Muhammed Azharudheen T P, Gobu R, Biju C N and Sheeja T E

Whole genome sequencing of black pepper: A 'gene-ius' move for pepper farmers

Black pepper *(Piper nigrum L.)*, a globally significant spice crop, suffers substantial yield losses due to biotic stresses such as *phytophthora* foot rot and pollu beetle infestation. Traditional breeding approaches have been constrained by the crop's perennial nature, long juvenile phase, and limited genetic variability among cultivated varieties. In this study, we discuss the implications of whole genome sequencing (WGS) of black pepper as a foundational advancement in spice crop genomics. The availability of a chromosome-scale reference genome enables precise identification of genes responsible for disease and pest resistance through comparative genomics with wild Piper species such as *P. colubrinum* and *P. barberi*. Furthermore, WGS facilitates marker-assisted selection, accelerates trait introgression, and provides insights into piperine biosynthesis and abiotic stress tolerance. This genomic resource lays the groundwork for molecular breeding, gene discovery, and future gene editing interventions aimed at developing resilient, high-yielding cultivars. The study highlights WGS as a transformative tool for enhancing black pepper productivity and sustainability.

BLACK pepper, the 'King of spices,' is much more than just a seasoning; it's a cornerstone of global cuisine and a vital crop for thousands of farmers, especially here in India. For centuries, our land has been synonymous with the finest black pepper, a tradition that has sustained livelihoods and enriched our culinary heritage. Yet, beneath the fragrant allure of this humble spice, a quiet battle has been brewing, threatening its very future and the prosperity of our pepper farmers.

Troubled reign of the king of spices

While black pepper reigns supreme as the world's most important spice crop, its journey in India has been anything but smooth in recent decades. Look around, and you might notice a worrying trend: the area dedicated to black pepper cultivation and its overall production have been steadily declining. This is not due to a lack of effort from our dedicated farmers, but rather a persistent enemy: pests and diseases.

Among these, *Phytophthora* foot rot and wilt stand out as the most devastating. Imagine a strong, healthy pepper vine, laden with berries, suddenly succumbing to a mysterious ailment, its leaves yellowing, its stems rotting, and its life force draining away. This is the tragic reality of the fungal diseases, which can wipe out entire plantations, leaving farmers in despair.

The heart-breaking truth is that our beloved cultivated black pepper varieties, including the iconic *Panniyur*-1, are highly susceptible to these diseases. Despite years of diligent breeding efforts, we have not found a single cultivar that can resist *Phytophthora* foot rot. It is like fighting a battle with a shield that offers no protection–all our efforts to breed resistance have hit a wall.

Challenges of traditional breeding: A slow, arduous path

Why has it been so difficult to develop disease-resistant black pepper varieties? The answer lies in the very nature of this remarkable plant. Black pepper is a perennial crop, meaning it lives for many years. More

Phytophthora infection on leaves

Infection on runner shoots

importantly, it has a long juvenile phase. This means that once you plant a black pepper vine, it takes several years, sometimes up to five or more, before it even starts producing berries.

For plant breeders, this long wait is a significant hurdle. When they try to cross different pepper varieties to introduce new traits, they have to wait for years to see the results of their efforts. This makes the breeding process incredibly slow and challenging, almost like trying to solve a puzzle where you only get to see one piece every few years.

It is no wonder then that the genetic improvement in black pepper through traditional breeding has been among the slowest of all crop plants. In fact, the very first improved cultivar, *Panniyur*-1, released all the way back in 1960s, remains the reigning champion today, occupying over 70% of the total black pepper area in India. While *Panniyur*-1 is a fantastic high-yielding variety, its susceptibility to diseases like *Phytophthora* foot rot leaves our farmers vulnerable. We need new, resilient varieties, but traditional breeding has struggled to deliver them.


Infected vine

Nature's hidden treasures: Wild relatives holding the key

While our cultivated black pepper varieties might be struggling against these diseases, nature, in its infinite wisdom, has provided solutions. Hidden in the forests, among the wild relatives of black pepper, are plants that possess incredible resistance to various stresses. For example, wild species like *Piper colubrinum* have shown remarkable tolerance to *Phytophthora* foot rot. Similarly, *Piper barberi* and *Piper attenuatum* hold the secret to resistance against the dreaded pollu beetle, another pest that can devastate pepper crops.

These wild relatives are like treasure chests, brimming with valuable genes that could protect our pepper farms. Dream of pepper breeders has always been to transfer these beneficial genes from the wild species into our cultivated varieties. Imagine a *Panniyur*-1 with the disease resistance of *Piper colubrinum* – a true powerhouse of a pepper vine! However, this process, known as inter-specific hybridization (crossing different species) and gene introgression (introducing genes from one species into another), has been incredibly difficult. It is like trying to find a specific key in a giant, disorganized keyring without knowing what the key looks like. For breeders, this has meant working in the dark, without precise tools to identify and track the genes they want to introduce. The unavailability of suitable molecular markers–essentially, genetic signposts–has made this process an arduous and often unsuccessful endeavour.


Piper barberi, a critically endangered *Piper* species endemic to the Western Ghats has resistance to pollu beetle disease

A new dawn: Power of whole genome sequencing

A new ray of hope has emerged, illuminating the way forward for black pepper research and offering renewed promise for pepper farmers. In a landmark scientific breakthrough, the whole genome of black pepper was successfully sequenced in 2019 by Hu et al. This significant achievement, presented in the study titled *"The chromosome-scale reference genome of black pepper provides insight into piperine biosynthesis,"* marks a transformative step for the crop's future, truly a 'gene-ius' advancement for the sustainable development of black pepper cultivation.

What exactly does 'whole genome sequencing' mean, and why is it such a big deal? Imagine the entire blueprint of a black pepper plant – every single instruction, every gene, every piece of genetic information that makes it what it is. That is its genome. Sequencing the whole genome means reading and mapping out the entire blueprint, letter by letter. It's like getting access to the complete instruction manual for building and operating a black pepper plant, detailing every single component and how it works.

Genomic breakthrough: Illuminating the future of black pepper

The successful sequencing of the black pepper genome in 2019 marks a transformative milestone, paving the way for advanced research and resilient cultivar development.

- **Unlocking the secrets of resistance:** Remember those wild relatives that possess resistance to diseases and pests? Now that we have the complete genome of black pepper, we can compare it with the genomes of these resistant wild species. This allows scientists to precisely identify the specific genes responsible for disease resistance. It is like having a detailed map that shows exactly where the 'disease resistance genes' are located in the wild species' blueprint. This knowledge is invaluable because it tells us exactly what to look for when trying to introduce these traits into our cultivated varieties.
- **Faster and more precise breeding:** With the genome sequenced, breeders no longer have to wait years to see if their crosses have been successful. They can now use molecular markers – those genetic signposts we talked about – to quickly identify seedlings that have inherited the desired resistance genes. This is akin to using a GPS system instead of navigating by guesswork. Instead of growing thousands of plants for years and then testing them for disease resistance, breeders can now test tiny seedlings in a lab and know almost immediately if they have the right genetic makeup. This dramatically speeds up the breeding process, cutting down years of work into a matter of months.
- **Targeted gene editing (future possibilities):** While still in its early stages for black pepper, having the complete genome opens the door for advanced genetic technologies like gene editing. Imagine being able to precisely 'edit' out the susceptible genes in our cultivated varieties and replace them with the resistant genes from wild relatives, or even simply 'turn on' existing dormant resistance mechanisms. This holds the promise of creating highly resilient pepper varieties with unprecedented speed and accuracy. This technology, while complex, relies entirely on having the complete genetic map.
- **Understanding Piperine bi osynthesis:** The research paper by Hu et al. specifically mentions "insight into Piperine biosynthesis." Piperine is the compound responsible for black pepper's characteristic pungency and its medicinal properties. Understanding how the plant produces Piperine can lead to exciting possibilities:
  - **Developing varieties with higher pungency:** For those who prefer a spicier kick, this could mean new varieties with naturally higher levels of Piperine.
  - **Improving consistency:** Ensuring consistent levels of Piperine for culinary and medicinal purposes.
  - **Exploring new uses:** Understanding the biosynthesis pathway could open doors to new applications for Piperine in medicine or other industries.
- **Combating abiotic stresses:** Beyond diseases, black pepper also faces abiotic stresses like drought, excessive rainfall, and temperature fluctuations. Just as with biotic stresses (diseases and pests), wild relatives often possess genes for tolerance to these environmental challenges. The whole genome sequence provides the tools to identify and utilize these genes, helping us develop pepper varieties that can withstand the changing climate and less predictable weather patterns. This is crucial for ensuring stable yields and farmer income in the face of climate change.

Piper colubrinum, a South American *Piper* species with resistance to *Phytophthora* foot rot disease

- **Sustainable pepper farming:** Ultimately, developing disease-resistant and stress-tolerant black pepper varieties means less reliance on chemical sprays and other interventions. This leads to more sustainable and environmentally friendly farming practices, benefiting both the farmers and the planet. Reduced crop losses also mean more stable incomes for farmers, creating a more secure and prosperous future for pepper cultivation.

From lab to field:

You might be thinking, "this all sounds very scientific, but how does it actually help me, a pepper farmer?" The answer is profound. Whole genome sequencing is the fundamental step that will allow our scientists and breeders to create the next generation of black pepper varieties that are:

- **Resistant to *phytophthora* foot rot and quick wilt:** Imagine no longer dreading the onset of the monsoon season, knowing the pepper vines are strong and resilient.

- **Tolerant to pests like the pollu beetle:** Less damage, more harvestable pepper.
- **Better adapted to changing climate conditions:** More consistent yields even with unpredictable weather.
- **Potentially higher yielding and with improved quality:** More pepper, better pepper, and better prices.

This is not about replacing traditional farming methods; it's about providing the farmer with better tools and better seeds. It's about empowering farmers to grow more resilient and productive pepper crops, ensuring a more secure and prosperous future for our family and our land.

The journey from a sequenced genome to a new, improved pepper variety in farmers' field will still take time. Research, breeding, and testing are meticulous processes. However, the whole genome sequence has drastically shortened this timeline and increased the precision of these efforts. It has transformed a daunting, often blind, search into a targeted, informed quest.

A bright future

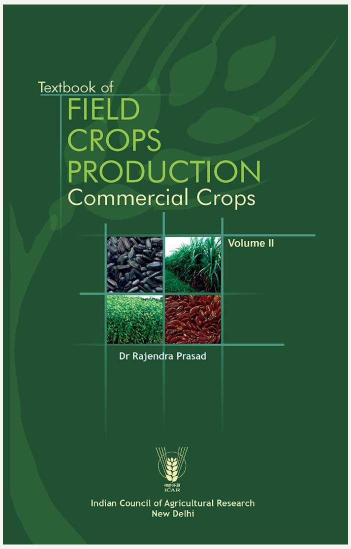
The sequencing of the black pepper genome in 2019 is truly a game-changer. It is not just a scientific achievement; it is a promise of a healthier, more robust future for black pepper cultivation in India and around the world. It is a testament to human ingenuity and our unwavering commitment to protecting and enhancing our vital agricultural resources.

For generations, the aroma of black pepper has filled our kitchens and enriched our lives. Now, with the power of genetic knowledge, we are on the cusp of ensuring that this precious spice continues to thrive, bringing prosperity to our farmers and delight to palates across the globe for many generations to come. This 'gene-ius' move is indeed a bright ray of hope for every pepper farmer.

For further interaction, please contact:
ICAR-Indian Institute of Spices Research,
Kozhikode 673 012, Kerala

Textbook of
Field Crops Production – Commercial Crops

(Volume II)



Availability of high-yielding varieties/hybrids and increased irrigated facilities have resulted in the development of production-intensive cropping systems in several parts of India, and this has catalyzed further agronomic research based on the cropping-system approach. Many changes have also taken place in the crop-production technologies. This necessitated the revision of the earlier publication brought out in 2002. The revised textbook is in two volumes: First is covering Foodgrains and second is on Commercial Crops.

The discipline of Agronomy has no longer remained mere field trials without application of discoveries emanating from the related disciplines of Genetics, Soil Science and Agricultural Chemistry, Plant Biochemistry, etc. The future Agronomy Landscape will face challenges of climate change, transboundary issues, TRIPS and other trade-related barriers, biotic and abiotic stresses, consequences of biotechnology and genetic engineering and increased market demands in terms of quality assurance, customized food crops, global competition, ecosystem services on land and social equities, etc. The Agronomy must measure up to these futuristic challenges with well-defined metrics and methodologies for performance. The advent of hydroponics, precision farming, bio-sensors, fertigation, landscaping, application of ICT, GPS and GIS tools and micro-irrigation is in the horizon. This revised edition in two volumes covers fundamentals of the subject and at the same time will inspire and prepare teachers and students for the emerging frontiers.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

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For obtaining copies, please contact:
Business Manager
Directorate of Knowledge Management in Agriculture
Krishi Anusandhan Bhavan I, Pusa, New Delhi 110 012
Tel: 011-25843657, Fax 91-11-25841282; *e-mail:* bmicar@gmail.com