

Application of Genetically Modified Plants with Special Reference to Ayurveda

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Abstract -- Genetically modified (GM) plants represent a significant advancement in agricultural and pharmaceutical biotechnology. Recombinant DNA technology enables the introduction of desirable traits such as pest resistance, stress tolerance, and enhanced phytochemical production¹. Their application to medicinal plants may offer possibilities for improved standardization and sustainable raw-drug supply, while simultaneously raising biosafety, ethical and traditional concerns relevant to Ayurveda for improving therapeutic consistency and sustainability. This article critically evaluates principles, techniques, applications, risks, and ethical issues of genetically modified (GM) plants with special reference to Ayurveda.

Keywords-- Ayurveda, Genetically-modified plants, Pharmaceutical-biotechnology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Medicinal plants described in Ayurvedic therapeutics contribute significantly to preventive and curative healthcare. More than 70% of classical formulations depend directly on botanicals as primary ingredients. However, the increasing global demand, overharvesting of wild species, habitat destruction and climate variability have resulted in scarcity of quality raw materials and inconsistency in phytochemical composition². These challenges threaten both the efficacy and sustainability of traditional medicine systems.

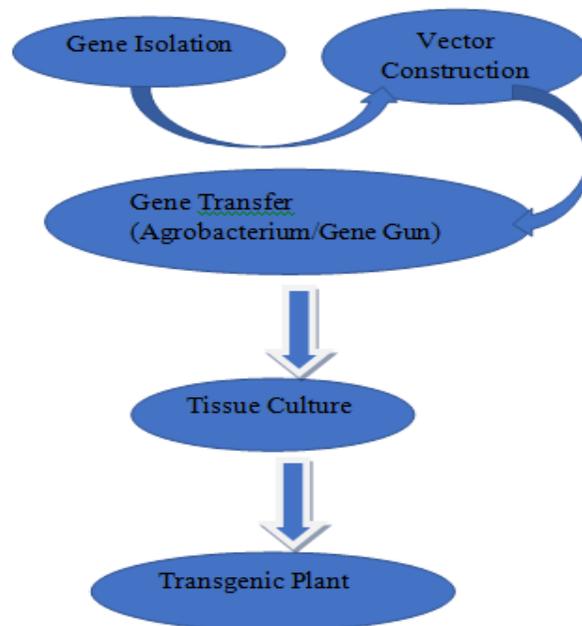
Modern plant biotechnology provides scientific tools to address these problems. Genetic engineering enables targeted modification of plant genomes to enhance desirable traits such as yield, resistance, and metabolite production. When applied judiciously, such technologies may complement Ayurveda by ensuring standardized, high-quality, and sustainable medicinal resources³. Hence, understanding the scope, benefits, and risks of genetically modified plants is essential for their rational integration into Ayurvedic practice.

II. METHODS

A. Concept and Definition of Genetically Modified Plants

Genetically modified plants are organisms whose DNA is altered through recombinant DNA technology to introduce novel traits or modify existing ones. The introduced gene is termed as transgene, is stably inherited and expresses proteins responsible for specific phenotypic changes⁴.

B. Basic Process of Genetic Modification



C. Methods of Genetic Transformation^{5,6,7}

Genetic transformation refers to the stable introduction of foreign DNA into a plant genome to express desirable traits. The success of plant genetic engineering depends largely on efficient gene delivery and regeneration systems.

Broadly transformation methods are classified into Vector-mediated (biological) or non-vector mediated (physical/chemical) techniques.

Agrobacterium tumefaciens-mediated transformation utilizes the natural T-DNA transfer system of the bacterium, allowing stable and low copy number integration into plant chromosomes. It is widely preferred due to its precision and efficiency.

Particle bombardment or gene gun method introduces DNA-coated metal particles into plant tissues. This technique is useful for monocots and species recalcitrant to *Agrobacterium*, though it may produce multiple insertions.

Electroporation applies electrical pulses to protoplasts to transiently open membrane pores for DNA entry. It is mainly used for laboratory research because regeneration is technically challenging.

Chemical methods such as polyethylene glycol treatment and liposome-mediated delivery enhance membrane permeability and facilitate DNA uptake. Protoplast fusion enables somatic hybrid formation and specialized genetic studies.

D. Advantages of GM Plants

Genetically modified plants offer several agricultural and pharmaceutical advantages. Insect-resistant crops expressing *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) toxin reduce dependence on chemical pesticides, thereby lowering environmental pollution and production costs. Herbicide-tolerant crops allow efficient weed control and improved productivity. Tolerance to abiotic stresses such as drought, salinity, and temperature extremes ensures stable cultivation even under changing climatic conditions⁸.

From a nutritional and medical standpoint, biofortified crops like Golden Rice enriched with beta-carotene help combat micronutrient deficiencies⁹. GM plants can also function as bioreactors for the production of vaccines, monoclonal antibodies, and therapeutic proteins, a concept termed molecular farming or biopharming¹⁰. For medicinal plants, metabolic engineering can enhance the concentration of active phytoconstituents, thereby improving therapeutic efficacy and consistency¹¹.

E. Limitations and Safety Concerns

Despite their potential, GM plants raise important biosafety and ethical concerns. Random insertion of transgenes may disrupt native gene function and alter metabolic pathways, potentially producing allergens or toxins¹².

The use of antibiotic resistance markers may contribute to antimicrobial resistance. Ecologically, gene flow to wild relatives can create herbicide-resistant weeds and reduce biodiversity.

Non-target organisms such as beneficial insects may also be affected. Changes in phytochemical profiles might modify the pharmacological properties of medicinal plants, raising questions about safety and authenticity. Therefore, comprehensive risk assessment, toxicological evaluation, and regulatory monitoring are essential before field release or medicinal use¹³.

F. Relevance to Ayurveda

Ayurveda emphasizes the use of naturally occurring herbs characterized by specific Rasa (taste), Guna (qualities), Virya (potency), and Prabhava (unique action). These properties depend largely on secondary metabolites. Genetic modification may alter these biochemical profiles and potentially influence therapeutic efficacy¹⁴.

The Ministry of AYUSH has expressed caution regarding the introduction of GM medicinal plants without adequate safety and efficacy evaluation. Ayurvedic pharmacognosy values the authenticity and purity of raw materials collected from their natural habitat. The introduction of transgenic varieties necessitates careful identification, standardization, and validation. Hence, integration of GM plants into Ayurveda should occur only after rigorous evaluation of safety, efficacy, and compatibility with traditional principles. Collaboration between Ayurvedic scholars and biotechnologists is crucial to maintain the integrity of the system.

G. Applications in Medicinal Plants^{15,16}

Biotechnological interventions are being explored to improve several medicinal species. Genetic transformation of *Bacopa monnieri* has demonstrated enhanced bacoside production, which may improve cognitive benefits.

Withania somnifera has been studied for increased withanolide synthesis to improve neuroprotective and apoptogenic properties. Efforts are ongoing to modify *Jivanti* and other *Rasayana* plants to enhance their pharmacological potential.

Metabolic engineering of *Artemisia annua* has successfully increased artemisinin content, illustrating how pathway gene overexpression can boost production of valuable compounds. Such strategies can ensure uniform quality, reduce dependency on wild collection, and support large-scale pharmaceutical manufacturing of herbal drugs.

III. DISCUSSION

The application of genetic modification in plants offers clear scientific advantages such as improved yield, stress tolerance, and enhanced production of active phytochemicals. From an agricultural and pharmaceutical viewpoint, these benefits may help to address the growing demand for medicinal plant resources and ensure consistency in drug quality. However, when considered within the framework of Ayurveda, the issue extends beyond productivity and biochemical enhancement.

Ayurveda views medicinal plants as living entities whose therapeutic actions depend on their inherent qualities, including *Rasa, Guna, Virya, Vipaka, and Prabhava*. These attributes arise from the plant's natural growth conditions, ecological interactions, and subtle balance of metabolites. Artificial genetic alteration may influence this intrinsic harmony, potentially modifying the plant's pharmacodynamic properties in ways not fully predictable through molecular analysis alone. Thus, even if a genetically modified plant shows increased levels of a specific compound, its overall therapeutic behavior may not remain identical to that of the naturally occurring drug.

Authenticity and purity of raw materials are also central to Ayurvedic practice. Classical texts emphasize the importance of collecting herbs from their natural habitat and preserving biodiversity. The introduction of transgenic varieties raises concerns regarding contamination of traditional species, loss of genetic diversity, and challenges in standard identification of genuine drugs. Such changes may affect both safety and acceptance among practitioners and patients.

Nevertheless, biotechnology need not be rejected entirely. When applied cautiously, it may serve as a supportive tool for conservation and sustainable cultivation, particularly for endangered or high-demand species. Approaches that enhance yield without drastically altering the plant's fundamental characteristics could reduce pressure on wild populations and ensure steady availability of quality raw drugs. Therefore, integration of GM technology into Ayurveda should be guided by rigorous pharmacological evaluation, ecological responsibility, and adherence to classical principles.

In essence, the goal should not be replacement of natural medicinal plants but responsible augmentation that respects the holistic philosophy of Ayurveda while utilizing scientific advancements for public health benefit.

IV. CONCLUSION

Genetically modified plants represent a promising yet carefully regulated frontier in plant science. They offer opportunities to enhance productivity, improve nutritional value, and increase the concentration of therapeutically important phytochemicals. However, concerns related to safety, ecological balance, and preservation of traditional authenticity must not be overlooked.

A balanced, evidence-based approach that respects both biotechnology and Ayurvedic philosophy is essential. With proper regulation and scientific validation, GM technology may serve as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for natural medicinal resources, ultimately contributing to sustainable and effective healthcare systems.

Future strategies should focus on sustainable cultivation, conservation of biodiversity, and development of standardized high-yielding medicinal varieties. Interdisciplinary research combining traditional knowledge with modern science will shape the next generation of evidence-based herbal medicines.

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International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435(Online) Volume 15, Issue 02, February 2026)

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