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Biological Control of Fungal Plant Diseases: Beneficial Microorganisms, Mechanisms of Antagonism and Agricultural Applications

Naina Srivastava

Department of Botany, DAV PG College, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India

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*Corresponding Author: **Naina Srivastava** | Email Address: **drnainasrivastava@gmail.com**

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Abstract

Fungal diseases are among the major biological constraints to agricultural productivity, causing substantial losses in crop yield, quality and post-harvest value. Conventional disease management relies heavily on synthetic fungicides; however, repeated and intensive fungicide application has contributed to the emergence of resistant pathogen populations, environmental contamination, disruption of beneficial microorganisms and concerns regarding residues in food and agricultural ecosystems. Biological control has therefore emerged as an important component of sustainable plant disease management. Beneficial microorganisms, including Trichoderma, Bacillus, Pseudomonas, mycorrhizal fungi, yeasts and other naturally occurring antagonists, can suppress fungal pathogens through multiple direct and indirect mechanisms. These mechanisms include competition for nutrients and ecological niches, mycoparasitism, antibiosis, secretion of hydrolytic enzymes, production of volatile organic compounds, iron competition through siderophores, parasitism, biofilm formation and degradation of pathogen structures. Beneficial microorganisms can additionally activate plant-mediated defense mechanisms, including induced systemic resistance, systemic acquired resistance, enhanced antioxidant capacity, reinforcement of cell walls and accumulation of antimicrobial metabolites. Recent advances in microbial genomics, metabolomics, microbiome analysis and synthetic microbial consortia have expanded opportunities for developing more effective biological control products. Nevertheless, inconsistent field performance, environmental sensitivity, formulation limitations, microbial compatibility and regulatory challenges continue to restrict large-scale adoption.

Keywords: *biological control, fungal diseases, beneficial microorganisms, trichoderma, bacillus, pseudomonas.*

Introduction

Fungal diseases represent one of the most persistent challenges to modern agriculture. A wide range of fungal and fungus-like pathogens infect roots, stems, leaves, flowers, fruits and seeds, resulting in reduced crop establishment, impaired plant growth, lower yield and deterioration of harvested commodities. Important pathogens such as *Fusarium*, *Rhizoctonia*, *Botrytis*, *Alternaria*, *Sclerotinia*, *Colletotrichum*, *Macrophomina*, *Verticillium* and *Phytophthora* affect numerous economically important crops [1]. Chemical fungicides have traditionally provided rapid and effective disease suppression. Nevertheless, their intensive use can result in several undesirable consequences. Repeated application creates selection pressure for fungicide-resistant pathogen populations and can affect non-target microorganisms.

Residues may also accumulate in agricultural environments and food products when fungicides are improperly used. These concerns have encouraged increasing interest in biological approaches to disease management [2]. Biological control refers to the suppression of plant pathogens through living organisms or their products. Beneficial microorganisms can occupy ecological niches that would otherwise be available to pathogens, produce antimicrobial compounds, directly attack pathogens or stimulate plant defense mechanisms. Unlike many single-site chemical fungicides, microbial biocontrol agents frequently employ several mechanisms simultaneously, potentially reducing the likelihood of rapid pathogen adaptation [3]. The rhizosphere represents a particularly important environment for biological control. Plant roots release sugars, amino acids, organic acids and secondary metabolites that influence microbial colonization.

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Beneficial microorganisms capable of establishing themselves around or within roots can compete with pathogens and simultaneously modify plant physiology.

Among microbial biocontrol agents, species of *Trichoderma*, *Bacillus* and *Pseudomonas* have received considerable attention. Mycorrhizal fungi, yeasts, actinomycetes and other beneficial microorganisms also contribute to disease suppression. Their effectiveness depends on microbial strain, crop genotype, pathogen species, soil characteristics, environmental conditions and application method [4]. The development of microbial biocontrol products has consequently shifted from simply identifying antagonistic organisms toward understanding their molecular mechanisms and ecological interactions. Advances in sequencing, metabolomics and microbiome research are enabling the identification of microbial traits associated with effective disease suppression.

Beneficial Microorganisms Used in Biological Control

Beneficial microorganisms associated with plants constitute a diverse biological resource for disease management. They may colonize the rhizosphere, phyllosphere or internal plant tissues.

Table 1: Major microbial groups used for biological control of fungal plant diseases

Microbial group	Representative organisms	Major mechanisms
Beneficial fungi	*Trichoderma* spp.	Mycoparasitism, antibiosis, competition, induced resistance
Mycorrhizal fungi	Arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi	Nutrient competition, defense priming, improved plant nutrition
Beneficial bacteria	*Bacillus* spp.	Antibiosis, lipopeptides, biofilm formation, induced resistance
Fluorescent pseudomonads	*Pseudomonas* spp.	Siderophores, antibiotics, competition, ISR
Actinomycetes	*Streptomyces* spp.	Antibiotics, enzymes, competition
Beneficial yeasts	*Pichia*, *Candida*, *Metschnikowia* spp.	Nutrient competition, antibiosis, ROS modulation
Endophytic microorganisms	Various bacterial and fungal taxa	Colonization, defense activation, pathogen exclusion
Microbial consortia	Multiple compatible strains	Complementary and synergistic disease suppression

Trichoderma as a Major Fungal Biocontrol Agent

Species belonging to the genus *Trichoderma* are among the best-characterized fungal biocontrol agents. They occur naturally in soil and on plant roots and can colonize diverse agricultural environments [5]. The effectiveness of *Trichoderma* results from several complementary mechanisms. These include competition, mycoparasitism, production of antimicrobial metabolites, secretion of hydrolytic enzymes and stimulation of plant defense.

Mycoparasitism

Mycoparasitism involves direct recognition, attachment and penetration of one fungus by another. *Trichoderma* can recognize pathogen hyphae through chemical and physical signals and subsequently grow around or along the pathogen [6]. The biocontrol fungus may produce chitinases, β-1,3-glucanases, proteases and other hydrolytic enzymes that degrade the pathogen's cell wall. Mycoparasitism can therefore directly reduce pathogen biomass and reproductive structures.

Antibiosis

Trichoderma species produce a wide range of secondary metabolites with antifungal activity. These compounds may inhibit spore germination, hyphal growth or pathogen reproduction.

The chemical diversity of *Trichoderma* metabolites is an important reason for the broad antagonistic activity observed among different strains.

Competition

Rapid growth and efficient nutrient utilization enable *Trichoderma* to occupy ecological niches before pathogens become established [7]. Competition can occur for carbon sources, nitrogen, iron, space and infection sites. Root colonization may therefore prevent pathogen establishment even in the absence of direct antagonism.

Beneficial Bacteria in Biological Disease Control

Several bacterial genera have demonstrated strong potential as microbial biocontrol agents.

Bacillus species

Bacillus species are particularly attractive because they produce environmentally persistent endospores. This characteristic facilitates formulation, storage and application [8]. Species such as *Bacillus subtilis*, *B. amyloliquefaciens*, *B. velezensis* and related taxa produce antimicrobial lipopeptides, including iturins, fengycins and surfactins. These compounds can disrupt fungal membranes and inhibit pathogen growth. Some *Bacillus* strains also produce volatile compounds and enzymes that contribute to pathogen suppression.

Pseudomonas species

Fluorescent pseudomonads are important rhizosphere colonizers. They can produce siderophores that bind iron and make this essential micronutrient less available to competing pathogens [9]. Certain strains also produce antibiotics, hydrogen cyanide and extracellular enzymes. In addition, *Pseudomonas* can stimulate plant defense pathways and promote root development.

Streptomyces and other actinomycetes

Actinomycetes, particularly *Streptomyces*, produce chemically diverse secondary metabolites with antimicrobial properties [10]. Their ability to produce antibiotics, hydrolytic enzymes and volatile compounds makes them valuable candidates for biological control. Their filamentous growth and capacity to colonize soil environments further contribute to pathogen suppression.

Competition for Nutrients and Ecological Niches

Competition represents one of the most fundamental mechanisms of microbial disease suppression. Plant pathogens require nutrients and physical space to germinate, grow and reproduce. Beneficial microorganisms can rapidly colonize plant surfaces and surrounding soil, reducing the resources available to pathogens [11]. Iron competition is particularly important. Iron is essential for fungal growth but can become limiting in the rhizosphere. Beneficial bacteria produce siderophores that bind ferric iron with high affinity.

Mycoparasitism

Mycoparasitism represents one of the most direct mechanisms of fungal biological control.

The process generally involves:
Pathogen recognition → attachment → coiling → secretion of lytic enzymes → penetration → degradation → nutrient acquisition

Trichoderma species are particularly effective mycoparasites of several soilborne pathogens. The specificity and intensity of mycoparasitism depend on the compatibility between the antagonist and target pathogen. Molecular recognition systems involving carbohydrate-binding proteins, receptors and secondary metabolites contribute to this interaction.

Induced Systemic Resistance

Beneficial microorganisms do not only attack pathogens directly. They can also prepare plants for more effective defense [12]. This phenomenon is generally referred to as induced systemic resistance (ISR). Microbial colonization activates signaling pathways that prime plants for faster and stronger defense responses following pathogen challenge.

Systemic Acquired Resistance and Microbial Biocontrol

Some beneficial microorganisms can influence pathways associated with salicylic acid and systemic acquired resistance (SAR) [13]. SAR is particularly associated with activation of broad-spectrum defense mechanisms following localized infection or immune stimulation. Although ISR and SAR have historically been treated as distinct pathways, modern research indicates substantial interaction and cross-talk between hormonal signaling networks. The ability of beneficial microorganisms to modulate these pathways is an important mechanism underlying their disease-suppressive effects.

Biofilm Formation and Root Colonization

Effective biocontrol requires microorganisms to survive and establish themselves in the target environment [14]. Bacterial biofilms facilitate attachment to root surfaces and protect microbial populations from environmental stress. Extracellular polymeric substances can improve adhesion and create localized microbial communities.

Mycorrhizal Fungi and Disease Suppression

Arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi form symbiotic associations with the roots of numerous agricultural plants. Mycorrhizal colonization can reduce disease through multiple mechanisms. Improved phosphorus and micronutrient acquisition may strengthen plants, while changes in root architecture can modify pathogen accessibility [15]. Mycorrhizal fungi can also prime plant defense responses and modify the composition of the rhizosphere microbiome. Disease suppression may therefore result from a combination of improved plant nutrition, competition, altered root physiology and immune activation.

Beneficial Endophytes

Endophytic microorganisms reside within plant tissues without causing obvious disease. Some bacterial and fungal endophytes provide significant protection against pathogens. Endophytes can produce antimicrobial compounds within plant tissues and occupy internal ecological niches that are inaccessible to many pathogens [16]. They may also modify plant hormone levels, stimulate antioxidant systems and improve tolerance to drought, salinity and temperature stress. The use of beneficial endophytes represents an important avenue for developing multifunctional microbial inoculants that provide both disease protection and growth promotion.

Microbial Consortia

Although single microbial strains have traditionally dominated biological-control research, microbial consortia are receiving increasing attention [17]. A consortium combines two or more microorganisms with complementary functions.

For example:
***Trichoderma* + *Bacillus* + mycorrhizal fungi**

Table 2: Potential advantages and limitations of microbial consortia

Aspect	Potential advantage	Potential limitation
Multiple mechanisms	Broad disease suppression	Microbial incompatibility
Environmental adaptation	Greater functional diversity	Variable establishment
Plant growth	Combined growth-promoting effects	Competition among inoculants
Disease resistance	Multiple defense pathways	Complex formulation
Stability	Functional redundancy	Difficult quality control

Successful consortia require careful selection of compatible microorganisms.

16. Biological Control of Major Fungal Diseases

Microbial biocontrol agents have been evaluated against numerous important diseases.

Table 3: Examples of fungal diseases targeted by biological control

Crop/disease	Major pathogen	Potential biocontrol agents
Tomato wilt	*Fusarium oxysporum*	*Trichoderma*, *Bacillus*, *Pseudomonas*
Rhizoctonia root rot	*Rhizoctonia solani*	*Trichoderma*, *Bacillus*
Damping-off	*Pythium*, *Rhizoctonia*	*Trichoderma*, *Bacillus*, *Pseudomonas*
Botrytis gray mold	*Botrytis cinerea*	*Trichoderma*, beneficial yeasts, *Bacillus*
Anthracnose	*Colletotrichum* spp.	*Bacillus*, *Trichoderma*, yeasts
Sclerotinia diseases	*Sclerotinia sclerotiorum*	*Trichoderma*, *Bacillus*, *Streptomyces*
Alternaria diseases	*Alternaria* spp.	*Bacillus*, *Pseudomonas*, *Trichoderma*
Charcoal rot	*Macrophomina phaseolina*	*Trichoderma*, *Bacillus*
Verticillium wilt	*Verticillium* spp.	*Trichoderma*, mycorrhizal fungi

Seed Treatment with Biocontrol Microorganisms

Seed treatment is an efficient method for introducing beneficial microorganisms into agricultural systems. Microbial seed treatments can protect germinating seeds and young roots from soilborne pathogens. They can also stimulate early root development and improve microbial colonization [18]. Biopriming combines seed hydration with microbial inoculation and can improve both seed germination and disease resistance.

20. Post-Harvest Biological Control

Biological control is increasingly important for managing post-harvest fungal diseases. Fruit and vegetable commodities are frequently affected by pathogens such as *Botrytis*, *Penicillium*, *Rhizopus* and *Monilinia*. Beneficial yeasts and bacteria can colonize wounds and compete with pathogens for nutrients and space. Some also produce antimicrobial compounds or stimulate host defense responses [19]. Post-harvest biological control can reduce reliance on synthetic fungicides and is particularly relevant for fresh produce where chemical residues are a significant concern.

24. Microbiome-Based Biological Control

Advances in microbiome science have expanded the concept of biological control from individual microbial strains to microbial communities. Disease-suppressive soils may contain microbial communities that naturally prevent pathogen establishment. These communities can function through competition, antibiosis, predation, nutrient limitation and plant defense activation [20]. Metagenomics, metatranscriptomics and metabolomics are increasingly being used to identify microbial taxa and functional genes associated with disease suppression. The future of biological control may therefore involve designing microbial communities rather than simply applying individual microorganisms.

Future Perspectives

The future of biological control is likely to shift toward more precise, multifunctional and ecology-based strategies. One major direction is the development of microbial consortia containing complementary microorganisms. Another is the identification of microbial metabolites that can be used as biological fungicides or plant-defense elicitors. Synthetic biology may allow researchers to improve microbial traits such as colonization, stress tolerance and antimicrobial production. Genome sequencing can accelerate the discovery of promising strains and biosynthetic pathways [21]. Microbiome engineering represents another major frontier. Rather than introducing a single organism, future systems may manipulate entire microbial communities to create stable disease-suppressive environments. Integration with precision agriculture could further improve performance. Site-specific application based on soil conditions, pathogen abundance and environmental forecasts may reduce unnecessary microbial inputs and increase treatment efficiency.

Conclusion

Biological control represents an important component of sustainable management of fungal plant diseases. Beneficial fungi, bacteria, yeasts, actinomycetes and mycorrhizal microorganisms can suppress pathogens through diverse mechanisms, including competition, antibiosis, mycoparasitism, nutrient deprivation, siderophore production, hydrolytic enzyme secretion, volatile compounds and activation of plant defense responses. The multifunctional nature of these interactions provides important advantages over approaches based exclusively on single chemical targets. *Trichoderma*, *Bacillus*, *Pseudomonas*, *Streptomyces*, beneficial yeasts and mycorrhizal fungi have demonstrated substantial potential in laboratory, greenhouse and field systems. However, inconsistent field performance remains a major obstacle to widespread adoption. Future research should therefore emphasize strain selection under realistic environmental conditions, improved formulation technologies, microbial consortia, microbiome engineering and integration with precision agriculture. Genomics, metabolomics, artificial intelligence and advanced ecological modelling can accelerate discovery and optimization of effective microbial agents. The most promising strategy is likely to be integrated disease management in which biological control is combined with resistant cultivars, cultural practices, soil-health management and carefully targeted chemical interventions. Such approaches can reduce dependence on synthetic fungicides while promoting resilient and environmentally sustainable agricultural production.

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