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The Multifunctional Role of Amino Acids in Plant Physiology and Crop Productivity

*Sanjay Seemawat[1] and Dr. B.G. Chhipa[2]
[1]Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Horticulture, Rajasthan College of Agriculture, MPUAT, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India
[2]Dept. of Soil and Water Engineering, CTAE, MPUAT, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India
*Corresponding Author's email: sanjayraj4116@gmail.com

Amino acids are fundamental molecules that play diverse and multifaceted roles in plant biology, extending beyond their classical function as protein building blocks. The agricultural sector today faces challenges such as declining soil fertility, climate change, water scarcity, and increased biotic and abiotic stresses. Enhancing crop productivity under such conditions requires innovative approaches. Amino acids, both synthesized within plants and supplied exogenously, offer a potential tool to address these challenges by improving nutrient assimilation, strengthening stress resilience, and enhancing physiological efficiency. Despite their critical roles, the molecular mechanisms through which individual amino acids influence growth regulation, hormonal cross-talk, and activation of stress-responsive signaling pathways are still not fully understood. These knowledge gaps limit our ability to effectively utilize amino acid metabolism in developing climateresilient crops.

Types of Amino Acids and Their Functions in Agricultural Crop Production

Amino-acid biostimulants supply organic nitrogen, drive metabolic and signaling pathways, and enhance stress resilience when applied as foliar sprays or soil amendments. Below is a table of 17 key amino acids—grouped by chemical class—with their primary functions in crop production.

Amino Acid	Chemical Class	Key Functions in Crop Production
Glycine	Polar uncharged	Acts as an osmoprotectant and chelator; precursor of glycine betaine, improving drought and salinity tolerance
Alanine	Non-polar	Contributes to protein synthesis and serves as an energy source under stress
Serine	Polar uncharged	Precursor for phospholipids and participates in stress-signal transduction
Proline	Special amino acid	Stabilizes proteins and membranes; accumulates under drought/salinity to maintain cell turgor
Glutamic acid	Acidic	Central to nitrogen assimilation; enhances root architecture and recovery after stress
Aspartic acid	Acidic	Chelates Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+}; stimulates root elongation and nutrient transport
Valine	Non-polar	Supports structural protein assembly and provides energy during stress
Leucine	Non-polar	Regulates synthesis of secondary metabolites and influences hormone balance

Amino Acid	Chemical Class	Key Functions in Crop Production
Isoleucine	Non-polar	Supplies energy for root growth and contributes to protein construction
Threonine	Polar uncharged	Involved in glycoprotein formation and mediates response to environmental cues
Phenylalanine	Non-polar aromatic	Precursor for phenolic compounds and lignin; reinforces cell walls and disease resistance
Tyrosine	Polar aromatic	Feeds into flavonoid and alkaloid pathways; serves antioxidant roles
Tryptophan	Non-polar aromatic	Precursor of indole-3-acetic acid (IAA); promotes root initiation, flowering and fruit set
Methionine	Non-polar sulfurous	Main precursor of ethylene and S-adenosylmethionine; supports antioxidant glutathione synthesis and ripening control
Cysteine	Polar sulfurous	Integral to glutathione biosynthesis; chelates heavy metals and protects against oxidative damage
Lysine	Basic	Precursor for polyamines; modulates cell division, pH homeostasis and stress-response signaling
Arginine	Basic	Supplies nitric oxide and polyamines; regulates stomatal aperture and defense pathways

Source: El-Nasharty *et al.*, 2021

Amino acids effects on vegetable crops

Exogenous amino acid application has been documented to modulate crop growth, yield, and biochemical quality by directly or indirectly influencing physiological activities in plant growth and development.

Tomato: Tantawy *et al.*, (2009) discovered that all growth parameters, including plant height, leaf area, and total chlorophyll, as well as tomato yield and fruit environment, reacted significantly to an increase in amino acid levels with the highest values obtained at a rate of 3 gm/L from amino acids.

Pepper: Sarojnee *et al.*, (2009) investigated the effects of two synthetic forms of naturally occurring amino acid stimulants (Perfectos Powder and Perfectos Liquid) on hot pepper plants at two doses. When Perfectos TM Powder was added at 0.45g and 0.27g/plant in the first and second fertilizer dressings, respectively, plant height, canopy width, number of branches, shoot dry matter, fruit weight, fruit diameter, percent fruit dry matter content, ascorbic acid content, and marketable yield all improved dramatically. At 27 and 40 days after transplanting, shot dry matter obtained in the Perfectos Powder (0.45g/plant) treatment was 54.9 and 54.1 percent higher than in the untreated control treatment, respectively. Plants treated with Perfectos Powder (0.45g/plant) yielded a marketable yield of 16.5 t/ha, which was 75.9% higher than untreated control plants. In contrast to plants that were not processed, Plant height, canopy width, number of branches, shoot dry matter, fruit weight, fruit diameter, percent fruit dry matter content and ascorbic acid content all improved dramatically when Perfectos TM Liquid (1.6 mL/L) was used.

Broccol: Shekari & Javanmardi (2017) indicated that foliar application of amino acid, at suitable concentrations, had positive effects on the physical and chemical properties of the Broccoli transplants.

Potato: Khaled *et al.*, (2020) spraying plants with amino acids at a rate of 1000 ppm led to a significant increase in plant growth and tubers yield and improve their quality, as well as improve the nutrient balance in potato tuber.

Impact of Amino Acids on Plant Stress

Amino acids are not only building blocks of proteins but also powerful stress mitigators. They protect plants by acting as osmolytes, antioxidants, metal chelators, and defense activators. Their exogenous application as biostimulants enhances stress tolerance, leading to better survival, growth, and productivity under challenging conditions.

Amino acids play crucial roles in enhancing plant tolerance to these stresses by regulating osmotic balance, maintaining cellular water potential, and scavenging reactive oxygen species. They stimulate the synthesis of defense-related compounds such as phytoalexins, antimicrobial peptides, and secondary metabolites involved in plant immunity. Amino acids like arginine and lysine serve as precursors for these compounds, activating defense pathways that deter pests and pathogens from invading plant tissues.

Amino acids such as proline and arginine accumulate in response to drought stress, acting as molecular chaperones that stabilize proteins and protect cellular structures from dehydration-induced damage. Amino acids contribute to cold stress adaptation by enhancing membrane stability, promoting cryoprotectant accumulation, and regulating cold-responsive gene expression. Proline and glycine betaine, accumulated in response to cold stress, act as cryoprotectants that prevent ice formation and maintain cellular integrity at low temperatures.

Challenges and future research in the agricultural of amino acid roles in plants

Climate change has led to more frequent abiotic stresses such as drought, heat, salinity, flooding, and nutrient imbalances, as well as biotic stresses including emerging pests and diseases. Amino acids play a crucial role in mitigating these impacts by acting as biostimulants, osmoprotectants, antioxidants, and signaling molecules that enhance plant resilience.

Amino acids are increasingly recognized as bioactive molecules in agriculture, with functions far beyond their role in protein synthesis. Their application in agroecosystems supports crop productivity, soil health, stress resilience, and sustainable farming practices.

Advanced omics tools such as genomics, proteomics, and metabolomics are helping researchers map amino acid pathways in detail, while isotope tracing and flux analysis reveal how nitrogen and carbon move through these pathways under stress. Modern CRISPR and genome editing techniques allow precise modifications of amino acid biosynthesis genes, improving crop tolerance to drought, salinity, and heat. At the same time, synthetic biology and microbial engineering are being used to design rhizosphere microbes that supply amino acids directly to plants. In addition, biosensors and nanotechnology-based delivery systems enable real-time monitoring and controlled release of amino acids in the field.

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