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Nature's Nitrogen Factory: The Molecular Story Behind Rhizobium Nodule Formation and Biological Nitrogen Fixation

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Nitrogen is often regarded as the engine of plant growth because it forms the backbone of proteins, nucleic acids, chlorophyll, enzymes, and numerous metabolites essential for plant development. Despite constituting nearly 78% of Earth's atmosphere, atmospheric nitrogen (N_2) remains inaccessible to plants because of the exceptionally stable triple bond that holds the two nitrogen atoms together. Consequently, plants depend largely on reactive forms of nitrogen available in the soil. Modern agriculture has traditionally addressed this limitation through synthetic nitrogen fertilizers produced via the Haber–Bosch process. Although these fertilizers have dramatically increased crop productivity, their excessive application has resulted in serious environmental challenges, including groundwater contamination, eutrophication, greenhouse gas emissions, and soil degradation (Goyal *et al*., 2021). Nature, however, has evolved an elegant and sustainable alternative. Leguminous plants establish a highly specialized mutualistic relationship with a group of soil bacteria collectively known as rhizobia (Chaulagain *et al*., 2021). This remarkable partnership enables atmospheric nitrogen to be converted into ammonia through biological nitrogen fixation (BNF), thereby supplying plants with an accessible nitrogen source while reducing dependence on chemical fertilizers. In return, the bacteria receive carbohydrates and a protected niche inside specialized structures called root nodules, which function as miniature biological nitrogen factories (Desbrosses & Stougaard, 2011).

What appears externally as a small swelling on the root is, in reality, the outcome of one of the most sophisticated examples of molecular communication in nature. The establishment of symbiosis requires precise coordination between plant and bacterium through chemical signalling, receptor-mediated recognition, calcium signalling, transcriptional reprogramming, cytoskeletal remodelling, and organ development. Over the past three decades, advances in molecular biology, genomics, and live-cell imaging have transformed our understanding of this fascinating interaction, revealing an intricate network of genes and signalling pathways that govern every stage of nodule formation and nitrogen fixation (Yang *et al*., 2021; Luo *et al*., 2023).

A Molecular Conversation Beneath the Soil

Every successful partnership begins with communication, and the symbiosis between legumes and rhizobia is no exception. The molecular dialogue starts long before bacteria enter the root. When nitrogen availability declines, legume roots release a diverse array of flavonoids into the surrounding soil. These compounds act as chemical attractants, guiding compatible rhizobia toward the root surface while simultaneously activating bacterial genes

required for symbiosis (Göttfert, 1993). Rhizobia also communicate among themselves through quorum sensing, a bacterial communication system mediated by acyl-homoserine lactones (AHLs). This enables the bacterial population to coordinate movement, colonization, and gene expression, ensuring that sufficient bacterial numbers are present before initiating infection (Goyal *et al*., 2021).

Inside rhizobial cells, flavonoids activate the transcriptional regulator NodD, often referred to as the molecular switch of nodulation. Activated NodD binds to conserved nod box promoter sequences and induces the expression of nodulation (nod) genes, whose products synthesize Nod Factors (NF's) species-specific lipochitooligosaccharides that serve as molecular invitations for the host plant (Spaink *et al*., 1987). Interestingly, Nod Factors are not universal. Each rhizobial species decorates these molecules with distinct chemical modifications such as sulfation, acetylation, glycosylation or fucosylation. These subtle structural differences function as molecular identity cards, allowing only compatible host plants to recognize the bacterial signal. This remarkable specificity explains why different rhizobial species establish symbiosis with only particular legumes (Yang *et al*., 2021).

Recognize of Rhizobium by plants

Receiving a Nod Factor does not automatically grant bacteria access to the root. Instead, plants employ a sophisticated recognition system comparable to a security checkpoint. Specialized LysM receptor-like kinases, including *NFR1*, *NFR5*, *NFP* and *LYK3*, are located on the plasma membrane of root hair cells. These receptors specifically recognize Nod Factors and initiate intracellular signalling. To recognize compatible rhizobia, legume roots rely on specialized membrane-bound proteins known as Nod Factor Receptors (NFRs). For instance, in Lotus japonicus, three such receptors, *NFR1*, *NFR5* and *NFRe* are present in the root epidermis. The NFR1-NFR5 receptor pair acts as the primary sensing system, detecting Nod factors released by rhizobia and initiating the molecular signalling required for nodule development (Nuc *et al*., 2025). Although *NFRe* is not essential for initial recognition, it reinforces the signalling generated by *NFR1* and *NFR5*, ensuring an efficient symbiotic response during the early stages of infection (Roy *et al*., 2020). Their stability and activity are supported by membrane-associated proteins such as flotillins, remorins, and RinRK1, which organize receptor complexes for efficient signal perception (Geurts & Bisseling, 2002).

Plants perform an additional verification step through the Exopolysaccharide Receptor 3 (EPR3), which recognizes bacterial exopolysaccharides (EPS). Only when both Nod Factors and EPS match the host's molecular requirements is bacterial entry permitted. This two-tier recognition system ensures high host specificity while preventing colonization by incompatible or pathogenic microorganisms (Yang *et al*., 2021).

Decoding the Signal: Calcium as the Universal Messenger

Recognition of Nod Factors triggers the Common Symbiotic Signalling Pathway (CSSP), one of the most conserved signalling pathways in plant symbiosis. The receptor kinase SYMRK (DMI2) transmits the signal toward the nucleus through HMGR1-mediated mevalonate production. Nuclear envelope ion channels, including CASTOR, POLLUX and CNGC15, generate rhythmic oscillations of calcium ions known as calcium spiking (Yang *et al*., 2022). Rather than serving merely as fluctuations in ion concentration, these calcium oscillations function as molecular messages. The calcium/calmodulin-dependent protein kinase CCaMK interprets these signals and activates the transcription factor CYCLOPS (*IPD3*) (Cerri *et al*., 2012; Cerri *et al*., 2017). Together with *NSP1*, *NSP2* and *DELLA* proteins, CYCLOPS induces the expression of early nodulin genes such as NODULE INCEPTION (*NIN*) and *ENOD11*, initiating the developmental programme that transforms ordinary root cells into nitrogen-fixing tissues (Luo *et al*., 2023).

Nodule formation

Once molecular compatibility is established, the plant begins constructing a completely new organ, the root nodule. The first visible response is the curling of root hairs around attached

rhizobia, creating a confined chamber where bacteria multiply. Cell wall-remodelling enzymes such as NPL and SyPME1 soften the root hair wall, while extensive rearrangement of actin filaments and microtubules establishes the polarity required for infection thread growth. Proteins including Nap1, Pir1, DREPP and LjROP6 coordinate this cytoskeletal remodelling (Yang *et al*., 2021). The bacteria enter the root through an infection thread, a plant-derived tubular structure that guides them toward the root cortex. Continuous membrane delivery by proteins such as VAPYRIN (VPY), LIN, RPG, and EXO70H4 ensures steady elongation of the infection thread. Simultaneously, cortical cells undergo repeated divisions to produce the nodule primordium, ultimately forming a new organ specialized for symbiosis (Luo *et al*., 2023).

NIN: The Master Architect of Nodulation

Among the numerous genes involved in symbiosis, NODULE INCEPTION (*NIN*) occupies a central position. Often described as the master regulator of nodulation, NIN coordinates nearly every stage of nodule development, from infection thread progression to cortical cell division and bacteroid differentiation (Shen & Feng, 2024). NIN encodes a plant-specific transcription factor containing a conserved RWP-RK DNA-binding domain and a PB1 protein interaction domain. Its promoter integrates both infection-related and cytokinin-responsive developmental pathways, allowing it to synchronize bacterial infection with organ formation. NIN directly regulates numerous downstream genes involved in infection (*NPL*, *RPG*, *SCARN*, *EPR3*), organogenesis (*NF-YA1*, *NF-YB1*, *LBD16*, *CRE1*) and mature nitrogen-fixing symbiosis. In essence, NIN acts as the molecular bridge connecting bacterial recognition with plant developmental reprogramming (Shen & Feng, 2024).

Keeping Nodulation in Balance

Although nodules provide nitrogen to plants, they are metabolically expensive to maintain. Producing excessive nodules would divert valuable photosynthates away from growth and reproduction. To prevent this, legumes possess an elegant long-distance feedback system known as Autoregulation of Nodulation (AON). Developing nodules produce CLE peptides, which travel through the xylem to the shoot and are perceived by receptors such as *SUNN*, *HAR1* or *NARK*. This suppresses the production of miR2111, allowing accumulation of Too Much Love (TML) protein in roots and thereby preventing excessive nodule formation. Conversely, nitrogen starvation activates CEP peptides, which promote nodulation through the CRA2–miR2111 pathway. Environmental factors such as nitrate availability, phosphate status, and light conditions further fine-tune this regulatory network (Yang *et al*., 2022).

Life Inside the Nodule: The Biological Nitrogen Factory

At the end of the infection thread, rhizobia are released into cortical cells through specialized infection droplets. Rather than entering freely, they become enclosed within a plant-derived membrane, forming the symbiosome. Inside this compartment, rhizobia differentiate into enlarged bacteroids, the specialized bacterial form dedicated to nitrogen fixation (Luo *et al*., 2023). Plant-derived NCR peptides regulate bacteroid differentiation, while SNARE proteins such as SYP132 contribute to symbiosome membrane development. This intracellular compartment creates a highly controlled environment optimized for nitrogen fixation while protecting both plant and bacteria (Yang *et al*., 2021).

Within mature nodules, bacteroids express the nitrogenase enzyme complex, composed of the Fe-protein (NifH) and the MoFe-protein (NifDK). Because nitrogenase is irreversibly damaged by oxygen, plants synthesize leghemoglobin, an oxygen-binding protein that carefully regulates oxygen concentration inside nodules. This remarkable molecule supplies sufficient oxygen for bacterial respiration while simultaneously protecting nitrogenase from oxidative damage (Schwember *et al*., 2019). The ammonia produced by bacteroids diffuses into the symbiosome space, where it is assimilated through the GS–GOGAT pathway into amino acids such as glutamine and asparagine. In exchange, plants

provide malate and other carbon compounds that fuel bacterial respiration, illustrating the highly coordinated metabolic partnership between the two organisms (Wu *et al*., 2025).

Future Perspectives

Rapid advances in genomics, transcriptomics, single-cell sequencing, live-cell imaging, and CRISPR-based genome editing are revolutionizing our understanding of legume–rhizobium symbiosis. Researchers are now identifying regulatory genes that improve nitrogen fixation efficiency, developing elite rhizobial inoculants for climate-resilient agriculture, and exploring strategies to transfer nitrogen-fixing capability into non-legume crops such as rice and wheat. Although many scientific challenges remain, these innovations hold tremendous promise for reducing fertilizer use and enhancing global food security in an environmentally sustainable manner (Zhang *et al*., 2024; Wu *et al*., 2025).

Conclusion

The rhizobium–legume symbiosis is one of nature's most remarkable examples of molecular cooperation. From the first flavonoid signal released by nitrogen-starved roots to the finely regulated activity of nitrogenase inside mature nodules, every stage of this partnership reflects extraordinary biological precision. Through coordinated signalling, gene regulation, cellular reprogramming, and metabolic integration, plants and bacteria create a highly efficient natural system for nitrogen acquisition. As the demand for sustainable agriculture continues to grow, understanding the molecular biology of rhizobium–nodule formation and biological nitrogen fixation will remain central to the development of eco-friendly farming systems capable of nourishing both crops and the planet.

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