Physical and antioxidative responses of *Orthosiphon stamineus* towards various copper and lead concentrations

Fazilah Abd Manan*, Wee-Han Chia*, Nor Farahani Ali Othman*, Dayangku Dalilah Mamat*, Chun-Shiong Chongb, Azman Abd Samadb and Tsun-Thai Chaic,d

*Faculty of Biosciences and Medical Engineering, Department of Biosciences and Health Sciences, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, Malaysia; bFaculty of Biosciences and Medical Engineering, Department of Biotechnology and Medical Engineering, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, Malaysia; cFaculty of Science, Department of Chemical Science, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kampar, Malaysia; dCentre for Biodiversity Research, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kampar, Malaysia

**ABSTRACT**

Plants normally change their physiological and biochemical properties when exposed to heavy metal stress. We investigated the response of *Orthosiphon stamineus* towards different concentrations of Pb (0, 2, 5, 8 mg/L) and Cu (1, 2, 4, 5 mg/L). Heavy metals left in soil, plant physical characteristics, and the level of antioxidants in *O. stamineus* were determined. Our results showed that the tested Pb concentrations did not significantly affect stem elongation, but at 2 mg/L Pb increased the leaf growth. Pb at 5 and 8 mg/L increased the total plant biomass. In contrast, 5 mg/L Cu treatment affected stem elongation and the root length of *O. stamineus*. The concentrations of Pb and Cu in soil were significantly reduced after the plants were harvested. Biochemically, 5 mg/L Pb had significantly increased the activity of catalase, while Cu at 5 mg/L significantly reduced the activity of superoxide dismutase and ascorbate peroxidase. Total flavonoid content increased in Pb-treated plants, but the total phenolics content decreased. Cu treatment at 2 mg/L, on the other hand increased the total phenolics content. Our results demonstrated that *O. stamineus* adapt to metal stress via physical changes, and scavenge oxygen radicals through enzymatic and non-enzymatic antioxidant productions.

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**CONTACT**

Fazilah Abd Manan  fazilah@fbb.utm.my

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flavonoid, diterpene, benzochromenes, and essential oils present in this plant, it has been widely used to treat diabetes, hypertension, gout, and kidney-related problems. [11] Flavonoid, for instance, has antioxidant, antimicrobial, antiviral, and anticancer activity[12], while diterpene has been used as an anticancer agent.[13] Besides that, a study by Sacchetti et al. [14] proved that essential oils react as antioxidants, antiradicals, and antimicrobials.

This species is also exposed to various environmental changes, including heavy metal stress. However, no study has been conducted specifically on the physical and biochemical response of O. stamineus towards heavy metal stress. In this study, we had three objectives: first, to determine the physical characteristics of O. stamineus exposed to different concentrations of Pb and Cu; second, to determine the enzymatic antioxidant activities of O. stamineus exposed to different concentrations of Pb and Cu, and third, to determine the total phenolics and total flavonoids contents of O. stamineus exposed to different concentrations of Pb and Cu.

Materials and methods

Plant materials

 Matured O. stamineus, also known as Orthosiphon arista-tus were transplanted using similar sizes of stem cutting in a 12.7 x 17.7 cm polybags. Voucher specimen (40212) was deposited at the herbarium of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Bangi, Malaysia. Copper (T1 = 1, T2 = 2, T3 = 4, T4 = 5 mg/L) and lead (T1 = 0, T2 = 2, T3 = 5, T4 = 8 mg/L) were applied to the soil at the early stage of growth. The range of metal concentration was selected based on our preliminary testing of soil metal concentrations that was subsequently used as control treatment. Plants were grown in a glasshouse in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia from September to December 2013. There were covered by shades and watered twice daily with tap water. During the growth, stem length and leaves number were recorded fortnightly. After 3 months, plants were harvested and physically characterized. The longest root was measured manually using a meter scale after removal from the soil. Plants were stored at −20 °C while soil samples were kept at room temperature prior to analysis.

Determination of heavy metal content in soil

Prior to heavy metal analysis, soil samples were dried in the oven at 80 °C for 48 h. Dried samples were pulverized into powder, and approximately 0.5 g samples were subjected to acid digestion process. Nitric acid followed by perchloric acid (2:1) was added to the powdered samples. The digested sample was further diluted and aliquots were used for the estimation of Pb and Cu concentrations. The measurements of these metal elements were conducted using Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometer.

Sample preparation for enzymatic antioxidant activity

Approximately 500 mg of plant samples were homogenized in cold extraction buffer (50 mM potassium phosphate buffer pH 7.0, 1% (w/v) polivinyl pyrolidone) using mortar and pestle. The homogenates were subjected to centrifugation at 15,000 x g for 10 min at 4 °C and the supernatant was kept as enzyme extract.

Assay of SOD activity

SOD was determined using Superoxide Dismutase Assay Kit II (Calbiochem, SanDiego, CA, USA). This assay utilizes a tetrazolium salt for the detection of superoxide radicals generated by xanthine oxidase and hypoxanthine. The absorbance was read at 450 nm. One unit of SOD is defined as the amount of enzyme needed to exhibit 50% dismutation of the superoxide radical.

Assay of CAT activity

CAT activity was assayed in a reaction solution containing 50 mM phosphate buffer (pH 7.0), 150 mM H₂O₂, and 200 μl of enzyme extract.[16] The activity of catalase was estimated by the decrease in absorbance at 240 nm for 1 min as a consequence of H₂O₂ consumed.

Assay of APX activity

APX activity was determined as described by [17], based on the decrease in the absorbance of ascorbate at 290 nm. The reaction mixture contained 50 mM phosphate buffer (pH 7.0), 0.5 mM ascorbic acid, 0.1 mM EDTA, 6 mM H₂O₂ and 200 μl enzyme extract.

Preparation of aqueous extracts

Dried plant samples were pulverized using mortar and pestle and extracted with autoclaved deionized water at a 1:40 (dry weight:volume) ratio at 90 °C for 1 h. The heat-incubated homogenate was vacuum-filtered, and the filtrate was centrifuged at 9000 rpm at 4 °C for 15 min. The supernatant obtained was immediately aliquoted (500 μl each) and stored at −20 °C until used.

Determination of total phenolic content

The concentration of total phenolics in the extracts was determined using a Folin–Ciocalteau colorimetric assay.[18] A mixture of extract (0.2 mL), deionized water (0.8 mL), and Folin–Ciocalteu reagent (0.1 mL) was first incubated at room temperature for 3 min. Next, 0.3 mL
of Na₂CO₃ (20% w/v) was added and the mixture was incubated at room temperature for 120 min. Absorbance of the mixture was recorded at 765 nm. A standard curve was prepared from 0 to 100 mg/L gallic acid. Total phenolic content was expressed in mg gallic acid equivalents/g dry matter.

**Determination of total flavonoid content**

The concentration of total flavonoids in the extracts was determined using an assay modified from a method by Zou et al. [19]. Plant extract (0.2 mL) was added to 0.15 mL of NaNO₂ (5% w/v) and the mixture was incubated at room temperature for 6 min. Then, 0.15 mL of AlCl₃·6H₂O (10% w/v) was added to the mixture and incubated for 6 min at room temperature, followed by the addition of 0.8 mL of NaOH (10% w/v). The mixture was incubated at room temperature for 15 min and absorbance of the mixture was recorded at 510 nm. A standard curve was prepared from 0 to 500 μg/mL quercetin dissolved in 80% ethanol and total flavonoid content was expressed in mg quercetin equivalents/g dry matter.

**Data analysis**

Experiments were carried out in triplicates. Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2007 and reported as mean ± standard error. Student’s t test was used at the 0.05 level of probability for comparison of the set of means.

**Results and discussion**

**Heavy metal removal in soils**

Pb and Cu concentrations left in the respective soils were quantified using AAS (Figure 1). Almost 100% reductions of Pb had been achieved after Pb-treated plants were harvested. For Cu-treated plants, the highest reduction of Cu from the soil was determined in 5 mg/L Cu treatment (93.2%). It was noticeable that, the higher the concentrations of heavy metals applied, the higher percentages of metals were removed from the soil. These results were consistent with the previous findings on the capability of *O. stamineus* to reduce the amount of metals in plant medium containing sewage sludge.[20] High removal of heavy metals from the soil might be due to active absorption of soluble metals by the root systems. These metals could be transported to aerial parts of the plant with the aid of transport proteins or immobilized in the vacuoles.[21]

**Physical characteristics of metal-treated O. stamineus**

The growth of *O. stamineus* was monitored by measuring the length of stems and counting the number of normal leaves fortnightly. The percentages of increment in stem length and leaves number were computed when the plants have been harvested (Figure 2). The highest concentration of Cu, 5 mg/L had significantly contributed to the lowest percentage of stem elongation (28.7%...
The longest roots for plants from each treatment were measured (Figure 3). Our results showed that the root length of *O. stamineus* remained unaffected with different concentrations of Pb. On the other hand, the highest concentration of Cu (5 mg/L) had significantly reduced the root length which was 30% less than the control. These results further confirmed that Cu disrupts the development of plant cells as reported previously. Cu inhibit cell elongations, thus stem growth and root length were affected.[23]

Total biomass from the leaves, stems, and roots of *O. stamineus* were determined (Figure 4). We found that 5 and 8 mg/L Pb treatments significantly increased the total biomass of *O. stamineus*, with 31.9 and 48.6% higher than T1, respectively. Although Pb reduced plant biomass in many previous cases, the increased biomass in plants exposed to Pb has also been reported. Pyroligneous acid, fertilizer containing Pb had been shown to promote the growth of rockmelon, when used at appropriate amounts.[24] Other than that, hydroponically grown *Sesbania exaltata*, with increasing amount of supplied Pb showed increasing root and shoot biomass during the earlier stage of exposure, although the trend changed after sometime.[25] Hyperaccumulator species, *Thlaspi caerulescens* promotes root growth when exposed to Zn and Cd.[26] However, the mechanism underlying this situation is still unclear. One of the reasons that promote positive growth is due to microbial activities in the soil and roots [27], besides unique responses of hyperaccumulators when exposed to certain level of heavy metals. Cu treatment, however, did not significantly affect the total fresh weight of *O. stamineus*.

Enzymatic antioxidant activities in *O. stamineus* in Pb and Cu treatments

The SOD, APX, and CAT activities varied in Pb- and Cu-treated plants (Table 1). In Pb-treated plants, the changes in SOD and APX activities at different Pb concentrations were not significant. However, the activity of CAT significantly increased at almost three-fold in 5 mg/L Pb. Our results showed that CAT activities were not significantly affected by different Cu treatments. However, SOD activities were significantly reduced in 5 mg/L Cu, with 2.4-fold lower than T1. Similarly, APX activities were not significantly affected by Cu treatments.

Table 1. Enzymatic antioxidant responses of *O. stamineus* towards Pb and Cu stress.

|          | SOD (U/g) | CAT (μmol H₂O₂ decomposed/min/mg protein) | APX (nmol ascorbate oxidized/min/mg protein) |
|----------|-----------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
|          | Pb        |                                        |                                             |
| T1       | 0.927 ± 0.033 | 0.625 ± 0.040                          | 3.173 ± 0.453                             |
| T2       | 1.170 ± 0.146 | 0.916 ± 0.093                          | 2.446 ± 0.489                             |
| T3       | 1.311 ± 0.140 | 1.860 ± 0.155*                         | 3.434 ± 0.656                             |
| T4       | 1.109 ± 0.067 | 0.932 ± 0.115                          | 2.659 ± 0.767                             |
|          | Pb        |                                        |                                             |
| T1       | 29.571 ± 3.690 | 12.657 ± 2.311                        | 21.920 ± 5.629                            |
| T2       | 32.231 ± 7.600 | 5.881 ± 0.714                          | 30.176 ± 1.310                            |
| T3       | 17.062 ± 0.830 | 9.996 ± 2.250                          | 35.868 ± 8.102                            |
| T4       | 12.379 ± 1.578* | 11.115 ± 3.377                        | 6.836 ± 1.952*                            |

Notes: An asterisk denotes significant difference between the mean values of treatment, compared to T1 as determined by using Student’s t test at p < 0.05. For SOD, 1 U is defined as the amount of enzyme needed to exhibit 50% dismutation of the superoxide radical.
Table 2. Total phenolic and flavonoid contents of *O. stamineus* in Pb and Cu treatments.

| Total phenolics (mg GAE/g) | Total flavonoids (mg quercetin/g) |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| T1                        | Pb                               |
| T2                        | Pb                               |
| T3                        | Pb                               |
| T4                        | Pb                               |
| T1                        | Cu                               |
| T2                        | Cu                               |
| T3                        | Cu                               |
| T4                        | Cu                               |

Note: An asterisk denotes significant difference between the mean values of treatment, compared to T1 as determined by using Student’s t test at $p < 0.05$.

significantly 3.2-fold lower in 5 mg/L Cu compared to T1. Overall, the APX level was quite low, indicating that *O. stamineus* preferably activated their catalase pathway to scavenge ROS during metal stress. In stress response, ROS will be converted to $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ by SOD prior to the activity of CAT or APX to dismutate $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ to water and oxygen. At certain amounts of heavy metals, the activities of these antioxidant enzymes might be inhibited as reported previously in other plants.[29,30]

Non-enzymatic antioxidant content of *O. stamineus* in Pb and Cu treatments

Analysis of ethanol extracts of *O. stamineus* treated with different Pb and Cu concentrations revealed different trends of total phenolics and total flavonoids content (Table 2). The total phenolics markedly decreased in Pb-treated plants. The highest concentration of Pb, 8 mg/L revealed 1.17-fold decrease in total phenolics, when compared to T1. Total flavonoids increased significantly at 5 mg/L Pb treatment, a 1.5-fold higher than T1. Despite the increase in total flavonoids and the decrease in total phenolics for Pb-treated plants, the activities were more pronounced in the latter, whereas, for Cu-treated plants, a 1.9-fold increase in total phenolics was recorded in 2 mg/L. The production of antioxidant compounds are normally triggered by heavy metal stress, but it can be inhibited at certain level of stress.[31]

Conclusion

Our study suggests that plants, specifically *O. stamineus* were actively responding towards Pb and Cu stress by expressing different visible physical characteristics. On top of that, biochemical adaptation mechanisms including the activation or inhibition of enzymatic antioxidant activities and the production of non-enzymatic antioxidants, such as total phenolics and total flavonoids are also important for plants to combat stress. Both provide resistant mechanisms against heavy metal stress, alongside with other biochemical pathways that help them survive metal stress.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Notes on contributors

**Fazilah Abd Manan** is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Biosciences and Medical Engineering, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. She obtained her PhD in Plant Biology from the University of Western Australia. Her research interests include plant biology and environmental biotechnology. She has published over 10 research papers related to this field.

**Wee-Han Chia** graduated from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia with a bachelor’s degree in Industrial Biology. This is her first paper in blind-reviewed journals.

**Norfarahani Ali Othman** graduated from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia with a bachelor’s degree in Industrial Biology. This is her first paper in blind-reviewed journals.

**Dayangku Dalilah Mamat** is a master’s student at the Faculty of Biosciences and Medical Engineering. Her research focus is on plant responses to stress.

**Chun-Shiong Chong** is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Biosciences and Medical Engineering, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. He has credit over nine publications in local and international blind-reviewed journals. His research interests include metal resistance, and enzymes for environmental and industrial application.

**Azman Abd Samad** is a senior lecturer at Faculty of Biosciences and Medical Engineering, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. He obtained his PhD in Plant Science from the University of Nottingham, UK. His areas of interests include plant tissue culture, genetic transformation and manipulation of secondary metabolites from medicinal plants. He has published over 20 publications in local and international blind-reviewed journals.

**Tsun-Thai Chai** obtained his PhD in Plant Biology from the University of Western Australia. He is currently an assistant professor at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia. He has to his credit 34 publications, including three reviews, in international peer-reviewed journals. His research interests include plant biochemistry and physiology, bioactivity of tropical ferns, and marine bioactive peptides.

ORCID

Chun-Shiong Chong [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2165-4030](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2165-4030)

Azman Abd Samad [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6942-9321](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6942-9321)

Tsun-Thai Chai [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3716-1599](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3716-1599)

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