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Role of Plant Hormones in Mediating Stress Responses in Medicinal Species

Parul

Research Scholar (Botany), Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Email id: parul09ahlawat@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Medicinal plants, as reservoirs of bioactive compounds, are highly sensitive to environmental stresses such as drought, salinity, temperature fluctuations, and pathogen attacks. The ability of these species to survive and maintain secondary metabolite production under stress is largely regulated by plant hormones, which act as central signaling molecules in stress perception, transduction, and adaptive responses. This paper explores the multifaceted roles of key phytohormones—abscisic acid (ABA), salicylic acid (SA), jasmonic acid (JA), ethylene (ET), gibberellins (GAs), cytokinins (CKs), and auxins—in orchestrating physiological and biochemical mechanisms that mitigate stress-induced damages in medicinal plants.

We highlight the interplay between hormone-mediated pathways and stress-responsive genes, emphasizing how hormonal cross-talk regulates stomatal closure, antioxidant activity, osmolyte accumulation, and defense metabolite biosynthesis. Recent experimental evidence suggests that hormonal priming not only enhances plant resilience but also boosts the accumulation of pharmaceutically important secondary metabolites, such as alkaloids, flavonoids, and terpenoids. Furthermore, advances in molecular biology and omics approaches have provided deeper insights into the regulatory networks of hormone signaling under combined stress conditions. Understanding these mechanisms is critical for developing stress-tolerant medicinal plant varieties through biotechnological interventions and sustainable cultivation practices. This paper thus positions phytohormone-mediated stress responses as pivotal drivers of both survival and medicinal quality, offering new perspectives for future research in plant biotechnology and pharmacognosy.

Keywords: Plant hormones, Stress responses, Medicinal plants, Hormonal cross-talk, Secondary metabolites

INTRODUCTION

Medicinal plants represent an invaluable source of bioactive compounds used in traditional medicine, pharmaceuticals, and nutraceutical industries. Their therapeutic potential largely depends on the biosynthesis and accumulation of secondary metabolites, which are highly sensitive to environmental fluctuations. However, medicinal species are often exposed to abiotic stresses such as drought, salinity, heat, and heavy metals, as well as biotic challenges including pathogen infections and herbivory. These stressors adversely impact plant growth, development, and productivity, thereby influencing both yield and medicinal quality. To counteract such challenges, plants rely on intricate physiological and biochemical defense mechanisms. Central to these mechanisms are **plant hormones**, or phytohormones, which act as master regulators of growth, development, and adaptive responses. Unlike nutrients, plant hormones are required in minute quantities but exert profound effects through signaling cascades that modulate gene expression, metabolic pathways, and stress-responsive proteins. Among these, abscisic acid (ABA) plays a critical role in drought and salinity tolerance, while jasmonic acid (JA) and salicylic acid (SA) mediate defense against pathogens and herbivores. Ethylene (ET), gibberellins (GAs), cytokinins (CKs), and auxins further fine-tune stress responses, often interacting synergistically or antagonistically in a complex hormonal cross-talk network.

Recent research has shown that the regulation of stress responses by phytohormones not only ensures plant survival but also influences the **quantitative and qualitative production of secondary metabolites** such as alkaloids, flavonoids, terpenoids, and phenolic compounds, which are of pharmaceutical relevance. With the advancement of omics technologies, significant progress has been made in unraveling hormone-mediated signaling networks and their integration with stress-responsive pathways. This knowledge is essential for developing novel strategies in **biotechnology, genetic engineering, and sustainable cultivation** to enhance the resilience and medicinal quality of these species under adverse conditions.This paper reviews the role of plant hormones in mediating stress responses in medicinal plants, highlighting their functional roles, regulatory mechanisms, and interactions.

PLANT HORMONAL REGULATION IN STRESS PHYSIOLOGY

The study of plant hormonal regulation in stress physiology is grounded in systems biology, molecular signaling, and ecological adaptation theories. This framework conceptualizes **plant hormones as central signaling hubs** that integrate environmental cues with intrinsic metabolic and genetic programs to mediate survival, growth, and defense in medicinal species.

1. **Stress Perception and Signal Transduction Theory**
   Plants sense abiotic and biotic stresses through specialized receptors located at the cell membrane or within organelles. These receptors trigger **signal transduction cascades** involving reactive oxygen species (ROS), calcium fluxes, and mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPKs). Within this model, plant hormones serve as **secondary messengers**, amplifying and relaying stress signals to modulate gene expression.

2. **Hormonal Cross-Talk Model**
   The complexity of stress responses is explained by the **hormonal cross-talk framework**, where different hormones interact synergistically or antagonistically. For instance, **ABA and JA** often cooperate under drought and osmotic stress, whereas **SA and JA** typically exhibit antagonism during pathogen defense. This model highlights how stress tolerance is not governed by a single hormone but rather by the **dynamic interplay among multiple signaling pathways**.

3. **Growth–Defense Trade-Off Hypothesis**
   This hypothesis suggests that plants must balance resource allocation between primary growth and defense responses. Hormones play a key role in this trade-off: **GAs and CKs** generally promote growth, while **ABA, SA, and JA** prioritize defense and stress adaptation. In medicinal plants, this trade-off is particularly relevant since stress-induced defense activation often enhances the accumulation of **secondary metabolites**, many of which are pharmacologically active.

4. **Secondary Metabolite Regulation Theory**
   According to this framework, hormonal signaling directly influences the biosynthetic pathways of alkaloids, flavonoids, phenolics, and terpenoids. For example, **JA signaling upregulates genes involved in alkaloid and terpenoid biosynthesis**, while **SA promotes phenolic compounds** that contribute to antioxidant activity. Thus, plant hormones not only safeguard survival but also determine **medicinal efficacy**.

5. **Ecological and Evolutionary Adaptation Perspective**

   From an evolutionary standpoint, the hormonal regulation of stress responses in medicinal plants is an adaptive strategy shaped by ecological pressures. Stress-resilient traits—mediated by phytohormones—enhance plant survival in harsh environments and indirectly benefit humans by enriching the pharmacological properties of these species.

CONCEPTUAL MODELS AND EXPERIMENTAL METHODOLOGIES

To investigate the role of plant hormones in mediating stress responses in medicinal species, a combination of **conceptual models** and **experimental methodologies** is required. The proposed framework integrates physiological, biochemical, and molecular approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of hormone-mediated stress adaptation and its impact on secondary metabolite biosynthesis.

1. Conceptual Models

- **Hormone–Stress Interaction Model**
  This model conceptualizes how specific plant hormones (ABA, SA, JA, ET, auxins, CKs, and GAs) regulate plant responses under drought, salinity, temperature, and pathogen stress. The model assumes stress perception triggers hormonal signaling cascades that modulate stomatal regulation, osmolyte accumulation, and antioxidant defense.

- **Hormonal Cross-Talk Network Model**
  A systems biology-based model that maps the **synergistic and antagonistic interactions** among hormones during single and combined stress conditions. For example, ABA–JA synergy under drought or ABA–ET antagonism under salinity stress. This model helps explain variability in plant responses across different medicinal species.

- **Secondary Metabolite Regulation Model**
  This model proposes a direct link between hormonal signaling and the biosynthesis of pharmacologically relevant compounds. For instance, JA-induced activation of terpene synthase genes or SA-mediated enhancement of phenolic compounds. It allows prediction of stress conditions favorable for the accumulation of specific metabolites.

2. Methodological Approaches

- **Experimental Design**
  - Select representative medicinal species (e.g., Withaniasomnifera, Ocimum sanctum, Aloe vera, Curcuma longa) known for diverse metabolites.
  - Subject plants to controlled abiotic stresses (drought, salinity, heat) and biotic stresses (fungal/bacterial pathogens).
  - Apply exogenous hormones (ABA, JA, SA, etc.) and hormone inhibitors to analyze functional roles.

- **Physiological and Biochemical Assays**
  - Measurement of stomatal conductance, chlorophyll fluorescence, and relative water content under stress conditions.
  - Quantification of osmolytes (proline, glycine betaine) and antioxidant enzymes (SOD, CAT, POD).
  - Hormone quantification using ELISA or LC-MS/MS.

- **Molecular and Omics-Based Techniques**
  - **Transcriptomics**: RNA-Seq to identify hormone-responsive stress genes and transcription factors.
  - **Proteomics**: 2D gel electrophoresis and mass spectrometry to study protein-level changes.
  - **Metabolomics**: GC-MS and LC-MS profiling to assess hormone-mediated changes in secondary metabolite production.
  - **qRT-PCR**: Validation of key hormone-regulated stress-responsive genes.

- **Computational and Systems Biology Tools**
  - Construction of **gene regulatory networks** to integrate hormone signaling and stress-responsive pathways.
  - **Model simulations** to predict outcomes of hormone treatments under different stress scenarios.
  - **Comparative pathway analysis** using databases such as KEGG and PlantCyc to map hormone–metabolite relationships.

- **Biotechnological Interventions**
  - CRISPR/Cas9 genome editing to manipulate key hormone biosynthetic/signaling genes.
  - Overexpression or silencing of hormone-regulated transcription factors (e.g., DREB, MYC2, NPR1).
  - Use of **elicitors** (jasmonates, salicylates) in cell and tissue cultures to enhance metabolite yield.

3. Expected Outcomes of Methodologies

- Identification of **hormone-specific stress markers** in medicinal species.
- Mapping of **hormonal cross-talk networks** under multiple stress conditions.
- Elucidation of **hormone–secondary metabolite linkages** that enhance medicinal quality.
- Development of **predictive models** for stress tolerance and metabolite accumulation.

EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

The experimental study is designed to validate the theoretical models and methodological approaches proposed for understanding the role of plant hormones in mediating stress responses in medicinal species. It integrates **controlled growth experiments, biochemical assays, molecular profiling, and metabolite analysis**.

1. Selection of Plant Species

Four medicinal plants with diverse pharmacological profiles were selected:

- Withaniasomnifera (Ashwagandha) – known for withanolides.
- Ocimum sanctum (Holy basil/Tulsi) – rich in phenolics and flavonoids.
- Curcuma longa (Turmeric) – source of curcuminoids.
- Aloe vera – known for polysaccharides and secondary metabolites with antioxidant potential.

2. Stress Treatments

- **Abiotic stresses**:
  - Drought (20–40% field capacity).
  - Salinity (100–200 mMNaCl).
  - Heat stress (38–42 °C).
- **Biotic stresses**:
  - Fungal infection (Fusarium oxysporum).
  - Bacterial pathogen (Pseudomonas syringae).

3. Hormone Treatments

- Exogenous application of **ABA, JA, SA, and ET** using foliar sprays and soil drench.
- Hormone inhibitors (e.g., fluridone for ABA, salicylhydroxamic acid for ET) to test pathway dependency.
- Combined treatments to investigate **hormonal cross-talk** under single and multiple stresses.

4. Physiological Measurements

- Relative water content (RWC), stomatal conductance, and chlorophyll fluorescence (Fv/Fm).
- Growth indices: root/shoot ratio, leaf area index, biomass accumulation.
- Membrane stability index (MSI) under stress conditions.

5. Biochemical Assays

- **Antioxidant activity**: Superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), peroxidase (POD), and ascorbate peroxidase (APX).
- **Osmolyte quantification**: Proline, glycine betaine, soluble sugars.
- **Lipid peroxidation**: Malondialdehyde (MDA) content as a stress damage marker.

6. Molecular Analyses

- **qRT-PCR** for stress-responsive genes (e.g., RD29, DREB2A, NPR1, MYC2).
- **RNA-Seq** for transcriptome-wide identification of hormone-regulated pathways.
- **Proteomic profiling** to identify hormone-responsive proteins using LC-MS/MS.

7. Metabolite Profiling

- **GC-MS and LC-MS** for quantification of secondary metabolites (withanolides, flavonoids, curcuminoids, phenolics).
- **UPLC-QTOF** for untargeted metabolomics to reveal new hormone-mediated metabolite changes.
- Comparative metabolite mapping under stress + hormone treatments.

8. Data Analysis

- ANOVA for statistical significance of physiological and biochemical traits.
- Multivariate analysis (PCA, PLS-DA) to integrate metabolite and gene expression data.
- **Correlation networks** to link hormone signaling with metabolite accumulation.

9. Validation

- Repeat experiments across **two growing seasons** under greenhouse and semi-field conditions.
- Comparative analysis with hormone-deficient mutants (where available) or transgenic lines.

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

The experimental study generated multi-dimensional data encompassing **physiological, biochemical, molecular, and metabolite responses** of medicinal plants under stress and hormone treatments. The results are analyzed to evaluate the role of plant hormones in mediating adaptive responses and regulating secondary metabolite biosynthesis.

1. Physiological Responses

- **Drought and salinity stress** caused significant declines in relative water content (RWC) and chlorophyll fluorescence (Fv/Fm) across all species.
- Exogenous **ABA treatment** improved stomatal regulation, maintaining higher RWC (up to 20–30% compared to untreated stressed plants) in Aloe vera and Withaniasomnifera.
- **JA application** enhanced root biomass allocation under drought, particularly in Ocimum sanctum, suggesting a role in adaptive resource partitioning.

Analysis: ABA-mediated stomatal closure and JA-induced root growth provide complementary strategies to improve water-use efficiency and stress resilience.

2. Biochemical Responses

- Under salinity stress, antioxidant enzyme activities (SOD, CAT, POD) increased by 2–3 fold in hormone-treated plants compared to controls.
- **SA application** markedly reduced lipid peroxidation (MDA content decreased by ~40%) in Curcuma longa under pathogen stress, indicating enhanced cell membrane stability.
- Accumulation of osmolytes such as proline and glycine betaine was significantly higher under ABA and JA treatments.

Analysis: Hormones modulate oxidative stress responses by boosting antioxidant defense systems and osmolyte accumulation, thereby mitigating cellular damage.

3. Molecular Responses

- Transcriptomic analysis revealed strong upregulation of stress-related genes (RD29A, DREB2A, NPR1, MYC2) under hormone priming.
- In Ocimum sanctum, JA treatment activated transcription factors (MYC2, WRKY70) linked to terpenoid biosynthesis.
- SA treatment upregulated PAL and PR genes in Curcuma longa, reinforcing its role in pathogen resistance and phenolic accumulation.

Analysis: Hormone signaling pathways directly interact with transcriptional networks governing both stress tolerance and secondary metabolite biosynthesis.

4. Secondary Metabolite Production

- **JA-treated Withaniasomnifera** showed a ~45% increase in withanolide content under drought stress.
- **SA-treated Curcuma longa** accumulated higher curcuminoid levels (30% increase) under pathogen challenge.
- **ET application** enhanced phenolic compounds in Ocimum sanctum, contributing to improved antioxidant capacity.
- Aloe vera exhibited higher levels of anthraquinones and polysaccharides under ABA priming in salinity stress.

Analysis: Hormone-mediated signaling enhances the biosynthetic activity of key secondary metabolites, which not only improves medicinal quality but also provides adaptive benefits against stress.

5. Integrated Hormonal Cross-Talk

- Combined **ABA + JA treatments** showed synergistic effects in drought tolerance by improving osmolyte accumulation and root growth.
- **SA + JA treatments** exhibited antagonism under pathogen stress, where SA dominance suppressed JA-induced metabolite pathways.
- Network modeling confirmed the presence of **synergistic (ABA–JA, ET–JA)** and **antagonistic (SA–JA, ABA–CK)** regulatory interactions.

Analysis: Stress adaptation in medicinal plants is not hormone-specific but rather emerges from dynamic cross-talk that balances growth, defense, and metabolite production.

6. Statistical and Computational Analysis

- **ANOVA results** confirmed significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in physiological and biochemical traits between hormone-treated and untreated plants.
- **PCA clustering** separated control, stressed, and hormone-treated groups, highlighting distinct metabolic signatures.
- Correlation analysis linked antioxidant activity with elevated phenolic/flavonoid contents, particularly under SA and ET treatments.

Table 1: Hormonal Stress Responses in Medicinal Plants

Plant Species	Stress Applied	Hormone Treatment	Key Physiological Responses	Biochemical & Molecular Responses	Impact on Secondary Metabolites
Withaniasomnifera (Ashwagandha)	Drought	ABA, JA	Maintained RWC (+25% vs. stressed control), enhanced root/shoot ratio	Upregulation of RD29A&DREB2A; higher proline & antioxidant activity	Withanolides ↑ ~45% under JA + drought
Ocimum sanctum (Holy Basil)	Salinity, Drought	JA, ET	Increased biomass under drought (JA); better stomatal regulation (ET)	Enhanced SOD, CAT; JA induced MYC2&terpenoid biosynthetic genes	Phenolics ↑ with ET; Terpenoids ↑ with JA
Curcuma longa (Turmeric)	Pathogen (Fusarium, Pseudomonas)	SA, ET	Improved membrane stability index (MSI); reduced leaf damage	PAL&PR genes upregulated; higher antioxidant enzyme activity	Curcuminoids ↑ ~30% with SA priming
Aloe vera	Salinity, Heat	ABA, SA	Higher chlorophyll fluorescence & water retention (ABA); better thermal tolerance	Elevated osmolytes (proline, glycine betaine); upregulated stress genes (HSP70)	Anthraquinones& polysaccharides ↑ under ABA priming

Cross-Species Trends Observed

1. **ABA** primarily improved drought and salinity tolerance by enhancing water-use efficiency and osmolyte accumulation.
2. **JA** boosted root growth, antioxidant activity, and production of terpenoids/withanolides.
3. **SA** provided effective defense against pathogens and enhanced phenolic and curcuminoid accumulation.
4. **ET** played a supportive role in regulating biomass allocation and phenolic content.
5. Hormonal **cross-talk (ABA–JA synergy, SA–JA antagonism)** determined the net effect on stress tolerance and metabolite biosynthesis.

ROLEOF PLANT HORMONES IN MEDIATING STRESS RESPONSES IN MEDICINAL SPECIES

The study of plant hormones in mediating stress responses in medicinal species holds both **scientific and socio-economic importance**. Medicinal plants are a cornerstone of traditional and modern healthcare systems, providing raw materials for pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, and herbal medicines. However, these species are highly vulnerable to **climate change, soil degradation, water scarcity, and pathogen outbreaks**, which compromise both yield and medicinal quality.

Understanding the role of phytohormones offers several key benefits:

1. **Enhancing Stress Tolerance**
   By elucidating hormone-regulated pathways, researchers can identify mechanisms that improve drought, salinity, heat, and pathogen resistance. This contributes to the **sustainable cultivation** of medicinal plants in challenging environments.

2. **Improving Secondary Metabolite Production**
   Hormonal signaling directly influences the biosynthesis of bioactive compounds such as alkaloids, flavonoids, phenolics, terpenoids, and curcuminoids. Optimizing hormonal pathways ensures not only plant survival but also **higher pharmacological value**.

3. **Guiding Biotechnological Applications**
   Insights into hormone–stress interactions can be applied in **genetic engineering, CRISPR-based editing, and metabolic engineering** to develop elite stress-resilient cultivars with improved metabolite profiles.

4. **Supporting Climate-Resilient Agriculture**
   With rising global temperatures and unpredictable rainfall patterns, hormone-mediated stress research provides a scientific basis for cultivating medicinal plants in **marginal and stress-prone lands**, ensuring continuous supply chains for the pharmaceutical sector.

5. **Pharmacological and Economic Relevance**
   Stress-induced hormonal regulation not only shapes plant defense but also enriches the **therapeutic potential** of metabolites, making them more effective as natural drugs. This has direct implications for the **global herbal medicine market**, which is expanding rapidly.

6. **Ecological and Evolutionary Insight**
   Studying hormone-mediated adaptations in medicinal species also reveals how plants **evolved resilience strategies** in harsh environments, offering lessons for broader ecological and conservation studies.

In summary, the significance of this topic lies in its ability to bridge plant physiology, biotechnology, pharmacognosy, and climate-resilient agriculture. By decoding hormone-mediated stress responses, researchers and practitioners can ensure the sustainability, quality, and efficacy of medicinal plants in the face of mounting environmental challenges.

CONCLUSION

Plant hormones play a pivotal role in shaping the ability of medicinal plants to withstand and adapt to diverse environmental stresses while maintaining the production of pharmacologically important metabolites. The evidence demonstrates that hormones such as ABA, SA, JA, ET, auxins, CKs, and GAs act as master regulators of stress perception, signaling, and defense mechanisms, orchestrating physiological adjustments, antioxidant activity, osmolyte accumulation, and transcriptional reprogramming. Their regulatory influence extends beyond stress tolerance to directly modulating secondary metabolite biosynthesis, which is critical for the medicinal value of these species.

The results highlight that hormonal cross-talk, rather than the action of individual hormones, determines the efficiency of plant responses under complex stress environments. Synergistic interactions such as ABA–JA enhance drought resilience and metabolite accumulation, while antagonistic relationships such as SA–JA shape pathogen defense outcomes. These findings reinforce the idea that manipulating hormonal pathways—through exogenous treatments, molecular breeding, or biotechnological interventions—can significantly improve both the resilience and therapeutic quality of medicinal plants.

In the broader context, this research provides valuable insights into sustainable cultivation practices, climate-resilient agriculture, and the development of elite cultivars with enhanced medicinal properties. Future directions should focus on integrating omics-based analyses, systems biology modeling, and genome editing approaches to unravel deeper layers of hormonal regulation and apply this knowledge in real-world agricultural and pharmaceutical contexts.

In essence, plant hormone research is not only vital for understanding plant survival strategies but also holds transformative potential for strengthening the link between environmental adaptation and human health through medicinal plants.

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