

Effects of sodium azide (NaN₃) treatment on *in vitro* growth and genetic variation in the Garnem rootstock

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Abstract

Objective

Sodium azide is a mutagenic chemical used to create genetic diversity in plants. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of different concentrations of sodium azide on the *in vitro* growth of Garnem rootstock and to identify possible changes in the sequence of the chloroplast *rbcl* gene after treatment.

Materials and methods

This study was conducted on Garnem rootstock under *in vitro* conditions from August 2021 to June 2022. Homogenized explants were treated with sodium azide at concentrations of 13 and 26 mg/L for 60 minutes, and untreated samples were considered as controls. Each treatment consisted of 10 independent replicates. After treatment, the explants were cultured in proliferation medium containing 6 mg/L kinetin (Kin) and 1 mg/L 6-benzylaminopurine (BA). Mortality percentage, number of branches, branch length and number of leaves were evaluated. Also, a fragment of the *rbcl* gene was amplified by PCR and sequenced in the control and treated samples. Sequence similarity was examined using BLAST.

Results

Sodium azide affected the survival and growth of branches. The highest mortality of explants (70%) was observed at a concentration of 26 mg/L, while no mortality was recorded in the control treatment. The highest average number of branches and leaves was obtained in the control. The length of branches also differed between the treatments; the highest value was observed at a concentration of 26 and the lowest value at a concentration of 13 mg/L. Sequence comparison showed that in the studied region of the *rbcl* gene of the treated samples, there were possible

changes in some nucleotides. The studied sequences had a high similarity with the reference sequence of *Prunus persica* *rbcl* with accession number JN114836.1 in GenBank.

Conclusion

Sodium azide affected the viability and *in vitro* growth of Garnemo basal explants in a concentration-dependent manner. Also, sequence changes in the studied region of the chloroplast *rbcl* gene were observed after treatment. However, to confirm the mutational nature, heritability, and extent of these changes, further biological replicates and sequencing of additional genomic regions are necessary.

Keywords: garnem, mutagens, peach rootstock, sequencing, sodium azide

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Introduction

Induced mutagenesis is one of the effective methods for creating genetic diversity in plants and has been widely used in plant breeding and improving agronomic traits. Mutations may occur naturally and are an important source of genetic diversity. However, when desirable traits are not found in existing genetic resources, new genetic diversity can be created using artificial mutagenesis. Physical and chemical mutagens are used to induce mutations in seeds, embryos, buds, and other plant tissues. The success rate of mutagenesis depends on factors such as the plant genotype, type and concentration of the mutagen, duration of treatment, and physiological status of the tissue used (Oladosu et al., 2016; Kharkwal, 2023). Chemical mutagens include alkylating agents, nitroso compounds, nucleotide base analogues, sodium azide, and acridine dyes. Among them, sodium azide (NaN_3) is one of the chemical mutagens of interest in plant studies due to its ability to induce genetic variation at relatively low concentrations (Kharkwal, 2023; Gruszka et al., 2012). The mutagenic activity of sodium azide is dependent on the treatment conditions, especially pH. This compound can be converted to azidoalanine in plants, which is known as a mutagenic metabolite in biological systems (LaVelle and Mangold, 1987). Also, previous studies have shown the role of acidic conditions in increasing the mutagenic activity of sodium azide (Gruszka et al., 2012). Therefore, appropriate determination of sodium azide concentration and treatment duration is essential to induce genetic variation and maintain tissue viability. Sodium

azide has been used to induce mutations in various plant species and can affect growth, physiological characteristics, and agronomic traits. Various studies have shown that this compound is capable of generating useful genetic diversity and can be used in mutation-based breeding programs to improve crop traits (Owais et al., 1983; Owais and Kleinhofs, 1988; Liang and Fournier, 1995; Khan et al., 2009; Gruszka et al., 2012). However, the plant response to sodium azide depends on the species, genotype, tissue type, concentration, and duration of treatment. Therefore, a given concentration may have a favorable effect in one species or tissue, but cause severe toxicity in another species or tissue. Recent studies have also provided further evidence for the mutagenic potential of sodium azide. Liu et al. (2025) showed using genome-wide analysis that sodium azide treatment can induce a large number of single nucleotide and other changes in DNA sequence. Also, the spectrum of changes induced can be influenced by genetic background and genomic location. These results confirm the capacity of sodium azide to induce genetic diversity and at the same time, indicate the necessity of molecular investigation of treated plant materials (Al-Hayany & Obaid, 2024; Liu et al., 2025). The effect of sodium azide under in vitro conditions has also been investigated in several plant species. Ramadan et al. (2016) investigated the effect of this substance on embryos, shoot tips and nodal explants of bitter and sweet almonds. The results showed that the survival of explants and vegetative growth depended on the concentration of sodium azide and the duration of treatment. The 60-min treatment caused changes in the number of branches, number of leaves and length of branches, indicating a concentration-dependent response of almond tissues to sodium azide (Ramadan et al., 2016). Also, Gómez et al. (2019) investigated the effect of sodium azide on micropropagated pineapple seedlings in temporary submerged bioreactors. With increasing sodium azide concentration, branch proliferation decreased significantly. At the highest concentration tested, the proliferation rate was reduced by about 87% compared to the control (Gómez et al., 2019). The physiological effect of sodium azide has also been reported in other horticultural crops. With increasing sodium azide concentration and increasing treatment time, the survival of the shoots decreases. These findings indicate that the appropriate dose for mutation induction depends on both concentration and duration of treatment. Yousif et al. (2025) also reported that 0.25 and 0.5 mM sodium azide concentrations reduced shoot proliferation in strawberry plants grown in vitro. Overall, the results of the available studies indicate that a good balance should be struck in the design of sodium azide treatments between inducing genetic changes and maintaining tissue viability. Garnem (G×N15) is an interspecific clonal rootstock obtained from a cross between almond and peach (*Prunus amygdalus* × *Prunus persica*). This rootstock is used for a number of stone fruit crops and is important due to its vigorous growth, good adaptability, and some desirable traits related to resistance. On the other hand, the ability of garnem to clonal proliferation makes it a suitable material for in vitro culture studies. Despite the importance of this foundation, information on the effect of chemical mutagens, especially sodium azide, on in vitro growth and molecular changes in garnem is still limited. Molecular examination of treated plant material could provide further information on possible DNA changes after mutagenesis. The chloroplast gene *rbcL* encodes the large subunit of the enzyme ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate carboxylase/oxygenase (Rubisco). Rubisco is one of the key enzymes in the photosynthetic carbon fixation process. The *rbcL* gene

is located in the chloroplast genome, while the small subunit of Rubisco is encoded by the nuclear *rbcS* gene. Together, these two subunits constitute the complete Rubisco enzyme; therefore, coordination between the chloroplast and nuclear components is essential for the formation and healthy function of the plant.

Materials and methods

Plant material and in vitro culture: This study was conducted from August 2021 to June 2022 at the tissue culture laboratory located in Al-Fahma district, Baghdad, Iraq. Gamum rootstock was studied as the plant material. For mutagenicity testing, homogenous and healthy explants from in vitro culture were selected. The explants were cultured in Murashige and Skoog (MS) medium (Murashige and Skoog, 1962) containing 6 mg/L kinetin (Kin) and 1 mg/L 6-benzylaminopurine (BA). 30 mL of the medium was distributed into each 300 mL glass vessel. The cultures were maintained under standard conditions used for micropropagation of Gamum rootstock.

Sodium azide treatment: Homogeneous explants were selected for sodium azide treatment. The samples were immersed in sodium azide (NaN_3) solutions at concentrations of 13 and 26 mg/L for 60 minutes. Untreated samples with sodium azide (0 mg/L) were considered as controls. Sodium azide solutions were prepared with double-distilled water and their pH was adjusted to 3.0. The explants were immersed in the solutions under sterile conditions for 60 minutes. After treatment, the explants were washed three times with sterile distilled water and then transferred to the propagation medium.

Experimental design and statistical analysis: The experiment was conducted in a completely randomized design (CRD). Each treatment consisted of 10 independent replications and one explant was considered as an experimental unit. The traits studied included explant mortality, number of branches per explant, branch length, number of leaves and seedling length. Data were analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA). Comparison of treatment means was performed with Duncan's multiple range test at a probability level of $P < 0.05$. All statistical analyses were performed using SAS software (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA).

DNA extraction: For molecular examination, three samples were selected: untreated control sample, sample treated with 13 mg/L sodium azide and sample treated with 26 mg/L sodium azide. Genomic DNA was extracted using a DNA extraction kit according to the manufacturer's instructions. The use of the commercial plant DNA extraction kit from Zymo Research in molecular studies of plants has been previously reported (Isuosuo et al., 2024).

Amplification of the chloroplast *rbcL* region by PCR: The *rbcL* region of the chloroplast genome was selected for molecular investigation and identification of sequence variations. This gene encodes the large subunit of the enzyme ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate carboxylase/oxygenase (Rubisco). Amplification of this region was performed using the *rbcLa* primer pair introduced by Maloukh et al. (2017). The forward primer sequence was 5'-ATGTCACCACAAACAGAGACTAAGC-3'. Its melting temperature (T_m) was 57.2°C and its GC percentage was 41%. The reverse primer sequence was 5'-GTAAAATCAAGTCCACCCAG-3', melting temperature 52.0°C and GC percentage was 47%. The expected size of the PCR

product was determined to be approximately 650 base pairs (bp) (Maloukh et al., 2017). PCR reactions were performed according to the protocols reported by Abdulhadi et al. (2019) and Din et al. (2023).

Agarose gel electrophoresis and purification of PCR products: PCR products were separated using 2% agarose gel electrophoresis. After staining, DNA bands were visualized at 302 nm under ultraviolet (UV) light. PCR products of the expected size were purified before sequencing.

DNA sequencing and sequence analysis: The purified PCR products were sequenced by Sanger duplex sequencing. Sequencing was performed using the BigDye Terminator v3.1 Cycle Sequencing Kit and an ABI 3130 Genetic Analyzer (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA). The resulting nucleotide sequences were edited and assembled. To identify similar sequences, a search was performed using the Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST) in the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) database (NCBI Resource Coordinators, 2016). Then, the resulting sequences were compared with the reference sequences available in GenBank and multiple alignment of the sequences was performed. To identify possible changes, the sequence of the control sample was compared with the sequence of the samples treated with sodium azide. The changes examined included single nucleotide substitutions, insertions, and deletions of nucleotides. Sequence differences compared to the control sample and the corresponding reference sequence were evaluated.

Reference sequence: The reference sequence of *Prunus persica rbcL* was obtained from GenBank with accession number JN114836.1 for sequence comparison. Based on the sample identification system in the laboratory, the control sample and the samples treated with sodium azide were identified with the numbers 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

Results and discussion

Explant mortality: Figure 1 shows the effect of sodium azide concentrations on explant mortality; it shows that the highest explant mortality reached 70% at a concentration of 26 mg/L, while no explant mortalities were recorded in the control treatment.

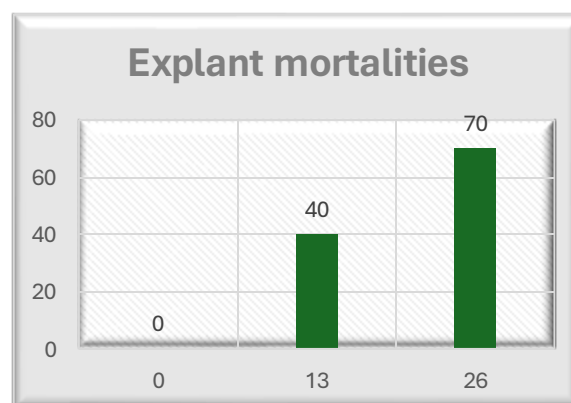


Figure 1. Effect of sodium azide concentrations on explant mortalities

Number of shoots: The results show significant differences between the concentrations of sodium azide used. The largest number of shoots was obtained with the control treatment, reaching 1.889 shoot explant shoots. It is noted that their numbers decrease with increasing concentration, reaching their lowest 1.331 shoot explants⁻¹ at a concentration of 26 mg/L (Figure 2).

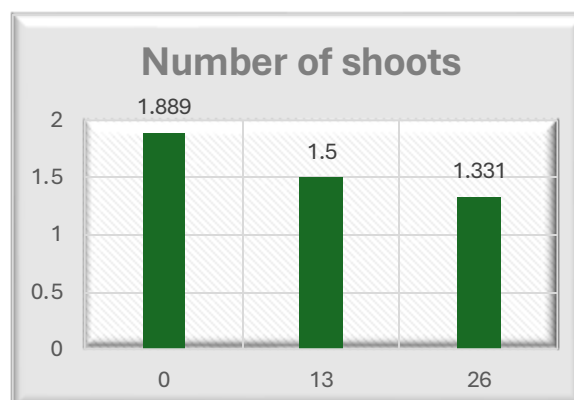


Figure 2. Effect of sodium azide concentrations on number of shoots

Shoot length: The results indicate that the treatment with sodium azide at 26 mg/L was significantly superior, giving the longest shoot length (12.639 mm), whereas the shortest shoot length was 8.341 mm when treated with a concentration of 13 mg/L (Figure 3).

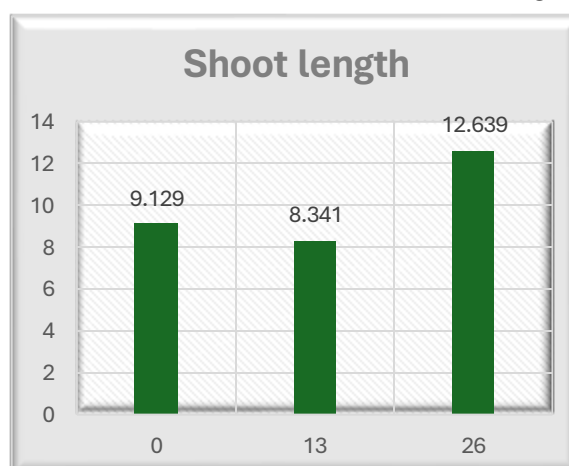


Figure 3. Effect of sodium azide concentrations on shoot length

Number of leaves: The results in showed that the control treatment was significantly superior, recording the largest number of leaves (17,670 leaf plant⁻¹), whereas the smallest number of leaves was obtained as a result of the treatment with sodium azide at 13 mg/L, (9,000 leaf explant⁻¹) (Figure 4).

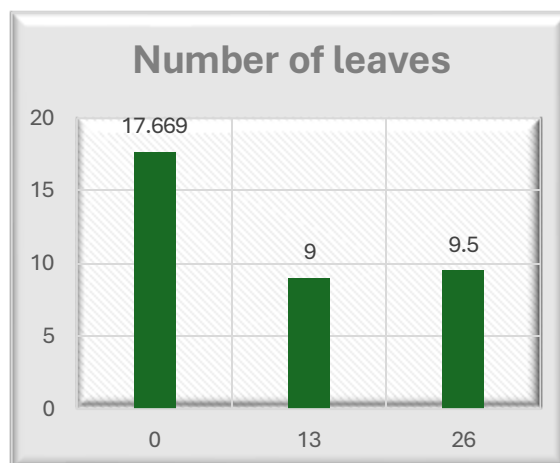


Figure 4. Effect of sodium azide concentrations on number of leaves

Shoot length (mm): From the results in Table 1, it is evident that the control treatment was superior, recording the longest seedling length (12.639 mm), thus significantly surpassing the other treatments. It is noted that the longest seedlings decreased with increasing sodium azide concentration, recording the lowest length of 14.770 mm at a concentration of 26 mg/L.

Table 1. The information on the mutant samples compared to samples from the database. NCBI

NO ID	Type of substitution	Location	Nucleotide	Sequence ID with compare	Source	Identities
Mutant 1	Transversion	18	A/T	<u>JN114836.1</u>	Prunus persica voucher	99.64%
	n	57	T/A		SBB-1089 ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate	
	GAP				carboxylase/oxygenase large subunit (rbcL) gene, partial cds; chloroplast	
Mutant 2	Transversion			<u>JN114836.1</u>	Prunus persica voucher	99.82%
	n	57	T/A		SBB-1089 ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate	
	GAP				carboxylase/oxygenase large subunit (rbcL) gene, partial cds; chloroplast	

Plantlet length (mm): From the results in Table 1, it is evident that the control treatment was superior, recording the longest seedling length of 23.566 mm, thus significantly surpassing the other treatments. It is noted that the longest seedlings decreased with increasing sodium azide concentration, recording the lowest length of 14.770 mm at a concentration of 26 mg/L (Figure 5).

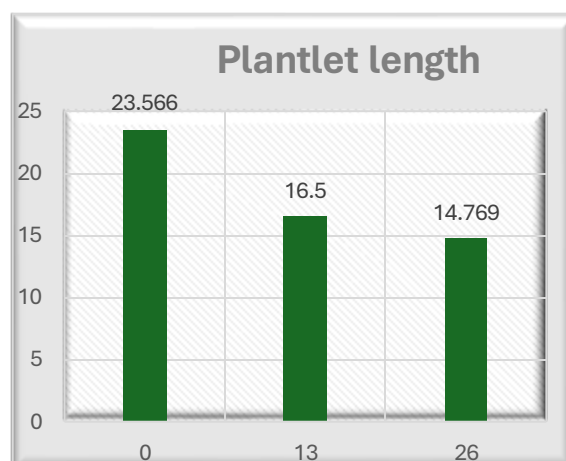


Figure 5 Effect of sodium azide concentrations on plantlet length

The results of the nucleotide sequence analysis of the gene showed *rbcL* is responsible for encoding the RuBisCO enzyme in chloroplasts by 99.64% and 99.82% for the first and second mutant samples with the control sample. The first sample showed two-point mutations at nucleotides 5 and 39 with respect to the control treatment (C/T and A/T in succession) (Figure 6).

Score	Expect	Identities	Gaps	Strand
1071 bits(548)	0.0	554/556(99%)	0/556(0%)	Plus/Plus
Query 2	CGACGGATTCAAGCTGGTGTAAAGATTATAAATTGACCTATTATACTCCTGACTATGAA	61		
Sbjct 1	T.....T.....	60		
Query 62	ACCAAAGATACTGATATCTTGGCAGCATTTCGAGTAACCTCAACCTGGAGTTCCACCT	121		
Sbjct 61	.....	120		
Query 122	GAAGAAGCAGGGGCGAGCGGTAGCTGCTGAATCTTCTACTGGTACATGGACAACCTGTATGG	181		
Sbjct 121	.....	180		
Query 182	ACTGACGGGCTTACTAGTCTTGATCGTTACAAAGGTCGATGCTACCACATCGAGCCCGTT	241		
Sbjct 181	.....	240		
Query 242	GCTGGAGAAGAAAGTCAATTTATTGCTTATGTAGCTTACCCCTTAGACCTTTTTGAAGAG	301		
Sbjct 241	.....	300		
Query 302	GGTCTGTACTAATCATGTTTACTTCCATTGTAGGTAATGTGTTGGGTTCAAGGCCCTG	361		
Sbjct 301	.....	360		
Query 362	CGCGCTCTACGTCTGGAGGATTGCGAATCCCTCCTGCTTATGTTAAACTTTCCAAGGC	421		
Sbjct 361	.....	420		
Query 422	CCGCCTCATGGGATCCAAGTTGAGAGAGATAAATTGAACAAGTATGGCCGCCCTTATTG	481		
Sbjct 421	.....	480		
Query 482	GGATGTACTATTAAACCTAAATTGGGGTTATCCGCTAAGAATTACGGTAGAGCAGTTTAT	541		
Sbjct 481	.....	540		
Query 542	GAATGTCTCCGYGGTG	557		
Sbjct 541	.....	556		

Figure 6. The location of point mutations in the first mutant sample compared to the control sample

554 nucleotides are identical as well as a single point mutation exists between the second mutant sample and the control treatment at nucleotide 39 relative to the control treatment A/T. The results show 551 nucleotide similarity, and the studied sequence contains only a point mutation without any gaps, insertions, or deletions of nucleotides compared to the standard sample. and since the plastid genome Plastome appeared stable comparing the sequence results, the first mutant sample showed the same two-point mutations recorded with the comparison sample above and with the sample recorded in the sequence. JN114836.1 In the database NCBI the second sample with the recorded mutation also showed similarity to the control sample when compared to the sample recorded in the sequence. JN114836.1 In the database NCBI (Figure 7).

Score		Expect	Identities	Gaps	Strand
1069 bits(547)		0.0	551/552(99%)	0/552(0%)	Plus/Plus
Query	6	GGATTCAAGCTGGTGTAAAGATTATAAATTGACTTATTATACTCCTGACTATGAAACCA			65
Sbjct	6	T.....			65
Query	66	AAGATACTGATATCTTGGCAGCATTTCGAGTAACCTCTCAACCTGGAGTTCCACCTGAAG			125
Sbjct	66	.....			125
Query	126	AAGCAGGGGCAGCGGTAGCTGCTGAATCTTCTACTGGTACATGGACAACCTGTATGGACTG			185
Sbjct	126	.....			185
Query	186	ACGGGCTTACTAGTCTTGATCGTTACAAAGGTCGATGCTACCACATCGAGCCCGTTGCTG			245
Sbjct	186	.....			245
Query	246	GAGAAGAAAGTCAATTTATTGCTTATGTAGCTTACCCCTTAGACCTTTTTGAAGAGGGTT			305
Sbjct	246	.....			305
Query	306	CTGTACTAACATGTTTACTTCCATTGTAGGTAATGTGTTGGGTTCAAGGCCCTGCGCG			365
Sbjct	306	.....			365
Query	366	CTCTACGCTCTGGAGGATTTGCGAATCCCTCCTGCTTATGTTAAACTTTCCAAGGCCCGC			425
Sbjct	366	.....			425
Query	426	CTCATGGGATCCAAGTTGAGAGAGATAAATTGAACAAGTATGGCCGCCCTTATTGGGAT			485
Sbjct	426	.....			485
Query	486	GTACTATTAAACCTAAATTGGGGTTATCCGCTAAGAATTACGGTAGAGCAGTTTATGAAT			545
Sbjct	486	.....			545
Query	546	GTCTCCGYGGTG	557		
Sbjct	546	.....	557		

Figure 7. The location of the point mutations in the second mutant sample compared to the control sample

Sodium azide is used as a potent mutagen to induce genetic changes in agricultural crops after its metabolism in the plant. This compound disrupts normal cellular activities by affecting intracellular calcium levels, thus reducing levels of Calmodulin production of adenine triphosphate (ATP) ATP low levels ATP in addition to disrupting spindle fiber organization and chromosome movement during mitosis, sodium azide also affects cellular respiration processes by inhibiting several enzymatic activities, including Catalase Peroxidase in addition to Cytochrome Oxidase Next to the proton pump Proton Pump it inhibits the cell cycle, and several studies have indicated that sodium azide acts as a mutagenic agent, transforming into an intermediate product that affects numerous cellular processes in the host plant, contributing to changes DNA for the host plant, all these metabolic disturbances ultimately contribute to the appearance of chromosomal abnormalities known as point mutations, which affect one or more

desirable traits in agricultural crops, ultimately improving production, quality, and resistance to biotic and abiotic stresses (Khan et al., 2009; Singh & Olejniczak, 1983; Jalil et al., 2023).

Conclusions: Sodium azide treatment affected the survival and in vitro growth of basal explants of Garnemo. The highest mortality of explants was observed at a concentration of 26 mg/L. Compared with sodium azide treatments; control samples generally produced more branches and leaves. Sequence analysis of the *rbcL* chloroplast region showed that the control and treated samples had high sequence similarity. However, a limited number of putative nucleotide changes were identified in the treated samples. These findings indicate that sodium azide treatment may cause changes in the sequence of the studied region of the *rbcL* gene. However, the data obtained from this study are insufficient to determine the functional effects, heritability, and extent of these changes at the genome level. To confirm the biological significance of these changes, it is necessary to conduct further studies using independent biological replicates, more markers from the nuclear and chloroplast genomes, and examining indices related to photosynthetic performance.

Author contributions

Sarah Ali Muhammad Al- Hayany; Methodology and Writing-Original Draft Preparation. Mohammed D. Abdulhadi; Software, Data Curation and Supervision. Ayad Assi Obaid; Investigation, Writing-Review & Editing.

Data Availability Statement

Sample recorded in the sequence JN114836.1 In the database NCBI the second sample with the recorded mutation also showed similarity to the control sample when compared to the sample recorded in the sequence JN114836.1 In the database NCBI.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable. This study focused on agricultural pests and did not involve human subjects or animal experiments that require ethical approval.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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اثر تیمار آزید سدیم (NaN_3) بر رشد درون شیشه‌ای و تنوع ژنتیکی پایه Garnem

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چکیده

هدف: آزید سدیم یک ماده شیمیایی جهش‌زا است که برای ایجاد تنوع ژنتیکی در گیاهان مورد استفاده قرار می‌گیرد. هدف از این مطالعه، بررسی اثر غلظت‌های مختلف آزید سدیم بر رشد درون شیشه‌ای پایه Garnem و شناسایی تغییرات احتمالی در توالی ژن کلروپلاستی rbcL پس از تیمار بود.

مواد و روش‌ها: این مطالعه بر روی پایه Garnem تحت شرایط درون شیشه‌ای، از اوت ۲۰۲۱ تا ژوئن ۲۰۲۲ انجام شد. ریزنمونه‌های همگن با آزید سدیم در غلظت‌های ۱۳ و ۲۶ میلی گرم در لیتر به مدت ۶۰ دقیقه تیمار شدند و نمونه‌های تیمارنشده به عنوان شاهد در نظر گرفته شدند. هر تیمار شامل ۱۰ تکرار مستقل بود. پس از تیمار، ریزنمونه‌ها در محیط تکثیر حاوی ۶ میلی گرم در لیتر کینتین (Kin) و ۱ میلی گرم در لیتر ۶-بنزیل آمینوپورین (BA) کشت شدند. درصد مرگ و میر، تعداد شاخه‌ها، طول شاخه‌ها و تعداد برگ‌ها ارزیابی شد. همچنین، قطعه‌ای از ژن rbcL با استفاده از روش PCR تکثیر و در نمونه‌های شاهد و تیمار شده تعیین توالی شد. میزان شباهت توالی‌ها با استفاده از BLAST بررسی گردید.

نتایج: آزید سدیم بر زنده‌مانی و رشد شاخه‌ها تأثیر گذاشت. بیشترین میزان مرگ و میر ریزنمونه‌ها (۷۰ درصد) در غلظت ۲۶ میلی گرم در لیتر مشاهده شد، در حالی که در تیمار شاهد هیچ مرگ و میری ثبت نشد. بیشترین میانگین تعداد شاخه‌ها و برگ‌ها در تیمار شاهد به دست آمد. طول شاخه‌ها نیز بین تیمارها متفاوت بود؛ به طوری که بیشترین مقدار در غلظت ۲۶ میلی گرم در لیتر و کمترین مقدار در غلظت ۱۳ میلی گرم در لیتر مشاهده شد. مقایسه توالی‌ها نشان داد که در ناحیه مورد مطالعه از ژن rbcL در نمونه‌های تیمار شده، تغییرات احتمالی در برخی نوکلئوتیدها وجود دارد. توالی‌های مورد مطالعه شباهت بالایی با توالی مرجع ژن rbcL در گونه Prunus persica با شماره دسترسی JN114836.1 در بانک ژنی GenBank داشتند.

نتیجه گیری: آزید سدیم به صورت وابسته به غلظت بر زنده ماندی و رشد درون شیشه ای ریزنمونه های پایه Garnem تأثیر گذاشت. همچنین، پس از تیمار، تغییراتی در توالی ناحیه مورد مطالعه از ژن کلروپلاستی rbcL مشاهده شد. باین حال، برای تأیید ماهیت جهشی این تغییرات، قابلیت وراثت آن ها و میزان گسترش این تغییرات، انجام مطالعات بیشتر با تعداد تکرارهای زیستی بیشتر و تعیین توالی نواحی ژنومی اضافی ضروری است.

کلمات کلیدی: آزید سدیم، پایه هلو، تعیین توالی، مواد جهش زا، Garnem

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