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► **To cite this version:**

Christophe Duplais, Nicolas Papon, Vincent Courdavault. Tracking the Origin and Evolution of Plant Metabolites. Trends in Plant Science, Elsevier, 2020, 25 (12), pp.1182-1184. 10.1016/j.tplants.2020.08.010 . hal-02942845

HAL Id: hal-02942845

<https://hal.univ-angers.fr/hal-02942845>

Submitted on 13 Nov 2020

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Spotlight

Tracking the origin and evolution of plant metabolites

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Abstract (50 words)

Iridoids are monoterpenes produced by various plants and used as chemical defenses. Lichman et al. described a timeline of molecular events that underpin the re-emergence of iridoid biosynthesis in an independent lineage of aromatic plants (catnip). This study represents a benchmark to study enzyme and metabolite evolution across lineages from the tree of life.

Keywords: Plant metabolites – Lamiaceae – iridoids – nepetalactone – enzyme evolution

Core text (1,200 words)

Understanding the origin and evolution of plant metabolites is fundamental to explain the distribution of natural products among plant families. These metabolites are produced by plants as a response to abiotic and biotic stress, to ensure inter- and intra-species communication and are also widely used by humans for medicine and agriculture. Mapping the presence and absence of plant metabolites across angiosperms has been undertaken for many years (1), but studying the molecular mechanisms and evolutionary processes of these metabolites still remains more challenging. To test whether a specific chemical family has evolved independently in different lineages or arisen from an ancestral pathway, the identification of genes and proteins involved in the biosynthesis of these natural products is an essential prerequisite. For example, in the biosynthesis of plant tropane alkaloids the enzymes responsible for the tropinone-reduction step are thought to have arisen independently across angiosperm species (2). Conversely the norcoclaurine synthase in benzylisoquinoline alkaloid biosynthesis in angiosperms is suggested to be a monophyletic evolution prior to the emergence of eudicots (3). Deciphering the evolution of terpene synthases across plant lineages is challenging since terpenes are present in the oldest lineages of land plants that colonized terrestrial habitats (480-430 Mya) (4). Over time, terpene synthases have generated high terpenoid chemical diversity, which has played a major role in plant diversification and adaptation. In this respect, an impressive new study led by Lichman, Buell and O'Connor has shed new light on the evolution of a prominent class of monoterpenes, namely iridoids, in the well-known aromatic plants family (Lamiaceae) (5). This investigation is a *tour de force*

1 revealing the molecular mechanisms for the loss and re-emergence of iridoid biosynthesis in
2 the *Nepeta* lineage.

3
4 Iridoids are produced by several plant families and act as chemical defense against
5 herbivores and plant pathogens. In the Lamiaceae (approximately 200 genera, 7,000
6 species) which is composed of seven major subfamilies, iridoids are widely distributed across
7 all the subfamilies but are absent in a single subfamily, i.e. the Nepetoideae (**Fig. 1A**).
8 Importantly, since iridoids are also present in the sister family of the Lamiaceae, i.e. the
9 Verbenaceae, it is likely that genes involved in iridoid biosynthesis have evolved from a
10 common ancestor while the capacity of producing iridoids has been lost in the clade of
11 Nepetoideae. However, there is a noteworthy exception because iridoids are found in the
12 Nepetoideae genus *Nepeta*. These plants are known as catmint or catnip, due to the euphoria-
13 inducing effect of the nepetalactone iridoids on the behavior of felines. The intriguing
14 presence of iridoids in Nepetoideae thus raises the question are the same enzymes utilized or
15 are novel enzymes involved that have led to the re-emergence of the biosynthesis of these
16 metabolites (**Fig. 1A**).

17 The structural core of iridoids is a *cis*- or *trans*-fused cyclopentanopyran. Unlike the
18 biosynthesis of terpenoids generally resulting from the cyclization of a linear terpene
19 carbocation by terpene synthase (TS), the key step to form the iridoid bicycle is a reductive
20 cyclization of 8-oxogeranial by iridoid synthase (ISY) followed by either a Diels-Adler reaction
21 or a Michael addition (**6**). ISY was originally discovered in the Madagascar periwinkle
22 (*Catharanthus roseus*, Apocynaceae), a major source of anticancer drugs derived from iridoid
23 monoterpene indole alkaloids (**6,7**). Interestingly, the sequence and crystal structure reported
24 from the Madagascar periwinkle showed that ISY is not similar to TS but more closely related
25 to the PRISE (progesterone 5 β -reductase/ISY) enzyme family, a short-chain NADPH-
26 dependent dehydrogenase (**8,9**).

27 To understand the evolution of ISY in aromatic plants, a novel chemical-genomic-
28 phylogenetic approach using the transcriptomes of 48 Lamiaceae species was recently
29 published (**10**). Unexpectedly, the functional validation of these candidates revealed that
30 although ISY activates 8-oxogeranial to give an enolic intermediate it does not catalyze the
31 consecutive cyclization into nepetalactone (**11**). Instead, the newly identified class of
32 nepetalactol-related short-chain dehydrogenase enzymes (NEPS) achieves the cyclization of
33 the reactive intermediate and controls the stereoselectivity of the outcome products (**12**).
34 Furthermore, biosynthetic gene clusters composed of *ISY* and *NEPS* were identified by mining
35 *Nepeta* genomes (**5**). Interestingly, these clusters also include major latex protein-like genes
36 (*MLPL*) whose biochemical characterization showed they react in a similar manner to NEPS to
37 form *cis-trans* nepetalactone stereoisomer (**Fig. 1B**).

38
39 With these key pieces in hand, Lichman et al. investigated the loss and re-emergence of
40 iridoid biosynthesis during the evolution of Nepetoideae. Firstly, genome resources of *Nepeta*
41 *cataria* and *Nepeta mussinii* were compared with those of the iridoid non-producer *Hyssopus*
42 *officinalis* (indicated by a red asterisk in **Fig. 1A**) and confirmed that the absence of iridoids
43 results from the loss of the *ISY* gene in this last species as in other Nepetoideae for which
44 omics data are available. Surprisingly, it also directly correlates nepetalactone biosynthesis to a
45 regain of *ISY* in *N. cataria* and *N. mussinii*. Furthermore, phylogenetic analyses clearly indicate
46 that *ISY* genes of *Nepeta* form a distinct clade in the Lamioideae subfamily, which strongly
47 suggests a distinct and parallel evolution of ISYs. Secondly, the evolution of *ISY* in *Nepeta* was
48 assessed using ancestral sequence reconstruction to infer the *PRISE* phylogeny. This
49 comparative phylogenetic method was then combined with positive selection analysis and

1 screening of *in vitro* activities of extant and predicted ancestral PRISE. Overall, the key finding
2 of the re-emergence of ISY supports the hypothesis that an ancestral enzyme with a minor
3 side ISY activity gradually evolved into a novel iridoid biosynthetic enzyme with high ISY
4 activity, following gene duplication and selection (**Fig. 1C**).

5 The *tour de force* was to compare the evolution and diversification of *NEPS* with the
6 emergence of ISY activity and to elucidate the chronology events leading to the assembly of
7 the nepetalactone gene cluster. By comparing PRISE and NEP chronograms, the authors
8 predicted that the gain of the most recent common ancestor of the NEPS gene was
9 concomitant to the second gene duplication of the ISY ancestor (around 25 Ma ago), while the
10 NEPS family expansion occurred at the same time that ISY relative activity dramatically
11 increased and P5 β R activity is was lost (20 to 9 Ma ago). Ultimately, a dispersed duplication
12 event allowed ISY to integrate into the NEPS locus while the original copy at the PRISE locus
13 was pseudogenized since redundant (9 Ma ago, today). These discoveries strongly suggest
14 that ISY and NEPS catalytic activities have coevolved with strong interplay between
15 corresponding genomic regions (**Fig. 1C**).

16
17 The evolution of iridoids in Lamiaceae thus stands out as a fascinating example for tracing
18 the origins of plant metabolites and the re-emergence of their biosynthesis in *Nepeta*. The
19 present study provides unprecedented insights suggesting that this phenomenon relies on
20 repeated and innovative evolution further widening our knowledge of the production of
21 nepetalactones compared to iridoids in the rest of the mint family. The proposed chronology of
22 enzyme selection and diversification also suggests that the formation of gene clusters may not
23 drive metabolic innovation but rather organize following enzyme evolution under strong initial
24 pressure. Now highlighted, this twisted evolutionary story raises new puzzling questions
25 ranging from the role of protein-protein interactions between ISY with NEPS/MLPL during the
26 stereoselective formation of nepetalactones, to the biotic and abiotic factors responsible for
27 the co-evolution of *ISY* and *NEPS*. Additionally, since iridoids also occur across different insect
28 taxa, the comparison of plant and insect iridoid synthases is a crucial entry point to address
29 the evolutionary convergence for producing these common compounds (**13**). The evolution of
30 iridoids represents a remarkable model to further study enzyme and metabolite evolution
31 across the tree of life.

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15 Figure caption

16 **Figure 1. Investigating the molecular basis of the re-emergence of iridoid biosynthesis in the *Nepeta* lineage.**
17 **(A) Detection of iridoid metabolites in *Nepeta*.** Iridoids are widely distributed in Lamioideae but are absent in the single
18 subfamily Nepetoideae. However, there is a noteworthy exception because iridoids are found in Nepetoideae in the *Nepeta*
19 genus. The phylogenetic tree represents the current understanding of the relationships of the Lamiaceae lineages, according
20 to (12). The red asterisk corresponds to the iridoid non-producer *Hyssopus officinalis*. **(B)** Iridoid biosynthetic pathway in
21 *Nepeta*. Knowledge of nepetalactones biosynthesis in *Nepeta* were reported in (3,10). This pathway involves geraniol
22 synthase (GES), geraniol 8-hydroxylase (G8H), 8-hydroxygeraniol oxidoreductase (HGO), iridoid synthase (ISY). Finally,
23 nepetalactol-related short-chain dehydrogenase enzymes (NEPS) or major latex protein-like enzyme (MLPL) achieves the
24 cyclization of the reactive intermediate and controls the stereoselectivity of the outcome products. **(C)** Proposed chronology
25 of events that have likely occurred in *Nepeta* for the re-emergence of nepetalactone biosynthesis.