

Biochemical Responses of Plants to Climate Change-Induced Abiotic Stress

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Climate change has emerged as a major global challenge affecting agricultural productivity and plant survival. Rising temperatures, irregular rainfall, drought, salinity, and extreme environmental conditions impose abiotic stress on plants. These stresses disrupt cellular homeostasis and metabolic processes, leading to reduced growth and yield. Plants respond through complex biochemical and molecular mechanisms, including the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS), activation of antioxidant systems, accumulation of osmolytes, and synthesis of stress-related proteins. This article discusses the biochemical responses of plants to climate change-induced abiotic stress and highlights their importance in developing stress-tolerant crops.

Climate change has intensified abiotic stresses such as drought, heat, salinity, and flooding, significantly affecting plant growth and productivity. These stresses often occur simultaneously and lead to severe physiological and biochemical disturbances.

Abiotic stress influences plant metabolism at multiple levels, including gene expression, enzyme activity, and cellular structure. Plants, being sessile organisms, have evolved sophisticated biochemical strategies to perceive stress signals and respond effectively.

Major Abiotic Stresses Induced by Climate Change

The major abiotic stresses associated with climate change include:

- Drought stress – due to irregular rainfall
- Heat stress – increased global temperature
- Salinity stress – soil degradation and irrigation issues
- Cold stress – unexpected temperature fluctuations
- These stresses can reduce crop productivity by more than 50% in severe conditions.

Generation of Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS)

One of the earliest biochemical responses to abiotic stress is the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) such as:

- Superoxide radical (O_2^-)



- Hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂)
- Hydroxyl radical (OH)

Under normal conditions, ROS are produced as by-products of metabolic pathways. However, under stress, their production increases drastically, leading to oxidative stress.

Excess ROS can cause:

- Lipid peroxidation
- Protein degradation
- DNA damage
- Membrane disruption

Despite their harmful effects, ROS also act as signaling molecules that trigger stress-response pathways.

Antioxidant Defense System

Enzymatic Antioxidants

- Superoxide dismutase (SOD)
- Catalase (CAT)
- Peroxidase (POD)
- Ascorbate peroxidase (APX)

These enzymes convert harmful ROS into less toxic molecules.

Non-Enzymatic Antioxidants

- Ascorbic acid (Vitamin C)
- Glutathione
- Carotenoids
- Flavonoids

These molecules scavenge free radicals and protect cellular components.

The balance between ROS production and antioxidant activity is crucial for plant survival under stress.

Osmolyte Accumulation and Osmoregulation

Plants accumulate osmolytes (compatible solutes) to maintain cellular water balance under stress conditions.

Key osmolytes include:

- Proline
- Glycine betaine
- Soluble sugars

These compounds help in:

- Osmotic adjustment
- Stabilization of proteins and membranes
- Protection against dehydration

Proline is especially important as it acts as:

- Osmoprotectant
- ROS scavenger
- Energy source and signaling molecule

Accumulation of osmolytes is a key adaptive mechanism during drought and salinity stress.

Secondary Metabolites and Stress Response

Plants produce secondary metabolites such as phenolics and polyphenols under stress conditions.

Functions:

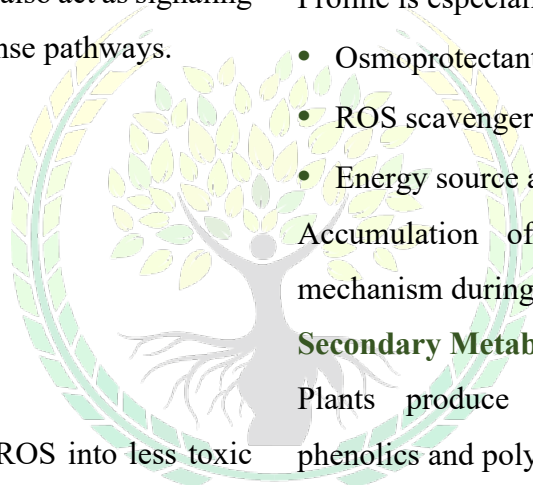
- Antioxidant activity
- Protection against oxidative damage
- Regulation of stress signaling pathways

The phenylpropanoid pathway plays a major role in producing these compounds, enhancing stress tolerance.

Stress Proteins and Molecular Responses

Plants synthesize special proteins under stress, including:

- Heat shock proteins (HSPs) – protect proteins from denaturation



- Late embryogenesis abundant (LEA) proteins – prevent dehydration damage
- Stress-responsive enzymes

These proteins help maintain cellular integrity and ensure survival under extreme conditions.

Signal Transduction Mechanisms

Plants perceive environmental stress through receptors and transmit signals via:

- Calcium ions (Ca²⁺)
- Hormones (ABA – abscisic acid)
- ROS signaling

These signals activate gene expression and biochemical pathways that enhance stress tolerance.

Impact on Photosynthesis and Metabolism

Abiotic stress affects photosynthesis by:

- Damaging chlorophyll
- Disrupting electron transport chain
- Reducing CO₂ fixation

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This results in decreased energy production and plant growth.

Strategies to Improve Stress Tolerance

Understanding biochemical responses helps in developing strategies such as:

- Genetic engineering of stress-resistant crops
- Use of biostimulants and plant hormones
- Breeding for enhanced antioxidant capacity
- Application of osmoprotectants

These approaches are essential for sustainable agriculture under climate change conditions.

Conclusion

Climate change-induced abiotic stress poses a serious threat to global agriculture. Plants respond through complex biochemical mechanisms, including ROS signaling, antioxidant defense, osmolyte accumulation, and secondary metabolite production. Understanding these responses is crucial for developing stress-tolerant crops and ensuring food security in the future.

