An Ethylene-Mediated Increase in Sensitivity to Auxin Induces Adventitious Root Formation in Flooded Rumex palustris Sm.1

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1 Part of this research was funded by a grant from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research.

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Adventitious roots can contain air channels connected to the shoot that enable shoot-to-root diffusion of air. The formation of these roots is a prerequisite for long-term survival of many wetland plants under flooded, oxygen-deficient soil conditions (Justin and Armstrong, 1987; Visser et al., 1996a). The induction of adventitious roots has been attributed to several plant hormones (Drew et al., 1979; Wample and Reid, 1979); two are important for the rooting response in species from the genus Rumex. We have shown that application of either auxin or ethylene induces formation of adventitious roots in Rumex palustris and Rumex thyrsiflorus plants and that inhibition of auxin transport from the shoot to the rooting zone decreases the number of roots induced by flooding (Visser et al., 1995). Recently, it was demonstrated that inhibition of ethylene synthesis in roots also led to a decline in root formation under flooded conditions (Visser et al., 1996b). From these experiments, we may conclude that a sufficiently high concentration of each of these hormones is essential for the flooding-induced formation of adventitious roots. It is well known that auxin can increase the rate of ethylene biosynthesis (Imaseki et al., 1977; Riov and Yang, 1989; Kelly and Bradford, 1990), whereas ethylene may affect auxin transport positively (Musgrave and Walters, 1973) or negatively (Beyer and Morgan, 1970; Suttle, 1988) or influence auxin perception (Bertell et al., 1990; Liu and Reid, 1992). The aim of the present study was to establish the individual roles of auxin and ethylene and the ways in which these hormones interact in the process of flooding-induced adventitious root formation. Intact plants of R. palustris Sm. were used for these experiments, because this wetland species readily forms large numbers of adventitious roots when flooded (Visser et al., 1996b).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Plant Growth

Seeds of Rumex palustris Sm. were collected from a river foreland and sown in flat trays filled with polyethylene grains (Lacqten Low Density, Elf Atochem, Balan, France) and nutrient solution (2 mM Ca(NO3)2, 1.25 mM K2SO4, 0.5 mM MgSO4, 0.05 mM K2HPO4, 50 μM FeCl3, 0.5 μM MnCl2, 0.5 μM CuSO4, 0.5 μM ZnCl2, 0.2 μM H3BO3, 0.002 μM Na2MoO4, and 0.5 μM CuSO4). The trays were placed in a growth chamber and photosynthetic photon flux density was 50 μmol·m−2·s−1 (vis spectrum). Water was added daily to maintain soil moisture at 60% of field capacity.

Abbreviations: AVG, L-a-(2-aminoethoxyvinyl)-Gly; NPA, N-1-naphthylphthalamic acid.
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 solução (concentrations as above) in 20-L containers (six to eight
plants from nutrient solution to
was filled with glass beads and nutrient solution so that the
roots were immersed. Either water or 250 μmol of AVG,
dissolved in 0.3 mL of water, was brushed on the leaves of
each plant (as described above), and the plants were al-
lowed to acclimatize for 24 h. Then, each AVG-pretreated
plant was brushed with 25 nmol of 1-NAA (dissolved in 0.3
mL water), whereas the water-pretreated plants were
brushed with either water or 25 nmol of 1-NAA (dissolved in 0.3
mL water). Measurements of ethylene production
started after the cuvettes were closed using a lid with an
inlet and an outlet. The inlet was connected to a stream of
ethylene-free air (flow rate 1 L h⁻¹)

Hypoxia and Ethylene Treatment

Waterlogging (soil flooding) was simulated by transfer-
ing hydroponically grown plants from nutrient solution to
an unstirred agar solution (0.1%, w/v; nutrient concentra-
tions as in the nutrient solution), which was first deoxy-
genated by vigorously flushing with nitrogen gas. Oxygen
concentrations in such an agar solution varied between 0.4
and 1.0 mg L⁻¹ 2 d after the onset of the experiment.

For ethylene treatments, plants were transferred to con-
tainers in which the nutrient solution was flushed with
various concentrations of ethylene. These concentrations
were obtained by blending 50 μL L⁻¹ ethylene (Hoekloos,
Dieren, The Netherlands) with air, using gas blenders
(model E55N3, Bronkhorst High Tech, Ruurlo, The Neth-
erlands). Ethylene concentration in the nutrient solution
was examined by introducing small volumes of ambient air
under Petri dishes at the bottom of each container. After
these air pockets were allowed to reach equilibrium with the
gas concentrations in the nutrient solution, gas samples
were drawn and analyzed on a gas chromatograph (model
437A, Chrompack, Bergen op Zoom, The Netherlands;
1.2 m × 2 mm Haysep QS-column).

Measurements of Free IAA Concentrations

Five-week-old plants of R. palustris were transferred to containers
filled with either fresh nutrient solution (control) or deoxygenated agar (as described above). A third
group of plants was pretreated with 150 nmol of NPA (in 0.3 mL of water) per shoot 24 h before transfer to agar.
At various times, plants were harvested and samples of the
root-forming zone (i.e. the apical 5 mm of the tap root)
were quickly frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at −80°C
for a maximum of 6 weeks. One group of plants from each
treatment (control, agar, and NPA/agar) was harvested
after 7 d to determine the number of adventitious roots
formed.

Purification and quantification of free IAA were per-
formed essentially as described by Chen et al. (1988). About
100 to 300 mg fresh weight of tissue (rooting zones of two
plants) were ground in liquid nitrogen, and approximately
5 mL of extraction buffer (35% [w/v] 0.2 mM imidazole, pH
7, 65% [v/v] propanol) was added to the plant material,
together with 150 ng of [13C₆]IAA as an internal reference.
After 3.3 kBq of [3H]IAA (specific activity 962 GBq
mmol⁻¹; Amersham) was added to the sample to trace the
fraction containing the free IAA during purification, the
homogenate was allowed to equilibrate at 4°C for 1 h.
The sample was then centrifuged at 1500g for 10 min and the
supernatant was collected. The pellet was taken up twice in
another 1 mL of extraction buffer and centrifuged. Subse-
quently, the supernatants were pooled and the propanol in
the sample was evaporated in a rotating evaporator (Ro-
tavapor R110, Büchii, Flawil, Switzerland) at 45°C. The
remaining sample was then applied to an NH₂ column
(model 456 SPE, J.T. Baker) that had been washed succes-
ively with 5 mL of hexane, 5 mL of acetonitrile, and twice
with 5 mL of distilled water and preconditioned with 5 mL
of 0.2 mM imidazole (pH 7) and two lots of 5 mL of water.
After the extract had passed through the column, the col-
umn was washed successively with 5 mL of hexane, ethyl
acetate, acetonitrile, and methanol before free IAA was
eluted with 3 mL of 5% (v/v) acetic acid in methanol. The sample was evaporated until near dryness, taken up in 120 µL 50% (v/v) methanol, injected on an HPLC column (Phenomenex Ultracarb 30 5-micron ODS reverse-phase column [Torrance, CA] connected to a Waters M45 HPLC-pump; pump rate 1 mL min⁻¹) and eluted with 1% (v/v) acetic acid in 25% (v/v) methanol. The radioactive fractions were pooled, dried in a warm sand bath under nitrogen gas, taken up in 150 µL of methanol, and methylated with column [Torrance, CA] connected to a Waters M45 HPLC-sample was evaporated until near dryness, taken up in 120 samples of tissue taken at each time interval per treatment.

RESULTS

Transferring *R. palustris* plants from aerated nutrient solution to deoxygenated agar resulted in the formation of a large number of adventitious roots (Fig. 1). Application of either a high dose of auxin (100 nmol of 1-NAA in 0.3 mL of water per shoot; Fig. 1A) or a high concentration of ethylene (2.5 µL L⁻¹; Fig. 1B) caused a very similar response in well aerated plants. When a relatively low dose or concentration of these two hormones was applied (25 nmol of 1-NAA in 0.3 mL of water per shoot or 1.0 µL L⁻¹ ethylene; Fig. 1C), only a limited number of roots were induced. Simultaneous application of a low auxin dose and a low ethylene concentration almost fully restored the maximum rooting response. The maximum number of adventitious roots (induced by stagnant agar, high ethylene concentrations, or high auxin doses) varied somewhat between replicate experiments, but the relative difference between treatments was not affected by this variation (data not shown).

To separate the effects of auxin and ethylene, experiments were conducted using inhibitors of polar auxin transport (NPA) or ethylene biosynthesis (AVG). The ethylene-stimulated formation of adventitious roots was almost completely counteracted by pretreatment of the shoot of the plants with NPA (Fig. 2). Unfortunately, in our experimental system it was technically not possible to reverse the effect of NPA by the application of auxin because the rosette form of *R. palustris* (and, thus, the lack of a stem) prevented application of IAA to a more basal part of the stem than NPA. However, application of NPA did not influence root growth or shoot appearance, and we conclude that at the concentrations applied the inhibiting effect is probably specific to auxin transport (Visser et al., 1995). Treatment of *R. palustris* plants with 1-NAA almost immediately resulted in a strong increase in the ethylene production rate (Fig. 3). This peak in ethylene release was much higher than the stress ethylene peak that control plants produced upon brushing with water and declined only gradually with time. Pretreatment of plants with AVG reduced regular ethylene production dramatically within a few hours and fully prevented the auxin-induced increase of ethylene biosynthesis (Fig. 3). Auxin-induced formation of adventitious roots, however, was not negatively affected by this pretreatment (Fig. 4). These experiments demonstrate that auxin can induce adventitious roots independently of ethylene, whereas the root-inducing effect of ethylene is mediated by auxin.

To establish whether a change in auxin concentration triggered flooding-induced adventitious root formation in...
R. palustris, we quantified the levels of free IAA in the rooting zone during the time interval in which these roots were irreversibly induced. When R. palustris plants were transferred to hypoxic, stagnant conditions and then transferred back to aerated conditions, the formation of many adventitious roots was attained by 3 to 4 d of oxygen deficiency (Fig. 5). Even 6 h of hypoxia resulted in an increase in the number of adventitious roots formed during the subsequent period on aerated nutrient solution. Induction of the rooting process thus occurs shortly after the onset of flooding, and auxin concentrations in the root-forming zone were therefore determined during these first hours of hypoxia. In nontreated R. palustris plants, the IAA concentration remained between 50 and 70 ng free IAA g⁻¹ fresh weight (Fig. 6). Plants transferred to deoxygenated agar also showed little variation in the level of auxin, and, surprisingly, the concentration did not differ from that of control plants. As expected, rooting was almost absent in control plants, whereas plants treated with agar had formed large numbers of adventitious roots 7 d after the onset of hypoxia (Table I).

It appears that during the first 2 d of flooding there is no change in the IAA concentration in the rooting zone that could signal the onset of adventitious root formation. Nevertheless, a certain level of IAA seems to be required for maximum adventitious root formation, since plants in which the shoot was pretreated with NPA demonstrated a decrease in the endogenous IAA concentration during the first 24 h of hypoxia (Fig. 6), followed by a strongly reduced formation of adventitious roots (Table I).
Table I. Effect of NPA on flooding-induced adventitious root formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>No. of Adventitious Roots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0.2 ± 0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deoxygenated agar</td>
<td>81.0 ± 5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deoxygenated agar + NPA pretreatment</td>
<td>52.2 ± 13.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Flooding the soil strongly induces the formation of adventitious roots in the wetland species *R. palustris* (Visser et al., 1996a). The same response was observed in plants grown on a deoxygenated agar solution or treated with either ethylene or auxin (Fig. 1, A and B). Suboptimal doses or concentrations of either hormone resulted in the formation of fewer adventitious roots. However, when suboptimal amounts of ethylene and auxin were supplied simultaneously, a maximum response was obtained (Fig. 1C). An explanation for such similar effects of auxin and ethylene is the strongly enhancing effect auxin may have on ethylene production (Dubucq et al., 1978; Riov and Yang, 1989; Kelly and Bradford, 1990). We found an increased production of ethylene in auxin-treated plants (Fig. 3), but, in contrast to findings by Riov and Yang (1989), such plants continued to form adventitious roots when ethylene biosynthesis was almost completely inhibited by application of AVG (Fig. 4). Thus, it seems that, although the two hormones can each enhance rooting, auxin possesses activity that is largely independent of ethylene. Consequently, we anticipated that an accumulation of endogenous auxin in the root-forming zone during flooded conditions may be the key factor regulating adventitious root formation. This theory, first proposed by Kramer (1951) and later supported by Phillips (1964) and Wample and Reid (1979), corresponds with studies of nonflooding-related adventitious root formation in cuttings, in which increased IAA concentrations were found in the basal, root-forming part of the shoot (Maldiney et al., 1986; Blakesley, 1994). In *R. palustris*, however, free IAA did not accumulate in the rooting zone (Fig. 6). Therefore, adventitious root formation in *R. palustris* during flooding is not induced by a change in auxin concentration.

Our results do not exclude the possibility that flooding and the subsequent hypoxic conditions and ethylene accumulation affect auxin transport or metabolism in the roots. Slowing of the polar, energy-dependent transport of auxin was proposed as the main cause of the flooding-induced accumulation of auxin at the base of the shoot (Kramer, 1951; Visser et al., 1995) and subsequent adventitious root formation. In *R. palustris*, either hypoxic conditions do not develop in the rooting zone because of internal aeration via aerenchymatous tissues (Laan et al., 1990; Visser et al., 1996a) or accumulation of IAA is prevented by a high metabolism and/or conjugation rate of free IAA.

The concentration of free IAA in control and rooting plants of *R. palustris* was high (approximately 60 ng g⁻¹ fresh weight; Fig. 6) compared with the auxin concentration in maize roots (25 ng free IAA g⁻¹ fresh weight; Ribaud and Pilet, 1994) and carrot roots (3.5 ng free IAA g⁻¹ fresh weight; Guivarc’h et al., 1993). Such high concentrations are usually found only in shoots (Nordström and Eliasson, 1991) or roots of “rooty” mutants (King, 1994), and it is probably the proximity of the shoot apex (located within approximately 1 cm of the rooting zone) of the rosette-shaped *R. palustris* plant that causes these constitutively high levels of IAA. Despite the high concentration of endogenous auxin in nonflooded plants, the levels were not sufficiently high to induce adventitious root formation in *R. palustris*, since no constitutive adventitious root system was observed in this species. Only exceptionally high concentrations of auxin, obtained by applying a large dose of 1-NAA to the shoot, were able to induce adventitious root formation under normally aerated conditions (Fig. 1A; Visser et al., 1995). Endogenous auxin probably never reaches such high levels.

Still, the rooting process during flooding is not independent of endogenous auxin. Root formation appears to require a certain level of free IAA, because low endogenous concentrations in NPA-pretreated plants (Fig. 6) were followed by a decrease in the number of adventitious roots formed upon agar treatment (Table I). Therefore, a second factor must be involved that increases the sensitivity of the root-forming tissue to auxin. Our results show that this factor may be the large increase in ethylene concentration (up to 2 µL L⁻¹) that occurs in waterlogged root systems of *R. palustris* (Visser et al., 1996b). Ethylene alone could not evoke the rooting response, because ethylene-induced formation of adventitious roots was suppressed by NPA pretreatment (Fig. 2). Thus, ethylene treatment of nonflooded plants only resulted in the formation of adventitious roots (Figs. 1B and 2) when combined with a sufficiently high endogenous concentration of free IAA (such as is found in plants not pretreated with NPA; Fig. 6).

Our results are comparable to those of Liu and Reid (1992), who studied the rooting response of sunflower hypocotyl cuttings. In their system, too, auxin was the primary regulator in the induction of adventitious roots, and ethylene-stimulated rooting was mediated by a change in the plant’s sensitivity to auxin. However, in their experiments, ethylene was applied to the cuttings to stimulate rooting, whereas in our case accumulation of endogenous ethylene was an intrinsic factor in the flooding event.

In conclusion, we reason from our results that the formation of adventitious roots in flooded *R. palustris* plants is preceded by a rapid and large increase in the endogenous ethylene concentration, whereas the endogenous auxin concentration does not change. The high ethylene concentration, which is caused mainly by the physical entrapment of ethylene in the submerged roots, sensitizes the root-forming tissue to auxin. This increased sensitivity to the
constitutively high concentrations of endogenous free IAA subsequently induces the formation of adventitious roots, which is necessary for the survival of flooded Rumex plants.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Dr. A.F. Croes and Dr. M.B. Jackson for critically reading the manuscript. Yuen-Yee Tam, David Ribnicki, Sonja Willems, and Yvonne Wilms are acknowledged for their technical assistance.

Received April 16, 1996; accepted August 26, 1996.

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