

The Root Microbiome: Breeding Plants to Harness Their Own Personal Army of Bacteria

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Few relationships in nature are as intimate or as essential as the one between plants and the invisible world beneath them. Every root that pushes into the soil enters a busy microbial metropolis filled with bacteria, fungi, archaea and other organisms that collectively make up the root microbiome. These microbes, often numbering in the billions around a single plant, quietly influence nearly every aspect of plant life: how well it grows, how it absorbs nutrients, how it defends itself and even how it responds to environmental stress. For centuries, farmers have relied on natural soil fertility without fully understanding the living forces that made it possible. Only recently has science begun to appreciate how deeply plants depend on microbial allies. As climate change, soil degradation and resource limitations challenge global agriculture, researchers are turning toward a revolutionary idea: breeding plants not only for height, yield or disease resistance but also for their ability to recruit, nurture and command beneficial microbes. This shift powerfully reframes agriculture. Instead of viewing microbes as background actors or soil inhabitants, scientists now see them as an extension of the plant's own biology a living toolkit plants can deploy to access nutrients, fight pathogens and survive harsh environments. If plants can be bred to better communicate with this hidden microbial army, the future of agriculture may not rely solely on fertilizers or chemicals, but on the natural partnerships embedded within life itself. An artistic-scientific visualisation in Figure 1, revealing the complex microbial universe surrounding plant roots, symbolising the unseen biological forces that support plant growth and drive the future of microbiome-based breeding.



Figure 1. The Hidden World Beneath the Roots

Why Roots and Their Microbiome Matter More Than Ever

Roots are much more than anchors; they are biological hubs constantly sensing, signalling and interacting with their environment. When a root grows into the soil, it releases chemical compounds exudates that act like messages or invitations. Some microbes are attracted by these signals and form mutually beneficial relationships. Others are repelled or ignored. Over thousands of years, crops evolved microbial partnerships suited to their native environments, co-adapting with soils shaped by climate, geography and ecological conditions. Modern agriculture disrupted many of these relationships. Intensive tillage destroys microbial networks. Synthetic nitrogen fertilizers diminish the plant's need to rely on nutrient-fixing microbes, gradually weakening these natural alliances. Monocropping reduces microbial diversity and chemicals used for weed or pest control often harm beneficial organisms. The result is a paradox: although we rely on soils more than ever, many cropping systems function with weakened soil biology. Harnessing the root microbiome offers a path to rebuild these relationships. Microbial communities can boost nutrient uptake, especially nitrogen and phosphorus; improve drought tolerance; suppress pathogens; buffer salt stress; and stimulate plant immunity. But not all plants recruit microbes equally and this is where breeding comes in.

How Plants Shape Their Own Microbial Communities

Plants are not passive receivers of soil microbes. They actively select which microbes colonize their roots. This selection occurs through chemical signals, physical structures and changes in the rhizosphere microenvironment. Each plant species and even each variety creates a distinct microbial fingerprint. Some modern crop varieties, especially those bred for high-input agriculture, are surprisingly poor at recruiting beneficial microbes. When fertilizers are abundant, the evolutionary signals that encourage microbial colonization become weaker. Plants that once depended on nitrogen-fixing bacteria or phosphate-mobilising microbes no longer prioritize those partnerships. Gene editing and advanced breeding are now helping scientists rediscover and enhance these microbial communication pathways. Instead of simply breeding plants to tolerate stress, researchers aim to breed plants that access microbial partners capable of mitigating stress naturally. Imagine crops that automatically summon drought-relief microbes when water becomes scarce, or plants that increase microbial nitrogen fixation when fertilizer is limited. These capabilities already exist in nature; breeding efforts simply need to unlock and amplify them. A scientific conceptual illustration is shown in Figure 2, roots surrounded by diverse microbial partners, forming an active communication network.

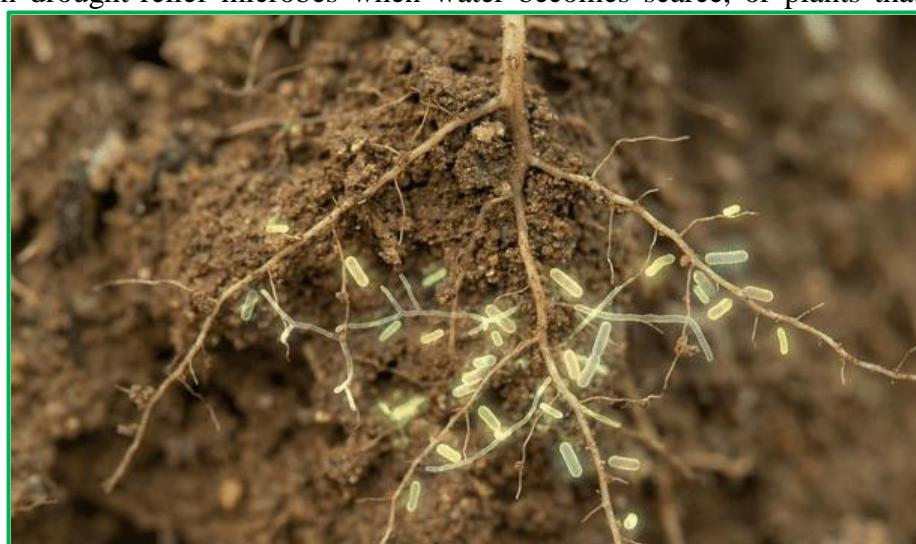


Figure 2. The Root Microbiome Network
diverse microbial partners, forming an active communication network.

The Hidden Chemical Conversations Between Plants and Microbes

A root is both a signal emitter and a sensor. Every day, it secretes sugars, amino acids, hormones and volatile molecules into the soil. These exudates act as invitations to specific microbes. Beneficial bacteria respond by producing compounds that enhance growth, trigger immunity or increase nutrient access. Some microbes help unlock phosphorus trapped in the soil; others produce natural antibiotics that defend against pathogens. Still others form biofilms that protect the root from desiccation. Plant genetics controls much of this chemical communication. Subtle differences in genes that regulate root exudates can dramatically alter which microbes are attracted or repelled. When scientists compared wild relatives of crops with modern domesticated varieties, they found that domestication unintentionally reduced microbial diversity around roots. Gene editing tools such as CRISPR now offer a way to restore or fine-tune these interactions. By reactivating ancestral traits or adjusting exudate profiles, breeders can help plants send stronger biochemical signals to beneficial bacteria, effectively recruiting a more powerful microbial army.

Breeding Plants with Microbial Partnership in Mind

The idea of breeding for microbiome compatibility is both simple and revolutionary. For most of agricultural history, breeders selected plants based on visible traits: height, yield, disease resistance or grain quality. The microbiome was invisible and therefore ignored. Today, with sequencing technologies revealing the microbial world in extraordinary detail, breeders can identify plant genes linked to microbial recruitment. For example, plants vary in their ability to attract nitrogen-fixing bacteria or phosphate-solubilising microbes. By screening different varieties and correlating their root microbiome composition with performance under stress, researchers can identify genetic markers associated with beneficial microbial traits. Some breeding programs already incorporate microbiome traits. Certain sorghum varieties, for instance, naturally attract bacteria that help manage drought stress. When these genetic traits are introduced into other varieties, the benefit follows showing that microbial recruitment is inheritable and selectable. CRISPR allows even finer control. Instead of waiting for natural variation, breeders can directly modify genes linked to root architecture, exudate profiles or immune signalling. These edits can help plants establish stronger microbial partnerships from the start. A conceptual graphic illustrating in Figure 3, how breeders select plant genotypes that recruit beneficial microbes more effectively.

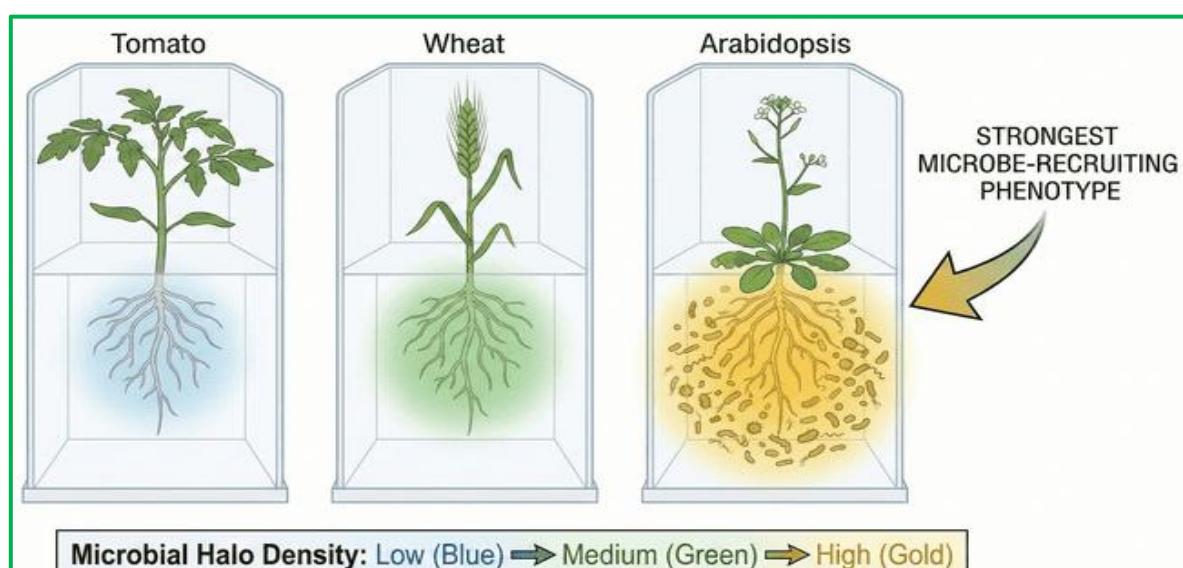


Figure 3. Microbiome-Enhanced Plant Breeding

A Natural Defence System: Microbes as Plant Bodyguards

Beneficial microbes act as an early warning system. They detect pathogens before plants do, producing antimicrobial compounds that suppress infection. Some microbes prime plant immune systems, making them more responsive when stress occurs. Others compete with pathogens for space and nutrients, preventing harmful organisms from gaining a foothold. This natural defence system is incredibly sophisticated. Microbes communicate with roots through chemical signals, teaching the plant to “expect” stress and prepare accordingly. Some bacteria increase hormonal responses that help a plant close its stomata during drought. Others produce antioxidants that reduce damage from heat or salt stress. Breeding plants to maximize these relationships could dramatically reduce pesticide use. Instead of spraying chemicals to combat disease, a plant could rely on its microbial allies—living defenders that adapt, evolve and respond faster than any synthetic product.

How the Root Microbiome Helps Plants Survive Stress

As climate change intensifies, stress tolerance has become a central challenge for agriculture. Heat waves, unpredictable rainfall, salinity from irrigation and degrading soils all threaten productivity. The root microbiome offers solutions nature developed long before farming existed. Beneficial microbes can:

- ❖ Convert nitrogen into forms that the plant can use
- ❖ Release organic acids that free phosphorus locked in soil
- ❖ Increase root branching for better water uptake
- ❖ Produce osmoprotectants that shield cells from drought
- ❖ Secrete hormones that regulate growth under stress

These functions are not hypothetical; they have been observed repeatedly in controlled studies. What varies is how well each plant can tap into its microbial community. Breeding and gene editing aim to make this connection more reliable, consistent, and powerful. Imagine a wheat variety that grows stronger under stress because its microbiome produces natural growth-regulating hormones. Or a rice plant that thrives in salty soil because microbes help manage ion balance. These outcomes become possible when plant genetics and microbial biology are aligned through thoughtful breeding. A visualisation is shown in Figure 4, beneficial microbes protecting roots and enhancing plant resilience under drought or disease stress.

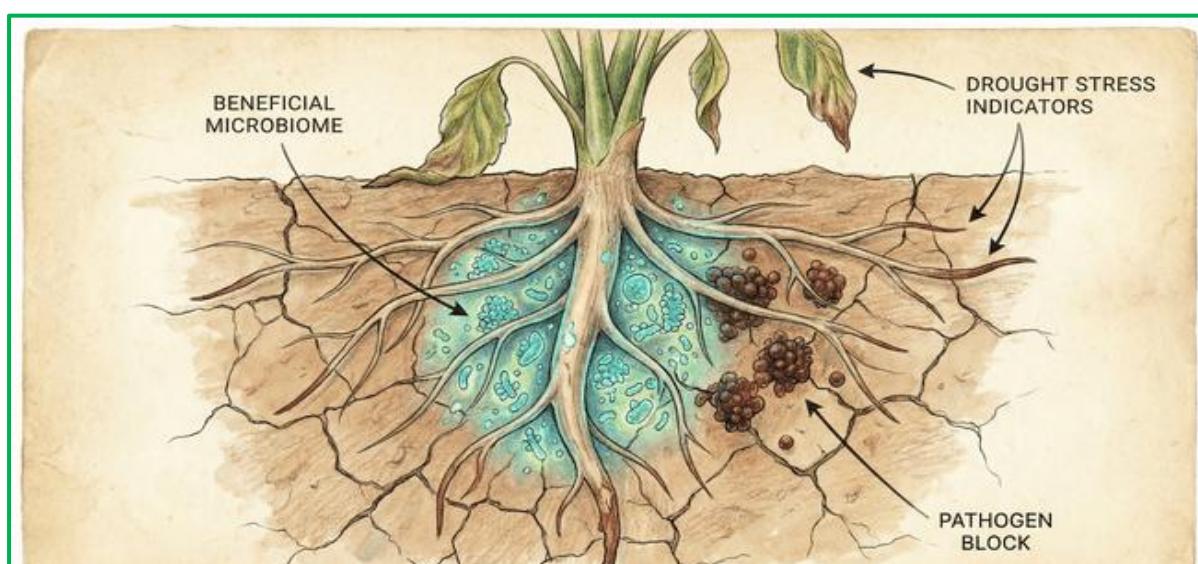


Figure 4. Microbial Defence and Stress Support

The Future: Plants and Microbes as Co-Engineered Systems

The next frontier in agriculture is not simply breeding hardier plants, but constructing systems where plants and microbes evolve together in designed harmony. Scientists envision crops whose genomes contain switches that activate microbial partnerships under specific conditions. These plants will not just withstand stress but anticipate and counteract it through coordinated biological interactions. Some future possibilities include:

- Crops that modulate exudates depending on microbial needs
- Varieties that customize their microbiome from seedling to harvest
- Microbial “consortia” designed to match specific plant genotypes
- Feedback systems where plants signal microbes during stress and microbes respond with targeted support

This vision transforms the root zone from a passive soil interface into a dynamic biological ecosystem engineered for resilience. In this new paradigm, the microbiome becomes an extension of the plant’s immune system, nutrient network and stress-response machinery. The most exciting part is that these solutions emerge not from chemical inputs, but from natural relationships amplified through scientific understanding. A futuristic concept is shown in Figure 5, plants and microbial partners interacting in a coordinated, engineered soil ecosystem.

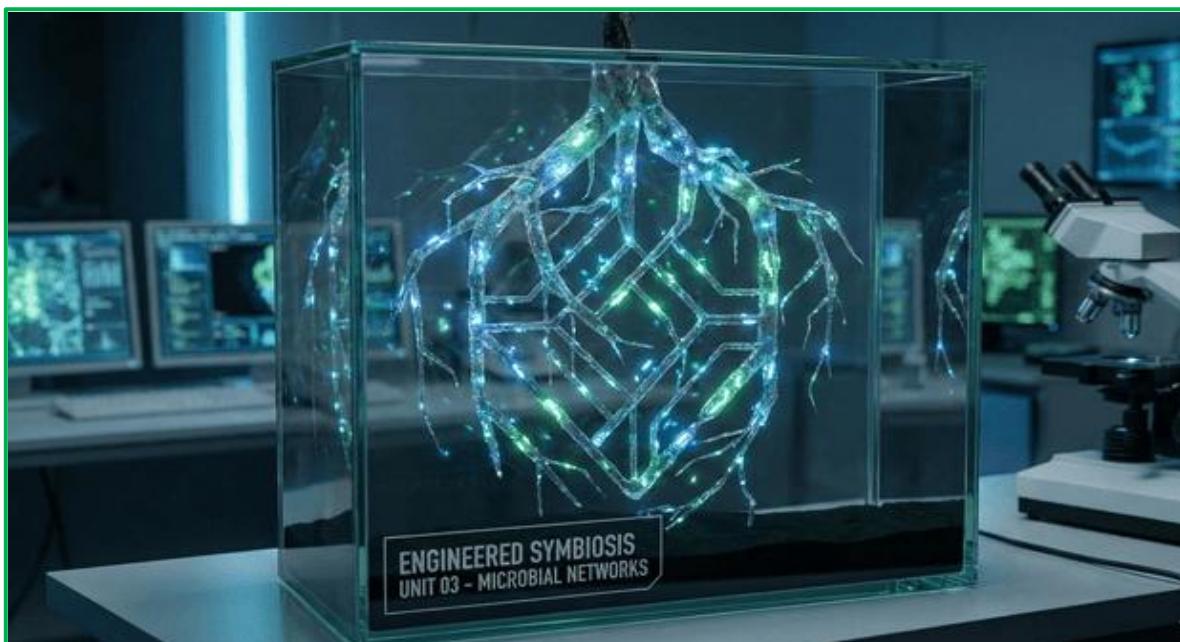


Figure 5. Future Co-Engineered Plant–Microbe Systems

Conclusion

Beneath every plant lies a hidden universe that determines its health and future. The root microbiome, once overlooked, has emerged as one of the most powerful tools available to modern agriculture. As scientists uncover the intricate dialogue between plants and microbes, the possibility of breeding crops that command their own biological support systems becomes increasingly real. Instead of relying on fertilizers, pesticides or external inputs, future crops may draw strength from within the soil’s living fabric. Their roots will attract microbial allies that nourish them, protect them and help them withstand stress. Breeding and gene editing will shape plants not only by what is seen above the ground but by the invisible armies they cultivate below. In an era marked by climate instability and rising demand for sustainable food production, the root microbiome offers a hopeful path forward. It reminds us that

innovation does not always require creating something new; sometimes it means rediscovering relationships that nature engineered long before humanity learned to farm. The future of agriculture may depend not just on stronger plants, but on stronger partnerships between plants and the microscopic allies waiting beneath their roots.

References

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