EMANATION, PARTITIONING AND ENDOGENOUS LEVELS OF ETHYLENE
IN PHASEOLUS VULGARIS DEVELOPING COTYLEDONS

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(Received 12 February 1993; accepted 14 January 1994)

ABSTRACT
Experiments were carried out to determine qualitative changes in the rate of emanation and endogenous levels of ethylene in the cotyledons of Phaseolus vulgaris at various stages of development and using partition coefficients to test whether qualitative changes in the binding of $^{14}$C$_2$H$_4$ occur. Three phases in the rates of emanation of ethylene use were observed, namely, 0–14, 14–24, and 24–48 days after flowering, respectively. The highest endogenous level of ethylene recorded was 728.7 μl kg$^{-1}$ during the first 7 days after flowering and progressively declined until maturity. A similar trend was observed for the partition coefficient values but with high values during the 14 days after flowering. Results are indicative of a "storage system" for ethylene in P. vulgaris developing seeds possibly to remove excess phytohormone from the system or to provide a reserve pool for ethylene in the cell so that levels of free hormone are maintained.

Key Words: Bean seed, $^{14}$C$_2$H$_4$, partition coefficients

INTRODUCTION
One of the assumptions made in the traditional methods of sampling ethylene in higher plants is that the rate of emanation of ethylene from a plant tissue is a reflection of the rate of synthesis. Also the effective concentration of ethylene in the cell bears a direct relationship with its rate of synthesis
and hence the physiological response (Jerie, 1978). However, research results on the metabolism of ethylene in *Vicia faba* L. (Jerie and Hall, 1978) and on the compartmentalization of ethylene in *Phaseolus vulgaris* (Jerie et al., 1979) have altered the interpretation of the ethylene status of a cell such that tissues used for emanation studies must be tested in two stages. Firstly for metabolism of ethylene, and secondly if metabolism is not detectable, the tissue must be heat-killed and then tested for compartmentalization.

It is now known that some plant tissues have a metabolic system capable of oxidizing ethylene to carbondioxide, ethylene oxide and ethylene glycol (Beyer, 1980). The simple test for metabolism of ethylene in such a plant tissue is to assay for formation of ethylene oxide since it is the primary oxidation product. In plant tissues with no ethylene metabolism, the rate of ethylene emanation is used to test for ethylene metabolism. Both ethylene emanation and compartmentalisation tests were applied to developing *P. vulgaris* seeds, with no known ethylene metabolism. This was done to demonstrate whether qualitative changes in the rate of emanation and endogenous levels of ethylene in the cotyledons of *P. vulgaris* at various stages of development are observable. Likewise, by means of partition coefficients, tests were carried out on the same cotyledons at various stages of development to demonstrate occurrence of qualitative changes in the binding of etylene. It was envisaged that data obtained should elucidate on ethylene compartmentalisation, emanation and binding in the developing *P. vulgaris* seeds.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Plant material.** Pods of the same age and size were obtained from plants grown in a glass house. For the rate of emanation, sampling was done 7, 9, 10, 14, 20, 24, 30, 37, 44, 48 and 54 days after flowering, while for the assessment of endogenous levels and partitioning coefficients, sampling was done 8, 10, 14, 24, 36, 39, 41, 46, 50, 52, and 56 days after flowering, respectively. Harvesting of plant material was usually done in the morning during the experimental period. Pods were carefully shelled and cotyledons separated from the embryo on to a filter paper. Cotyledons weighing 0.2–0.5 g (fresh weight) were used in each test-tube. Each age group was replicated thrice.

**Ethylene emanation.** Rates of ethylene emanation were determined according to the method of Jerie et al. (1979) in which cotyledons at various stages of development weighing between 0.2–0.5 g (fresh weight) were used, and ethylene accumulation sampled at one hour intervals. Ethylene was analysed by gas chromatography. This made it possible to establish the incubation period during which the highest rate of emanation was recorded.

**Partition coefficients.** Cotyledons at various ages of development were prepared as outlined above and placed in 20 ml test-tubes which were then sealed with subseal caps. After balancing the pressure, 1 ml of $^{14}C_2H_4$ (200,000 cpmp) was injected into the tube using a 1 ml tuberculin plastic syringe. Samples were incubated in light for 3 hr at 20°C. At the end of incubation, 1-ml samples of gas from three replicates in each case were withdrawn using a plastic syringe and its disintegration rate measured with a Beckman Model LS-200B Scintillation Spectrometer (Jerie, 1978). After obtaining samples of free gas from above tissue, the incubation tube was opened, the cotyledons removed and the disintegration rate of the gas trapped in the tissue also determined (Jerie, 1978).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Rate of ethylene emanation.** Under the experiment conditions, the optimum rate of emanation was reached within 2 hr of shelling after which the ethylene concentration in the space above tissue started to decline (Fig. 1). This can be explained by considering that ethylene is initially released from both the compartment system and the tissue air spaces into free space in the closed system, this being a result of removing cotyledons from the testa and pod which are the natural physiological environments. The time lag of two hours could be explained in terms of the resistance in the diffusion path for ethylene in the tissue from the site of synthesis to the free space in the closed system. The gradual decline in the rate of emanation could also be explained by the fact that the cotyledons have been removed from the pods which in turn have been removed from
Ethylene in *Phaseolus vulgaris*

was allowed while determining rates of emanation although the emanation "peak" could be achieved within 2 hr (Jerie, 1978). Therefore, just mature cotyledons (about 25 days old) were used for determining the incubation period.

**Rates of Emanation.** The rate of emanation of ethylene (Fig. 2) was highest seven days after flowering (15.63 µl kg⁻¹ h⁻¹) but sharply dropped to a low level (0.7 µl kg⁻¹ h⁻¹) by the 14th day after flowering. This constitutes Phase I of the developing cotyledons. In Phase II, the rate of emanation remained rather stable up to 24 days after flowering. These two phases were followed by Phase III in which the rate of emanation gradually rose, attaining a maximum of and stabilised at about 6.6 µl kg⁻¹ h⁻¹ by the 37th day after flowering. After this period the rate appeared to decline. It is argued that these phases in the rate of emanation of ethylene may be a consequence of the developmental processes of the seed or an integral part of the growth processes of the seed.

**Endogenous levels of ethylene.** The endogenous levels were equally high (28.7 µl kg⁻¹) 8 days after flowering (Fig. 2), but declined to 9.30 µl kg⁻¹ by the 24th day. One salient feature of the endogenous

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**Figure 1.** Time course for rate of emanation of \(^{12}C_2H_4\) in mature cotyledons of *Phaseolus vulgaris* L.

**Figure 2.** Changes in rate of emanation (- - -) and endogenous (---) levels of ethylene in developing cotyledons of *Phaseolus vulgaris* L. I–III are Phases of emanation.
levels is that at every developmental stage, the rates of release of the endogenous amounts were far higher than the observed rates of emanation.

Rate of accumulation of $^{14}$C$_2$H$_4$ and partition coefficients. A maximum rate of accumulation of $^{14}$C$_2$H$_4$ in the developing cotyledons was achieved within 1 hr and amounted to $5.5 \times 10^3$ dp mg$^{-1}$ (Fig. 3). It is suggested that at the end of the two-hour period an equilibrium is attained (Jerie, 1978). A similar observation was made by Bengoechea (1987). The rate of accumulation of $^{14}$C$_2$H$_4$ in the cotyledons of P. vulgaris at various ages of development and partition coefficients derived from the data were maximum on the 12th day after flowering after which they dropped (Fig. 4).

From the data on partition coefficients two peaks are observable, namely, between 9 and 22 days after flowering, and then between 22 days and 42 days after flowering. The $C_p$ values and rate of accumulation of $^{14}$C$_2$H$_4$ at various stages of development (Fig. 3) agree with the values obtained by Jerie (1978) and Jerie et al. (1979).

In general, the data indicate that ethylene status is dependent on the developmental stage of P. vulgaris seed. It could be speculated that a signal is received by the receptor cells at the site of synthesis resulting in acceleration or deceleration of the rate of synthesis depending on the developmental stage of cotyledons. With respect to the view that ethylene is a regulatory factor in growth, an interesting question arises: are the fluctuations in endogenous levels of ethylene, per se, in space and time with the result that the rate of synthesis is altered, the primary

**Figure 3.** Time course for rate of accumulation of $^{14}$C$_2$H$_4$ in Phaseolus vulgaris L. The amount accumulated per unit time is plotted against "incubation time". Samples were incubated with 10,000 Dpm ml$^{-1}$ $^{14}$C$_2$H$_4$.

**Figure 4.** Changes in accumulation (→) and partition coefficient (↔) of $^{14}$C$_2$H$_4$ in developing cotyledons of Phaseolus vulgaris L. Bars indicate standard errors.
control of growth, or is it the effect of the hormone exerted at the active site of action of the ethylene molecule? These questions merit further investigations as the data obtained do not answer them. Nevertheless, the endogenous levels of ethylene were quite high. Two possible functions of the compartmeralising system is suggested. One of these could be to remove excess gaseous hormone from high and rapid turnover of the ethylene precursor 1-Amino acid-1-carboxylic acid (ACC) in the cell. The second function could well be to provide a reserve pool for ethylene in the cell so that levels of free hormones are maintained. The underlying assumption in this case is that changes in the critical levels of the hormone is the mechanism of action of ethylene. Investigations by Bengochea (1981) also showed that the testa, pod, abscission zones, roots and stems in \textit{P. vulgaris} have a capacity to compartmeralise ethylene. This then points to the physiological significance of the compartmeralising system in leguminous plants (Jerie \textit{et al.}, 1979).

In conclusion, it is proposed that the physiological function(s) of the storage system of ethylene in \textit{P. vulgaris} could further be evaluated by measurement of ethylene emanation in cotyledons of various stages of development to establish whether ethylene emanations together with the endogenous levels are in agreement with the turn-over rate of ACCS. Since ethylene is involved in many plant growth processes, biotechnological studies aimed at identifying the genome (Deragon and Landry, 1992; Majiwa \textit{et al.}, 1993; Joshi and Nguyen, 1993) coding for ethylene production, action and metabolism will elucidate on the storage system of ethylene.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Funding was provided by the World University Service, UK.

REFERENCES


