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Conventional and Molecular Techniques: From Simple Breeding to Speed Breeding in Crop Plants

(*Mukesh Kumar Poonia[1], Kapil Bishnoi[1], Ravinder Kumar[1] and Babulal Dhaka[2])
[1]Department of Genetics and Plant Breeding, College of Agriculture, SKRAU, Bikaner
[2]Department of Genetics and Plant Breeding, SKNAU, Jobner
*Corresponding Author's email: mukeshpoonia410@gmail.com

Crop breeding has been essential for centuries to meet the growing global demand for food, fiber, and fuel. Traditional breeding methods, also known as conventional breeding, have been the backbone of agriculture for generations. However, the need to produce crops with enhanced traits and adaptability to changing environmental conditions has driven the development of molecular techniques that have revolutionized the field of crop improvement. One of the most exciting advancements in recent years is "speed breeding," which combines both conventional and molecular approaches to accelerate the breeding process and develop improved crop varieties faster than ever before.

Conventional Breeding

Conventional breeding is the age-old practice of selecting and crossing plants with desirable traits to produce offspring with the desired characteristics. This process involves controlled pollination and selection over several generations. While it has been highly successful in creating improved crop varieties, it is a time-consuming process, often taking years to develop a new cultivar. Factors such as plant maturity, seasonality, and the availability of suitable germplasm can significantly slow down the progress.

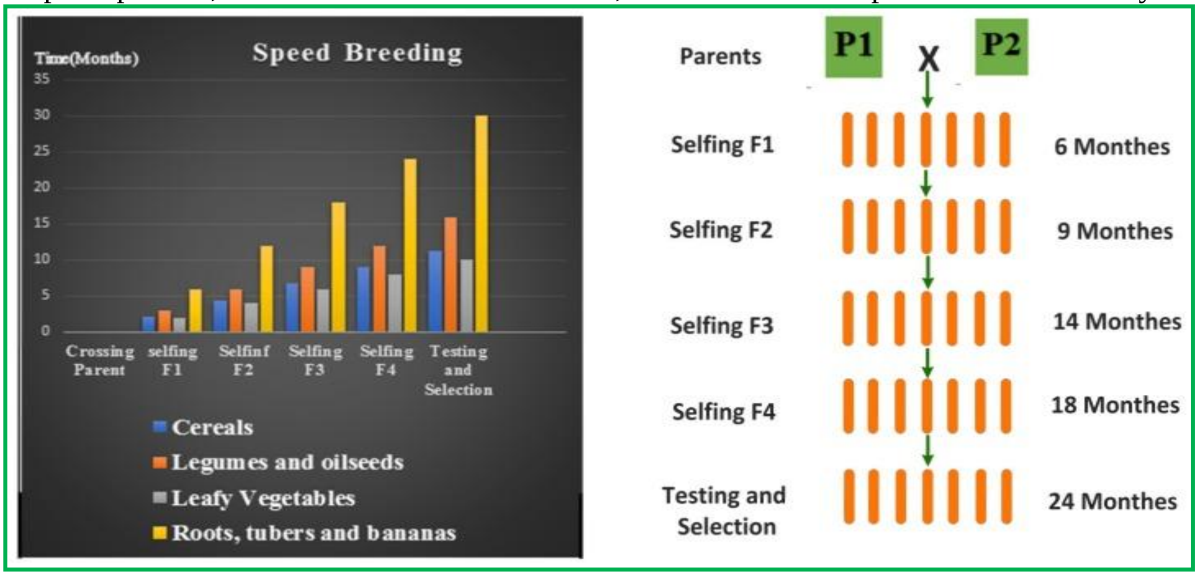
Molecular Techniques in Crop Breeding

The advent of molecular techniques has brought a revolution in crop breeding. These techniques allow scientists to identify and manipulate specific genes responsible for desired traits, leading to more precise and rapid crop improvement. Some of the key molecular techniques include:

- Marker-Assisted Selection (MAS): MAS enables breeders to identify and select plants with desired traits by analyzing molecular markers linked to those traits. This method significantly reduces the time required for traditional phenotypic selection.
- Genetic Engineering (GE): Genetic engineering involves the direct manipulation of an organism's genes to introduce or enhance specific traits. This has led to the development of genetically modified (GM) crops with traits such as resistance to pests, diseases, or herbicides.
- Genomic Selection (GS): GS utilizes genomic data to predict the breeding value of individual plants. It allows breeders to make selections at an earlier stage of plant development, saving time and resources.

Speed Breeding for Accelerating Plant Breeding: Speed breeding is an exciting and emerging approach in crop breeding that combines the strengths of both conventional and molecular techniques to accelerate the development of new crop varieties. It was first developed for small-grain crops like wheat and barley but has since been applied to various other crops.

- Controlled Environments: Speed breeding involves growing crops in controlled environments with optimized conditions for rapid growth. This includes extended photoperiods, elevated carbon dioxide levels, and controlled temperature and humidity.



- Conventional Crosses: Breeders still use conventional breeding methods to create genetic diversity by crossing different varieties or wild relatives. However, the rapid growth conditions allow for multiple generations to be produced in a single year.
- Molecular Techniques: Molecular techniques, such as marker-assisted selection and genotyping, are used to identify desirable traits and select the best-performing plants early in the breeding process.

Speed breeding offers several advantages

- Accelerated Breeding Cycles: By shortening the time required for each breeding cycle, speed breeding enables the development of new crop varieties in a fraction of the time it takes with traditional methods.
- Enhanced Trait Incorporation: Molecular techniques help breeders introduce or enhance specific traits with precision, making it easier to address challenges like disease resistance, drought tolerance, and nutritional content.
- Faster Response to Changing Environments: Speed breeding allows breeders to respond more quickly to emerging environmental challenges, such as climate change and new disease outbreaks.

Conclusion

Conventional breeding methods have served agriculture well for centuries, but the integration of molecular techniques and the development of speed breeding have taken crop improvement to new heights. To deal with this challenge and to enhance crop selection efficiency, marker-assisted breeding, and transgenic approaches have been adopted, generating desired traits via exogenous transformation into elite varieties. These genome editing systems are excellent tools that provide rapid, targeted mutagenesis and can identify the specific plant molecular mechanisms for crop improvement. These innovative approaches not only expedite the breeding process but also offer the potential to address global challenges like food security and climate resilience. As we move forward, a combination of conventional and molecular techniques will continue to drive progress in crop breeding, ensuring a sustainable and productive future for agriculture.

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