Chapter 3

Agrobacterium-mediated transformation of Arabidopsis thaliana with Cannabis sativa cDNA encoding chalcone synthase

T.T.H. Dao¹, ², H.J.M. Linthorst ³ and R. Verpoorte ¹

¹ Section Metabolomics, Institute of Biology, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
² Traditional Pharmacy Department, Hanoi Pharmacy University, Hanoi, Vietnam
³ Section Plant Cell Physiology, Institute of Biology, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Abstract

The cDNA encoding chalcone synthase from Cannabis sativa was introduced into Arabidopsis thaliana Col. 0 via Agrobacterium tumefaciens-mediated transformation. This method involved the use of floral dip with disarmed Agrobacterium strain LBA4404 containing a plasmid in which the T-DNA region carries the CaMV 35S promoter driven CHS gene, as well as hptII encoding hygromycin phosphotransferase and the gene encoding the GFP protein. Twenty one transgenic Arabidopsis lines (ACS 1 - 21) were collected and six of them were subjected to molecular analysis. The results indicate that the exogenous gene was successfully integrated into the genome and expressed in Arabidopsis thaliana plants. All of the six transgenic lines contained multi copies of the CHS gene.

Key words: Arabidopsis thaliana, Agrobacterium tumefaciens, chalcone synthase, transformation.
3.1. Introduction

Chalcone synthases are a family of polyketide synthase enzymes (CHS) catalyzing the first reaction in the flavonoid pathway yielding chalcones, a class of organic compounds found mainly in plants as natural defense compounds and as biosynthetic intermediates. In plant, these compounds serve as antibacterial, antifungal and antitumor and anti-inflammatory activities. Chalcones are also intermediates in the biosynthesis of flavonoids, which are substances widespread in plants, with a wide array of biological activities.

Expression of the \textit{CHS} gene has been well studied in a number of plant species. The expression can be quite differently regulated. E.g., in early developmental stages this enzyme is present in leaf tissue [Knogge \textit{et al.}, 1986], while in adult \textit{Petunia} plants CHS is limited to floral tissue [Koes \textit{et al.}, 1986; Koes \textit{et al.}, 1989]. Environmental stress, such as UV light, phytopathogens and elicitors, or wounding may lead to an induction of \textit{CHS} gene expression [Koes \textit{et al.}, 1989; Winkel, 2002]. \textit{CHS} genes are involved in the biosynthesis of a number of different plant metabolites such as flavonoids, anthocyanins, isoflavonoids and prenylated phenolics. These compounds play important roles in the interaction of plants with the environment. Different substituted cinnamic acid derivatives are the pool from which the enzyme CHS taps the intermediates for the above-mentioned compounds. Moreover cinnamic acid deverivates are precursors for lignin, lignans, coumarins, chlorogenic acids and other esters of cinnamic acid. \textit{CHS} is encoded by a gene family of between 4–8 members in many legume species, such as \textit{Phaseolus vulgaris} [Ryder \textit{et al.}, 1987], \textit{Glycine max} [Estabrook \textit{et al.}, 1991; Wingender \textit{et al.}, 1989], \textit{Medicago sativa} [Dalkin \textit{et al.}, 1990, Junghans \textit{et al.}, 1993], and \textit{Pisum sativum} [An \textit{et al.}, 1993; Harker \textit{et al.}, 1990], whereas \textit{Arabidopsis thaliana} contains only one \textit{CHS} gene in its genome [Feinbaum \textit{et al.}, 1988]. \textit{Arabidopsis thaliana} has one of the smallest genomes among plants, and its genome is completely sequenced. Because of its rapid life cycle it is an important model plant for studying the function of genes. Because of those reasons, \textit{Arabidopsis thaliana} was chosen as model to study \textit{CHS} gene expression in the plant. The \textit{Agrobacterium}-mediated transformation of \textit{Arabidopsis} using the “floral dip” method is a routine protocol [Clough and Bent, 1998]. This method involves simply dipping a flower into a
solution containing *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* bearing the DNA of interest, thus avoiding the need for tissue culture or plant regeneration.

So far, most studies of CHS in plants considered only molecular aspects of gene expression, only few studies have been done on the effects of CHS on the plant metabolome and plant physiology [Koes *et al.*, 1989; Winkel, 2002, Le Gall *et al.*, 2005; reviewed in Chapter 2]. Previously, we cloned a polyketide synthase (~1.2Kb) from *Cannabis sativa* young leaves. By expression of the cDNA encoding CHS in *Escherichia coli* the gene product was shown to have CHS activity [Raharjo *et al.*, 2004]. In the present study, we investigated the effect of the overexpressed CHS on the biosynthesis pathways in *A. thaliana* plants.

### 3.2. Materials and Methods

#### 3.2.1. Plant materials

*Arabidopsis thaliana* ecotype Col-0 seeds were obtained from the section Plant Cell Physiology (IBL, Leiden Universiy, The Netherlands) and were used throughout the study. Seeds were sown on a mixture of vermiculite, peat moss, and perlite 2:1:1 (by vol.). The pots were placed at 4°C for 4 days in the dark and transferred to a growth chamber at 21°C and long day conditions (16/8 h light/dark cycle). When the primary inflorescence reached 5 to 10 cm, plants were clipped to favor the growth of multiple secondary bolts.

For the molecular experiments, the samples (leaves of transgenic and non-transgenic plants) were collected, frozen immediately into liquid nitrogen and kept at -80°C.

#### 3.2.2. Transformation vectors

A.
Agrobacterium–mediated transformation of Arabidopsis thaliana

Figure 3.1. A. Subcloning vector pMOG843, B. Transformation vector pCAMBIA 1302-sGFP. chs cDNA transgene was subcloned in pMOG843 in position between HindIII and KpnI restriction site then CHS containing the PotPI and 35S promoter was constructed in the poly linker site of pCAMBIA1302-sGFP.

3.2.3 Vector construction and plant transformation

To generate chs overexpression constructs, the coding region of chs cDNA [Raharjo et al. 2004] was obtained by PCR using primers containing restriction sites KpnI and HindIII, respectively, and was ligated into the pGEM-T easy vector (Promega). The vector was then digested using a KpnI/HindIII double digestion, and the resulting DNA was subcloned into the pMOG843B (Fig. 3.1A) behind the 35S promoter. Subsequently, the XbaI/EcoRI digested 35S:CHS:PotPI terminator fragment was cloned into the pCAMBIA1302-sGFP (Fig. 3.1B) and transformed into Agrobacterium LBA4404. Plasmid vector pCAMBIA1302-sGFP also contains hptII encoding hygromycin phosphotransferase and a gene encoding the GFP protein, which permits easy detection of transformed plantlets. All DNA manipulations were according to standard procedures [Sambrook et al., 1989], and the chs coding region and the junction sequences were confirmed by DNA sequencing.

The PCR conditions were following: one μl chs plasmid DNA was used as template for PCR using CHSR and CHSF primers (Table 3.1), PCR was performed with a Perkin Elmer DNA Thermal Cycler 480 with the following parameters: 30 sec at 95°C, 1 min at 50°C, 1 min at 72°C, 30 cycles. The final step was an extension at 72°C for 10 min.
Transformation of *Arabidopsis* was according to the floral dip method [Clough and Bent, 1998] using *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* LBA4404 with minor modifications. Transgenic plants were selected on half MS medium containing 25mg/l hygromycin. Fluorescence of GFP protein in transgenic *Arabidopsis* was visualized by using an inverted Axiovert Zeiss 100 M microscope (Zeiss, Jena, Germany). After further selection of transgenic lines with a 3:1 segregation ratio, T3 or T4 homozygous lines were used for the phenotypic investigation.

### 3.2.4. Extraction of DNA

Approximately 100 mg of leaf tissue from transgenic and non-transgenic plants was ground to a fine powder under liquid nitrogen. DNA was isolated by using a DNAeasy Plant Mini kit (Qiagen Inc., Valencia, CA) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Each DNA sample was dissolved in 50 μL sterile ddH2O, and 2 μL of DNA solution was used for each real-time PCR. DNA was quantified by spectrophotometric measurements.

### 3.2.5. Extraction of RNA and RT-PCR

Total RNA was extracted from the frozen samples by using the Plant RNeasy extraction kit (Qiagen, The Netherlands). To remove residual genomic DNA, the RNA was treated with an RNase-free DNasel according to the manufacturer's instructions (Qiagen). The concentration of RNA was measured by spectrophotometer, and 5 μg of total RNA was separated on 1.2% formaldehyde agarose gel to check the concentration and to monitor integrity. RT-PCR was employed to detect the expression of *chs* in the transgenic *Arabidopsis* plants. A 500 ng sample of total RNA was used in the RT-PCR reaction.

### 3.2.6. Northern blot analysis

Total RNA (30 μg) was used for each experiment. Denatured RNA was subjected to electrophoresis through a 1.2% agarose/formaldehyde gel in MOPS buffer [Sambrook *et al*., 1989] and then transferred onto a nylon membrane as described by Sambrook *et al*.. The RNA-labelled probes were synthesized using digested pCAMBIA-CHS, T7 (or T3) polymerase (Gibco-BRL) and ^32^P UTP using the Riboprobe Gemini II core system kit (Promega).

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RNA quantification was achieved by ethidium bromide staining. This experiment was repeated with different RNA extracts with the same RNA quantity and similar patterns were obtained for each analysis.

### 3.2.7. Quantitative real-time PCR and calculation methods

Quantitative real-time PCR was performed on a Chromo4 Real-Time PCR Detector system (Bio-Rad laboratories). Samples were amplified in a 50 μl reaction containing 1× SYBR Green Master Mix (Eurogentec, Maastricht, The Netherlands) and 300 nM of each primer. The thermal profile consisted of 1 cycle at 95°C for 5 min followed by 40 cycles at 95°C for 0.5 min, at 58°C for 0.5 min and 72°C for 1 min.

Changes in gene expression and copy number of the transgene as a relative fold difference between transgenic samples and control ones were calculated using the comparative $C_t \left( 2^{-\Delta\Delta C_t} \right)$ method [Livak et al. 2001; Winer et al. 1999; Ingham et al., 2001; Schmittgen et al., 2000]. Actin3 gene was used as a reference gene for normalization. To exclude the DNA genomic contamination in the total RNA samples, the intron actin was used as a reference matrix.

Final copy number was calculated according to the following equation.

\[
\text{Copy number} = 2^{-\Delta\Delta C_t} \text{ where, } \Delta\Delta C_t = \Delta C_t \text{ (unknown sample)} - \Delta C_t \text{ (reference)}.
\]

In the copy number of transgenes experiment, the reference Ct is the Ct of 4-Hydroxyphenylpyruvate Dioxygenase gene (4HPPD) from Arabidopsis, because it has only a single copy in the Arabidopsis genome [Garcia et al., 1999].

The PCR primer sets for real-time PCR are shown in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1. PCR primer sets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primer name</th>
<th>Sequence</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHSR</td>
<td>5’ CGCGGATCCGGTACCCTGGGAGGAATTTTC 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHSF</td>
<td>5’ CGCGGATCCCTAAATAGCCACACTGTGAGG 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qCHSR</td>
<td>5’ CTATTTGGATCTGGAATGTAATCC 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qCHSF</td>
<td>5’ ACCGTGGAGGAATTTGCCAGG 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4HPPD</td>
<td>5’ TCATCCCACTAATGTTTTGCTTC 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4HPPDF</td>
<td>5’ GTGTCTATCGTGGCTTCACAGC 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTINR</td>
<td>5’ CAGGCAATACGGAGAACAGTAGTGGA 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTINF</td>
<td>5’ CCTCAGCGGATCCTCTGCTGCT 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTINF-uni</td>
<td>5’ AATGGCTGCTAACCCTGTAATGG 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTINR-7</td>
<td>5’ GAGGAGAGCTCGTACCCCTCGTA 3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTINF-7</td>
<td>5’ GTTGTACATGTGTAAGACTACTGATCATG 3’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2.8. Reagents
Oligonucleotide primers were purchased from Isogen Benelux (IJsselstein, The Netherlands). Nucleoside triphosphates were purchased from Roche Molecular Biochemicals (Indianapolis, IN, USA). Invitrogen (Breda, The Netherlands) provided restriction endonucleases. All PCR and ligation reagents were purchased from Promega (Leiden, The Netherlands). Miniprep, plant genomic extraction, RT-PCR, and PCR product purification kits were purchased from Qiagen (Venlo, The Netherlands). Bacterial and plant growth media components were all purchased from Gibco-BRL (Breda, The Netherlands), Sigma-Aldrich (Zwijndrecht, The Netherlands).

3.3. Results and discussions
3.3.1. Transformation
The binary vector suitable for _A. tumefaciens_-mediated transformation was prepared with full-length _Cannabis sativa chs_-cDNA [Raharjo, 2004]. This binary vector named _chs_-pCAMBIA contains the _chs_ coding region under the control of the constitutive CaMV-35S promoter. The construct also contains the hygromycin phosphotransferase (_HPT_) gene and the green fluorescent protein (_GFP_) reporter gene. _Arabidopsis_ flowers were inoculated with a suspension of hypovirulent _A. tumefaciens_ when numerous immature floral buds and only a few siliques were present. This method is simple and a high rate of transformed plants can be obtained. The transformation was successful and twenty one transgenic _Arabidopsis_ lines were established and named ACS1-ACS21. Amongst these six transgenic lines (ACS1, ACS2, ACS3, ACS14, ACS20, and ACS21) were selected randomly for further molecular analysis.

3.3.2. Transgene expression experiments
ACSs were selected in half MS containing Hygromycin (25 mg/ml). Expression of GFP protein in ACSs can be detected in 5 days old seedlings (Figure 3.2). Figure 3.2A shows an ACS plantlet with high expression of GFP protein; GFP protein is present in all plant tissues. Figure 3.2B shows a plantlet with low expression of GFP, in which the GFP protein is only visible in the trichomes.
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A. B.

**Figure 3.2.** A. Transformed Arabidopsis with high GFP expression, B. Transformed Arabidopsis with low GFP expression

Common genetic transformation methods such as Agrobacterium–mediated transformation frequently result in multiple transgene copies at the same or different integration sites [Kohli et al., 1998; Srivastava et al., 1999, De Neve et al., 1997; De Buck et al., 1999; Tzfira et al., 2006]. In transformed plants, the first step to be done is to estimate how many copies of the transgene have been integrated in the plant genome because this may influence the level of transgene expression and the ease of stabilizing expression in following generations. This can be measured by Southern blot analysis, but in this study we used Real-time PCR to estimate the gene copy number in our transgenic plants. This method has shown to be a reliable tool for such analyses [Li et al., 2004, Yuan et al., 2007, Mitrecic et al., 2005].

In the real-time PCR assay, DNA samples from a CHS transgenic plant were serially diluted 2-fold to obtain a standard curve. Standard curves for the endogenous Actin3 gene the CHS transgene and reference gene (4HPPD) were produced by using Opticon Monitor Continuous Fluorescence Detector software (Figure 3.3). The correlation (R) between C\textsubscript{i} value and log\textsubscript{DNA} concentration was 0.99 for the Actin gene, CHS transgene and reference gene. The DNA concentration was linear with respect to gene copy number. The results confirm the linear relationship between C\textsubscript{t} value and log\textsubscript{DNA} concentrations, thus making the C\textsubscript{t} value a reliable way to quantify DNA amount to
estimate gene copy number as both genes amplify with approximately equal efficiencies and always constant regardless of DNA concentration.

Table 3.2. Estimated CHS copy number from real-time PCR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transgenic line</th>
<th>Estimated Copy Number by Real-Time PCR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACS 1</td>
<td>7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACS 2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACS 14</td>
<td>3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACS 20</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACS 21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All transgenic plant lines showed multicopies of the transgene. Multiple transgene copies may cause a higher expression of mRNA or even cause transgene silencing [Flavell, 1994; Iyer et al., 2000; Vaucheret et al., 1998] so we used northern blot analysis to detect the expression level of the cannabis CHS transgene in all six transgenic plant lines. The results showed that the steady-state level of GFP-mRNA was slightly induced in ACS1, 3 and 20 and strongly induced in ACS2, 14 and 21 but unfortunately we were not able to detect chs mRNA on the northern blots (results not shown). Apparently, the steady-state levels of chs-mRNA expression are low in the transgenic Arabidopsis lines. Therefore, we used RT-PCR and real-time PCR to detect and quantify levels of chs-mRNA expression in transgenic Arabidopsis.

The RT-PCR result is presented in Figure 3.4. It shows that chs-mRNA is present in all ACS lines (Figure 3.4A) and no genomic DNA contamination was detected in RNA samples (Figure 3.4B). Thus only expression of the gene is measured. The chs-mRNA expression levels were quantified and can be seen in Figures 3.5. The expression levels are very low in transgenic line 2 whereas transgenic line 1 and lines 20 have high expression levels (Figures 3.5).
Figure 3.3. Efficiency of duplex real-time PCR for detection and quantitation of Actin and CHS DNA from a transgenic plant or a nontransgenic plant was diluted serially 2-folds.
Figure 3.4. A. Qualitative analysis of CHS gene expression by RT-PCR, B. Analysis of genomic DNA contamination in mRNA samples by PCR.

Figure 3.5. chs-mRNA expression levels optimized by Real-time PCR.

3.4. Conclusions

Among 21 CHS transgenic Arabidopsis lines, 6 lines (ACS 1, ACS 2, ACS 3, ACS 14, ACS 20, and ACS 21) were analysed for their transcriptional and genomic levels. We found that chs-mRNA was expressed in all 6 transgenic lines and all contain multicopies of CHS. The metabolic changes due to the transformation will be studied in these lines.