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64 Genetic Modification of Plants

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Frank Kempken and Christian Jung *Editors*

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Editors

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*This book is dedicated to
Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Gerhard Röbbelen
on the occasion of his 80th birthday for
his lifetime contribution to applied plant
genetics.*

Preface

Today modern agriculture is facing new challenges. Total yields have to be increased due to the continuing population growth of mankind and due to changing food consumption. However, global climate creates new problems but also new opportunities for agriculture. For more than a decade the yearly yield increases of major food staples have been on the decline, which is due to optimized production systems like the application of mineral fertilizer and crop protection measures. But also the yield increases due to genetic improvement of crops have been stagnating. Obviously we are approaching yield barriers for a number of crops, which creates a need for innovation in breeding systems.

There is no doubt that further genetic improvement of crops will be a key for increasing yields in the future. Moreover, breeding must meet the demands for increasing biomass (bioenergy) and the production of industrial raw materials. The breeding of better-adapted and higher-yielding varieties relies crucially on the available genetic variation. Broad genetic variation is a fundamental prerequisite for successful breeding. Apart from other technologies like wide crosses, mutation breeding and somatic hybridization, genetically modified plants will play an increasingly important role in future breeding systems either because natural genetic variation has been largely exploited or because natural variation is completely lacking from the primary and secondary or even from the tertiary gene pool of a crop species.

It is commonly agreed within the scientific community that genetically modified plants will be important for future breeding. Adoption rates worldwide have been increasing in the past ten years in a breathtaking manner. In the year 2008 genetically modified plants were cultivated by about 13.3 mio farmers from 25 countries worldwide on a total acreage of about 125 mio ha (<http://www.isaaa.org/>). Numerous investigations have confirmed that cultivation of genetically modified plants is safe, as far as approved plants are concerned which have passed a step by step risk assessment procedure, as is commonly applied in most countries growing genetically modified organisms (GMO) today. Instead of this, there is still a big public debate on GM plants in a number of countries. Mainly in the European Union, the production of GM plants is almost completely avoided. Low consumer acceptance

is the only reason pointed out by politicians to establish legal restrictions for GMO production, in spite of numerous studies confirming their safety towards the environment or for food and feed use. Many scientists have been frustrated due to this debate which is ignoring scientific facts and which is mainly directed by pressure groups and non-governmental organizations.

This book was written with an intention to get back to the facts. In the past years a number of books focusing on GM plants have been published. Some of these cover all aspects, including minor crop species. So, why is there a need for a new book? Our book tries to address all aspects of GM plants, including their employment in a plant-breeding procedure, and their socioeconomic implications. We try to emphasize that GM plants among others are an important tool in plant breeding to broaden the genetic variation of crop species.

The book is structured into four parts. The first part deals with technical details of plant genetic engineering. The second part introduces characters of GM plants, while the third part presents applications in agricultural production systems. The last part deals with risk assessment and economic implications, which are important aspects of GM plants. The articles are written by scientists who have a long experience in their field of expertise. We thank the authors for their excellent contributions, which make this book, we think, a valuable resource for the different aspects of GM crops. We are aware of the fact that not all topics and some minor crops could not be included in this book. We regret that this was not possible due to size limitations. Finally we are indebted to the Springer publishing company for supporting this book.

Kiel, Germany
October 2009

Frank Kempken and Christian Jung

Contents

Part A Generation and Analysis of Transgenic Plants

1 Plant Nuclear Transformation	3
John J. Finer	
1.1 Introduction to Plant Transformation	3
1.1.1 DNA Introduction Basics	3
1.2 Transient Expression	4
1.2.1 Optimization of Transient Expression	5
1.2.2 Transient Expression to Study Gene Expression and Stability	5
1.3 Agrobacterium Background	6
1.3.1 A String of Improvements for <i>Agrobacterium</i>	7
1.3.2 Agrobacterium– Plant Interactions	8
1.3.3 Reducing Agents	8
1.3.4 Agroinfiltration	9
1.3.5 <i>Arabidopsis</i> Floral Dip	9
1.4 Particle Bombardment	10
1.4.1 Gene Guns	11
1.4.2 Optimization of DNA Delivery	11
1.4.3 Control of DNA Integration Patterns	12
1.5 Other Direct DNA Uptake Approaches	12
1.5.1 Protoplasts	13
1.5.2 Whole Tissue Electroporation	13
1.5.3 Silicon Carbide Whiskers	14
1.5.4 Nanofiber Arrays	14
1.5.5 Pollen Tube Pathway	15
1.6 Evidence for Transformation	16
1.6.1 DNA Presence	16
1.6.2 Gene Expression	17
1.7 Conclusions	18
References	18

2	Plastid Transformation	23
	Heribert Warzecha and Anna Hennig	
2.1	Introduction	23
2.2	Delivery of Transforming DNA to the Chloroplast	24
2.3	Vector Design	27
2.3.1	Flanking Regions	27
2.3.2	Promoters and UTRs	29
2.4	Transgene Stacking and Control of Gene Expression	30
2.5	Selection	31
2.5.1	Antibiotic Resistance Markers	31
2.5.2	Other Selection Markers	32
2.6	Marker Gene Excision	32
2.7	Analysis	33
2.8	Conclusions	34
	References	34
3	Concepts of Marker Genes for Plants	39
	Josef Kraus	
3.1	Introduction	39
3.2	Criteria for Choosing the Marker Gene System	40
3.3	Availability of Selectable Marker Gene Systems and Alternatives	42
3.3.1	Positive Selection Marker	42
3.3.2	Alternative Systems	47
3.3.3	Screenable Marker Genes	51
3.3.4	Negative Selection Marker	52
3.3.5	Marker-Free Transformation Without Usage of Any Marker Gene	52
3.4	Conclusions and Perspective	53
	References	54
4	Precise Breeding Through All-Native DNA Transformation	61
	Caius M. Rommens	
4.1	Introduction	61
4.2	Examples of the Intragenic Modification in Potato	62
4.3	Requirements for the All-Native DNA Transformation of Potato	65
4.4	Intragenic Tomato (<i>S. esculentum</i>): Concentrating the Quality Potential of Tomato into its Fruit	67
4.5	Exploring the Diversity of Solanaceous Crops	68
4.6	Intragenic Modification of Alfalfa: Optimization of a Forage Feed	69
4.7	Exploiting Native Genetic Elements for Canola Oilseed Improvements	70
4.8	Drought-Tolerant Perennial Ryegrass	71
4.9	Bruise-Tolerant Apple	72

4.10	Native Markers for Intragenic Transformation	72
4.11	Intragenic Crops Are at Least as Safe as Those Developed Through Traditional Methods	73
4.12	Conclusions	74
	References	74
5	Gene Silencing in Plants: Transgenes as Targets and Effectors	79
	Andreas E. Müller	
5.1	Introduction	79
5.2	Mechanisms of Gene Silencing	80
5.2.1	The Role of Small RNAs	81
5.2.2	Epigenetic Silencing of Transcription	83
5.3	Silencing of Transgene Expression	85
5.3.1	<i>Cis</i> - and <i>Trans</i> -Silencing Of Multi-Copy Transgenes	85
5.3.2	Silencing of Single-Copy Transgenes	88
5.3.3	Reducing the Risk of Transgene Silencing	89
5.4	Applications of RNA Interference in Transgenic Plants	90
5.4.1	Applications of RNAi for Crop Protection	92
5.4.2	Applications of RNAi for Crop Improvement and Metabolic Engineering	93
5.5	Conclusions	94
	References	94
6	Breeding with Genetically Modified Plants	103
	Christian Jung	
6.1	Genetic Variation in Plant Breeding	103
6.2	Breeding Aims	103
6.3	Methods for Introducing Transgenes into Elite Plant Material	105
6.4	Breeding Methods	107
6.4.1	Line Varieties	108
6.4.2	Open-Pollinated Varieties	109
6.4.3	Hybrid Varieties	109
6.4.4	Clone Varieties	111
6.5	Safety and Legal Aspects of GMO Breeding	112
6.5.1	Separating Transgenic and Non-Transgenic Breeding Programs	112
6.5.2	Breeding Marker-Free Cultivars	113
6.5.3	'Cisgenic' and Transgenic Plants	113
6.6	Non-Transgenic Versus Transgenic Breeding	114
6.7	Conclusions	115
	References	116
7	Detection of Genetically Modified Plants in Seeds, Food and Feed	117
	Lutz Grohmann	

- 7.1 Introduction 117
- 7.2 Techniques Used to Detect a Transgenic Plant 118
 - 7.2.1 DNA-Based Detection 118
 - 7.2.2 Protein-Based Detection 122
 - 7.2.3 Method Validation and Standardisation 123
- 7.3 Detection Strategies 124
 - 7.3.1 Screening 124
 - 7.3.2 Identification 128
 - 7.3.3 Quantification 129
 - 7.3.4 Detection of Stacked Events 129
 - 7.3.5 Detection of Unauthorised/Unknown GMOs 130
 - 7.3.6 Method Databases 131
 - 7.3.7 Sampling Issues 131
- 7.4 Conclusions 132
- References 132

Part B Selected Characters of Transgenic Plants and Their Application in Plant Production

- 8 Drought Stress Tolerance 139**
 Dorothea Bartels and Jonathan Phillips
 - 8.1 Introduction 139
 - 8.2 Transgenic Plant Strategies for Enhanced Drought Stress Tolerance in Crop Plants 140
 - 8.2.1 Osmoprotectants and Metabolite Engineering 141
 - 8.2.2 Regulatory and Signalling Genes: Tools to Engineer Drought Stress Tolerance 147
 - 8.3 Future Prospects: “Climate-Ready” Crops 153
 - References 154
- 9 Herbicide Resistance 159**
 Micheal D.K. Owen
 - 9.1 Introduction 159
 - 9.1.1 Overview of Adoption 160
 - 9.1.2 Types of Herbicide Resistance 160
 - 9.1.3 Modes of Herbicide Action in Herbicide-Resistant Crops 161
 - 9.1.4 Implications of Genetically Modified Herbicide-Resistant Crops 162
 - 9.2 Specific Crops with Herbicide Resistance 164
 - 9.2.1 Maize 164
 - 9.2.2 Soybean 165
 - 9.2.3 Cotton 165
 - 9.2.4 Canola 165
 - 9.2.5 Sugarbeets 166
 - 9.2.6 Turf 166

9.2.7 Alfalfa	166
9.2.8 Rice	166
9.2.9 Wheat	167
9.3 Implications of Genetically Modified Herbicide Resistance	
on Cropping Systems	167
9.3.1 Tillage	167
9.3.2 Diversity of Weed Management Tactics	168
9.3.3 Timelines of Weed Management Tactics	169
9.4 Herbicide-Resistant Weeds	169
9.4.1 Weedy Near-Relatives to Genetically Modified	
Herbicide-Resistant Crops – Gene Flow	170
9.4.2 Implications of Herbicide Resistance – Persistence	
in the Agroecosystem	171
9.5 Conclusions	172
References	173
10 Insect and Nematode Resistance	177
Tim Thureau, Wanzhi Ye, and Daguang Cai	
10.1 Introduction	177
10.2 R Gene-Mediated Resistance	178
10.2.1 Plant Resistance and Resistance Gene	178
10.2.2 Plant Parasite Resistance and Resistance Genes	179
10.2.3 Significance and Limitations of Plant Resistance	
Genes	181
10.3 Engineering of Insect and Nematode Resistance	182
10.3.1 Anti-Insect/Nematode Genes	183
10.4 Conclusions	189
References	189
11 Metabolic Engineering	199
Lars M. Voll and Frederik Börnke	
11.1 Introduction	199
11.2 Strategies for Metabolic Engineering in Plants	200
11.3 Engineering of Primary Metabolism	201
11.3.1 Carbohydrate Metabolism	201
11.3.2 Metabolic Engineering of Lipid Metabolism	206
11.4 Engineering of Secondary Metabolism for Human	
Health and Nutrition	212
11.4.1 Flavonoids	212
11.4.2 Vitamins	213
11.5 Conclusions	214
References	214
12 Pharmaceuticals	221
Andreas Schiermeyer and Stefan Schillberg	

- 12.1 Introduction 221
- 12.2 Expression Systems 222
 - 12.2.1 Transient Expression Systems 222
 - 12.2.2 Stable Expression Systems 223
- 12.3 Post-Translational Modifications 226
- 12.4 Downstream Processing 228
- 12.5 PMPs in Advanced Development 228
 - 12.5.1 Glucocerebrosidase 228
 - 12.5.2 Insulin 229
 - 12.5.3 Idiotype Vaccines 230
 - 12.5.4 Interferon 231
- 12.6 Conclusion 231
- References 232

- 13 Biopolymers 237**
 - Maja Hühns and Inge Broer
 - 13.1 Introduction 237
 - 13.2 Transgene-Encoded Biopolymers 238
 - 13.2.1 Starch and Cellulose 239
 - 13.2.2 Polyhydroxyalkanoates 242
 - 13.2.3 Protein-Based Biomaterials 243
 - 13.3 Conclusion 247
 - References 248

- 14 Engineered Male Sterility 253**
 - Frank Kempken
 - 14.1 Introduction 253
 - 14.2 Natural Male Sterility Systems in Plants 254
 - 14.2.1 Cytoplasmic Male Sterility 254
 - 14.2.2 Nuclear Male Sterility 255
 - 14.3 Methods of Producing Male-Sterile Plants 256
 - 14.3.1 The Selective Destruction of Tissues Important
for the Production of Functional Pollen 256
 - 14.3.2 Changing the Levels of Metabolites Needed
for the Production of Viable Pollen 258
 - 14.3.3 Engineering Cytoplasmic Male-Sterile Plants 259
 - 14.4 Strategies for the Multiplication of Male-Sterile Lines 259
 - 14.4.1 Herbicide Application for Selection
of Male-Sterile Plants 260
 - 14.4.2 Reversible Male Sterility 260
 - 14.4.3 Use of Maintainer Lines 261
 - 14.5 Commercial Use of Male Sterility 261
 - 14.6 Conclusions and Future Perspectives 261
 - References 262

Part C Transgenic Plants in Breeding and Crop Production

15 Cotton	269
Keerti S. Rathore	
15.1 Introduction	269
15.2 Importance and Potential Impact of Genetic Modification in Cotton	270
15.3 Transformation of Cotton and its Improvement via Genetic Modification	271
15.3.1 Methods Used to Transform Cotton	271
15.3.2 Selectable Markers and Reporter Genes used for Cotton Transformation	276
15.3.3 Genetically Engineered Traits in Cotton	277
15.3.4 The Role of New Technological Advances in Cotton Improvement	280
15.4 Future Perspectives	280
References	281
16 Triticeae Cereals	287
Jochen Kumlehn, Grit Zimmermann, Carolin Berger, Cornelia Marthe, and Goetz Hensel	
16.1 Introduction	287
16.1.1 The Generation of Transgenic Triticeae Plants	288
16.1.2 Transgene Expression Systems	289
16.2 Tolerance to Abiotic Stress	290
16.2.1 Drought and Salinity	291
16.2.2 Aluminium Toxicity	292
16.3 Resistance to Fungal Infection	292
16.3.1 Regulators of Plant Defence	293
16.3.2 Pathogenesis-Related Proteins	293
16.3.3 R Proteins	295
16.3.4 Fungal Proteins	296
16.3.5 Viral Proteins	296
16.4 Resistance to Viral Infection	296
16.5 Resistance to Insects	297
16.6 Grain Quality	297
16.6.1 Production of Recombinant Proteins	299
References	300
17 Fruit Crops	307
Magda-Viola Hanke and Henryk Flachowsky	
17.1 Introduction	307
17.2 Temperate Fruit Crops	308
17.2.1 Top Fruit	308
17.2.2 Small Fruit	319