mechanisms, metabolomics bridges the gap between genotype and phenotype. It not only enhances our knowledge of disease progression but also supports the development of innovative and eco-friendly disease management strategies. Despite challenges such as high cost, data complexity, and limited standardization, continuous advancements in analytical technologies and bioinformatics are making metabolomics more accessible and precise. In the future, integration of metabolomics with other omics approaches will play a crucial role in achieving sustainable agriculture and effective plant disease management.

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