

Use of Endophytic Microbes to Promote Crop Production for Eco-efficient Agriculture

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Article ID:11009

Introduction:

Agriculture today faces multiple challenges *viz.*, rising input costs, environmental degradation, increasing incidence of pests/diseases and climate-induced abiotic stresses such as drought, salinity, heat, etc. To meet global food demand sustainably, farmers and scientists are looking for approaches that reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, while enhancing crop productivity and resilience.

Sustainable agriculture aims to maintain crop productivity while minimizing environmental impacts and preserving natural resources. Among the innovative approaches supporting this vision, **endophytic microbes** have emerged as vital components in improving crop health, productivity, and resilience. Endophytes are microorganisms—mainly **bacteria and fungi**—that reside within plant tissues **without causing any harm**. These hidden allies enhance plant growth, yield, sustainability, confer stress tolerance and play crucial roles in plant defence mechanisms, making them key players in sustainable crop management.

What Are Endophytic Microbes?

- **Definition:** Microbes (bacteria, fungi and actinomycetes) that live inside plants — roots, leaves, stems, seeds etc. — without causing disease. They can be mutualistic.
- **Diversity:** They belong to many taxa. Among bacteria, common genera include *Bacillus*, *Pseudomonas*, *Rhizobium*, *Burkholderia*, *Klebsiella*, etc. Among fungi, there are *Trichoderma*, *Serendipita indica*, etc.

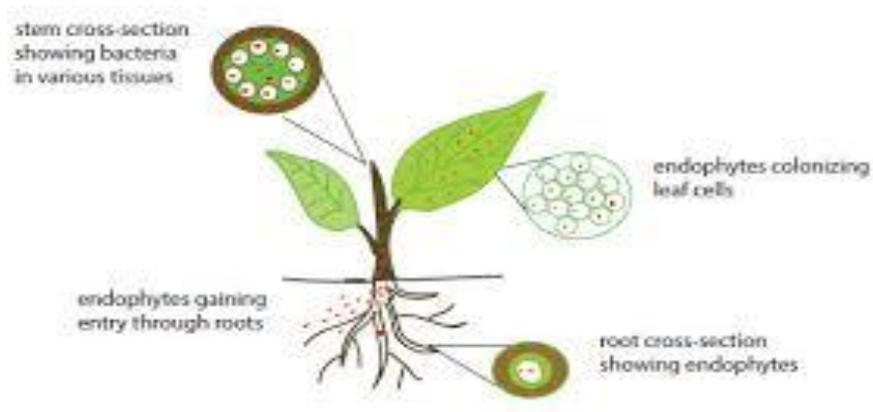


Figure: Endophytic Microbes and their mechanism

Mechanisms by Which Endophytes Promote Crop Health:

Endophytes can help plants via multiple direct and indirect mechanisms:

1. Nutrient Acquisition & Enhancement

- **Nitrogen fixation** (some bacterial endophytes convert atmospheric N_2 to ammonia usable by plant).
- **Solubilization of nutrients:** phosphate, potassium, zinc etc., which are often present in insoluble forms in soil.
- **Siderophore production:** chelating iron and making it more available to plant, while sometimes restricting pathogen access.

2. Growth Promotion via Phytohormones

- **Production of growth hormones:** auxins (IAA), cytokinins, gibberellins. These influence root system architecture: more branching, more root hairs, better uptake.
- Enzymatic activity that modulates plant's internal signalling (e.g. ACC deaminase to lower ethylene, which reduces plant stress).

3. Stress Tolerance (Abiotic)

- Tolerance to drought, salinity, extremes of temperature and pH variation. Endophytes may help by modulating oxidative stress (controlling reactive oxygen species), producing osmoprotectants, enhancing water uptake, etc.
- These are also tolerance to heavy metals and pollutants. Some endophytes help plant

survive in contaminated soils by sequestration or detoxification.

4. Disease and Pest Suppression (Biotic Stress)

- Production of antimicrobial compounds, enzymes, volatile organic compounds that suppress phytopathogens (fungi, bacteria, viruses).
- **Induced systemic resistance (ISR):** endophytes prime the plant's immune system, so that when pathogens attack, the defense response is stronger/faster.
- Competition for space/nutrients with pathogens.

5. Other Benefits

- Improvement of root system architecture: more roots, deeper roots for water/nutrient uptake.
- Reducing oxidative damage inside plants.

Examples of Beneficial Endophytes:

- *Serendipita indica* (synonym *Piriformospora indica*): A fungal root endophyte first isolated from orchid plants in Rajasthan, India. It promotes plant growth, increases salt-stress tolerance, improves resistance to root pathogens, enhances antioxidant capacity.
- *Herbaspirillum seropedicae*: A diazotrophic bacterial endophyte that associates with crops such as maize, rice, sugarcane, etc., improving yields by supplying nitrogen.
- *Paenibacillus polymyxa*: Known for nitrogen fixation and biocontrol, forming biofilms on roots, producing substances that deter pathogens.

Application Methods & Management Practices:

To use endophytic microbes effectively in crop health management, appropriate strategies and good practices are needed. These include:

1. Selection of Appropriate Strains

- Screening for local adaptation: endophytes from local soils/plants may perform better.
- Testing for multiple beneficial traits: nutrient mobilization, hormone production, stress tolerance, biocontrol, etc.

2. Inoculation Methods

- Seed treatment: coating seeds with endophyte preparations.
- Soil inoculation: introducing microbes to soils (nurseries, transplanted seedlings).

- Root dips or drenches.
- Sometimes foliar sprays if endophytes can colonize above-ground parts.

3. Formulation and Delivery

- Stability: carriers like peat, biochar, compost, or encapsulation to deliver live microbes effectively.
- Ensuring viability under storage/shipping conditions.

4. Integration with Agronomic Practices

- Avoiding practices that kill beneficial microbes: overuse of broad-spectrum fungicides, heavy tillage, high salinity or pH extremes, etc.
- Using complementary practices: organic amendments, cover crops, proper rotation.

5. Monitoring & Assessment

- Checking colonization success (microscopy, molecular methods).
- Monitoring plant growth, stress markers, disease incidence, yield.

Challenges and Limitations:

While endophytic microbes hold great promise, there are challenges to practical, large-scale deployment:

- **Variability in field performance:** lab or greenhouse results don't always translate well in field conditions due to environmental fluctuations.
- **Colonization and persistence:** getting the endophytes to establish inside the plant and remain through ontogenesis and under stress is not always easy.
- **Competition with native microbiota:** introduced endophytes must compete with indigenous microbes.
- **Regulation, safety, and consistency:** risk assessment, regulatory approvals, ensuring no unintended effects.
- **Formulation and cost:** making affordable, stable products that farmers can use.

Recent Advances & Future Prospects:

- Use of **omics** (genomics, metagenomics, transcriptomics, proteomics) to better understand plant–endophyte interactions, to discover novel beneficial strains, and to engineer or select for better performing ones.
- Development of **microbial consortia** (more than one species) rather than single strains, to exploit synergies and cover more functions.

- Breeding or engineering crops that better recruit or partner with beneficial endophytes.
- Tailored endophyte solutions for abiotic stress mitigation (drought, salinity), especially with climate change.
- Policy / extension efforts to make microbial inoculants accessible to farmers.

Implications for Sustainable Agriculture:

- **Reduced chemical inputs:** fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides can be reduced, lowering environmental pollution and costs.
- **Improved resource use efficiency:** better nutrient uptake, water use, etc.
- **Enhanced resilience:** to pests, disease outbreaks, and abiotic stresses.
- **Soil health and biodiversity:** fostering microbial diversity in soils and inside plants helps maintain ecosystem functioning.
- **Food security:** higher, more stable yields under marginal conditions.

Case Studies & Practical Examples:

- Use of *Serendipita indica* in multiple crops in India, improving salt stress tolerance and disease resistance.
- Field trials of *Herbaspirillum seropedicae* for maize and rice showing significant yield increases, equivalent in some cases to added nitrogen fertilizer.
- Studies showing that bacterial endophytes in legumes enhance growth, nutrient acquisition, pathogen resistance, etc.

Recommendations for Farmers and Researchers:

For those wishing to implement or research this approach:

1. **Start small:** pilot trials in local conditions to test which endophytes work best.
2. **Use local isolates if possible:** adapted to the local soil and climate.
3. **Ensure compatibility:** crop species, soil type, existing microbial communities.
4. **Ensure proper formulation:** live microbes, good shelf life, easy application.
5. **Combine with good practices:** organic matter addition, balanced fertilization, crop rotation.
6. **Monitoring & feedback:** track performance over time; adjust based on observations.

Conclusion:

Endophytic microbes offer a potent tool for improving crop health and management in sustainable agriculture. Through mechanisms such as nutrient acquisition, stress tolerance, disease suppression, and growth promotion, they can help reduce reliance on chemical inputs, enhance resilience, and contribute to long-term soil and ecosystem health. While challenges remain in field consistency, formulation, and regulation, ongoing advances in microbial ecology, biotechnology, and agronomy suggest that endophyte-based solutions will become increasingly viable and important in future agricultural systems.