Screening of Fungi Isolated from the Brazilian Restinga for Insecticidal Activity

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Authors’ contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

ABSTRACT

Research on microorganisms for the control of pests and pathogens is increasing. Such organisms display antagonistic effects on pests and pathogens, at the same time, they do not interfere with the sustainable development processes and are environmentally safe for human populations. Thus, bioprospection of fungi from restinga ecosystems is of interest as a novel source of microorganism and a yet unexplored source of chemical structures. This study selected endophytic fungi and fungi from the restinga soil samples to investigate their biological activity against insects. Fifty-three fungal isolates were used in screening bioassays against Atta sexdens rubropilosa leaf-cutting ant workers via direct contact of the insects with sporulating fungi cultures. This assay indicated that Trichoderma caused the highest mortality. Extracts from Trichoderma were then assessed for...
biological activity via ingestion, contact or exposure to fungal volatiles. Results showed that one Trichoderma sp. isolate (TR1) caused 50% mortality in 2, 1.5 and 4 days when ingested, sprayed onto the ants or by exposing ants to volatiles, respectively. Although this fungus is not known to be entomopathogenic, it could have potential use as an additional tool for pest control as it produces metabolites with antagonistic effects.

Keywords: Biodiversity; toxicity; biological control; bioactive compounds.

1. INTRODUCTION

In general, insect pests pose constant threats due to their seasonality and outbreaks causing major losses and damage to agriculture and forestry. The use of “synthetic” insecticides, which are extremely toxic, has caused environmental pollution and indiscriminately affected human health. Economically important insect pests, both rural and urban, rapidly become resistant to such products. Therefore, interest in biological control methods has increased, as they represent a promising option in the search for molecules that are less aggressive to humans. From this perspective, our studies have focused on the search for fungi from the Brazilian restinga, a yet poorly studied ecosystem that is a possible source of novel biological control agents and molecules [1,2].

Several studies have demonstrated the diversity of flora and fauna in restinga areas [3,4,5]. However, little is known about the presence of fungi associated to plant species from such ecosystems and much less about the potential use of such organisms for biological control [6].

Restingas exhibit a diverse group of biological communities, reflecting the influence of soil conditions and the degree of exposure to ocean breezes, radiation and salinity, among other factors [7]. In recent years, the LAQUIBIO team has explored this ecosystem’s fungal diversity particularly in northern Rio de Janeiro state [8,9]. Discovering new fungal species or isolates is important in the tropics as they occupy differentiated ecological niches. Microorganisms are important components of the local biodiversity, and they may also contribute to the production of drugs and other natural chemical substances or compounds that are less environmentally toxic, with potential as control agents for urban and agricultural pests, such as leaf-cutting ants.

Leaf-cutting ants are important pests of agroforestry systems because they occur throughout the year and can cause major losses if not combated. The worker ants carry plant fragments into their underground colonies where they cultivate a mutualistic fungus Leucoagaricus gongylophorus (Möller) Singer from which they obtain nutrients [10].

The ants’ habits make them, especially Atta sexdens rubropilosa, one of the most frequent pests attacking areas dedicated to agricultural, pastur and forestry activities in South, Central and North America [11]. Besides, leaf-cutting ants are considered the dominant herbivores in neotropics: they consume more vegetation than any other animal group such as mammals, Homoptera and Lepidoptera [12]. Plant damage due to leaf-cutting ant activity is caused by cutting of leaves, shoots, thin branches and flowers, and this leads to further plant damage, making the control of these ants such an important matter [13].

One way to control these ants is by intoxicating the workers using applications of insecticides mainly in the form of baits [14], because they are cheap, practical and easy to disperse. The most common active ingredient in baits is sulfluramid, a compound originally stated to offer technological and environmental advances, although it is highly toxic. According to the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (ANVISA), in compliance to the Stockholm Convention dealing with Persistent Organic pollutants, sulfluramid producers should have observed the date 09/09/2015 as a deadline for disposing of their previous stocks and for adapting their production lines to the new standards removing the use of this active ingredient thereafter [15]. However, sulfluramid is still being commercialized in Brazil.

Consequently, it is very important to develop alternatives for the control of leaf-cutting ants. Biological control has considered the use of entomopathogenic fungi, which are capable of infecting and killing the ants [16], or acting via antagonistic action on the symbiotic fungus (the ant’s food source) [17]. However, ants have their own mechanical and chemical sanitation
strategies, which are able to protect them and their symbiont against parasites and competing microorganisms [18].

Although the potential of synthetic and plant-derived products for ant control have been well explored, studies on fungal-produced compounds on leaf-cutting ants are scarce in the literature [19]. This is also true for Trichoderma spp., a fungal species that is widely known to produce bioactive secondary metabolites [20], and is frequently found in soils from temperate and tropical regions, and that can inclusively be found in the microbiota of ant colonies [21].

Some fungal isolates, including Trichoderma, were obtained from the restinga ecosystem leaf litter and soil samples in the region of northern Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil. The isolates are maintained in LAQUIBIO’s (ISECENSA’s Chemical and Biomolecules Laboratory) biological collection [9]. The availability of high species diversity enables one to improve knowledge regarding insect-microorganism interactions, what includes knowledge on insect pest microbial control [22].

The objective of this study was to select and cultivate, in solid and liquid media, endophytic and soil-borne fungi from the restinga and screen these to select the most active isolates and test the extracts they produced against Atta sexdens rubropilosa worker ants as a model pest species.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Tested Fungi, Cultivation and Inocula Preparation

All fungi tested in this research were obtained from the LAQUIBIO/ISECENSA’s Chemistry and Biomolecules Laboratory fungal collection (Table 1). Isolates derived from endophytic colonization and soil samples were collected in restinga ecosystems from Rio de Janeiro state’s northern region, and identification was confirmed by morphological and/or molecular analyses.

Each fungus was cultivated on potato-dextrose-agar (PDA) and maintained via periodic transfer to fresh media throughout the whole test period.

Initial screening was performed on 53 fungi isolates aiming to observe any possible direct contact effects between fungal cultures and the ants, enabling selection of the most promising isolates regarding their effect in reducing ant survival rates.

2.2 Ant Collection and Laboratory Maintenance

The worker ants, displaying an average cephalic capsule width of 2.9 mm, were obtained from active foraging trails of Atta sexdens rubropilosa nests in the municipality of Campos dos Goytacazes, RJ. The ants were then kept in 250 mL plastic containers whose edges were impregnated with inert talc to avoid escape. After collection, they were taken to the laboratory (average temperature, 25°C ± 1°C; relative humidity, 60%). For experiments, ten workers were placed in each dish (cohort), and the ants were fed on 10% sucrose solution soaked in cotton wools. This diet was changed every two days and the effects of exposure to fungi on ant survival was observed through the bioassays.

2.3 Bioassays

2.3.1 Screening for lethal effects by contact with fungal colonies

Each of the 53 fungal colonies cultivated on PDA provided one test disc (3 cm in diameter). In order to promote direct contact between workers and fungi, those discs were placed at the bottom of each 250 mL container and ants were allowed to move freely within the container. In the negative control treatment, a PDA disc without fungus was placed at the bottom of the container. A positive control, was used which had discs of the entomopathogenic fungi, Beauveria bassiana (Bals-Criv.) Vuill. (isolate LPP2) or Metarhizium anisopliae (Metschn.) Sorokin., (isolate LEF 2000) These isolates were obtained from the Insect Pathology Sector fungal collection at UENF.

2.3.2 Bioassays for ant infection via contact with fungal spores

For this bioassay, a sterilized filter paper disc (7 cm in diameter) soaked in 2 mL of a spore suspension (10^7 conidia/mL) with each of the isolates shown in Table 1 was used.

Suspensions were prepared from sporulating cultures in Petri dishes by washing with 10 mL sterile distilled water; spores were then brushed from the surface. After agitating in a vortex mixer for 30 s, the concentration of the suspensions was estimated using a Neubauer chamber under a magnification of 200 times. For the control treatment, only sterile distilled water was added to the filter paper.
Dead ants were removed daily during the bioassays (A and B) and then superficially disinfected in alcohol 70% (1 min.), sodium hypochlorite (1000 ppm for 1 min.), rinsed again in alcohol 70% (30 s), washed in sterile distilled water (1 min.) and individualized in ELISA plate wells (96 well plates). A sheet of filter paper soaked in sterile distilled water was placed between the wells and the lids in order to increase the humidity and induce conidiogenesis.

As conidia appeared on the cadavers, fungi were identified and compared to the inocula used in each treatment to indicate isolate recovery or pathogenicity.

2.3.3 Toxicity via ingestion of fungal extracts by worker ants

In order to assess the effects of fungal extracts on ants, a cotton pad was immersed in the extracts, diluted in a 10% sucrose solution, and then placed in each dish. Extracts were prepared with 50 mL of potato-dextrose (PD) medium to which three discs from BDA cultivated fungal colonies had been added. Flasks were kept at 40 rpm agitation for 15 days at room temperature. After this time, each extract was filtered using nitrocellulose membrane (0.22 µm) and the filtrate was used in the tests.

For the Trichoderma toxicity assays, worker ants were divided in groups of 10 individuals each and exposed to different Trichoderma undiluted extracts; mortality percentages were determined every 24 hours for 7 days. Each assay was performed in triplicate. For control tests, ants fed on 10% sucrose solution soaked in a cotton pad. This diet was replaced every two days. The assessment methodology was repeated in the following assays.

2.3.4 Contact toxicity of fungal extracts

For each replicate, ten ants were sprayed with 3 mL of extract using a manual hand sprayer. Control treatment insects were sprayed with sterile distilled water. Mortality was evaluated every 24 hours for 7 days. Experimental treatments and controls were performed three times each.

2.3.5 Toxicity via exposure to volatile compounds from fungal extracts

Five mL of each fungal extract were applied to a cotton pad placed inside a small container with a perforated lid. Next, the container was placed inside a larger container so that the worker ants did not have direct contact with the liquid extract, but only with the volatile compounds produced by the extract therein. In the control treatment, sterile distilled water was used. For 10 days, at 24-hour intervals, the number of dead ants was verified, and the diet was replaced every two days.

2.4 Experimental Design and Statistical Analyses

We employed the total randomized experimental design for all assays. Treatments were fungal isolates for assays using culture dishes, spore suspensions, liquid extracts or volatile compound extracts; three repetitions with 10 ants each with a total of 30 individuals per treatment.

Evaluations were performed every 24 hours and dead ants were removed every day up to 10 days. Survival data was collected and survival curves were generated by the Kaplan-Meier method [23]. Curves were compared by the Log-Rank test [24,25], with \( P=0.05 \) used to verify significant differences between treatments. Analysis of variance and the Tukey multiple comparison test were also performed. We also assessed the LT\(_{50}\) (Lethal Time for 50% of tested individuals) estimate and made trend adjustments using the polynomial model. All analyses were performed with the aid of GraphPad Prism 5.0 and Excel software.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Endophytic fungi are microorganisms that live within plants without harming their hosts and may constitute an alternative source of secondary metabolites. Similarly, soil-borne fungi, particularly from uninhabited areas such as restingas in northern Rio de Janeiro state, are also capable of producing structurally heterogeneous molecules that exhibit low molecular mass, with potential as bioactive compounds [26] and biological control agents [27]. Table 1 shows the host plants, soils and substrates of the fungi which could produce secondary metabolites that were tested against *Atta sexdens rubropilosa* leaf-cutting ants.

3.1 Screening for Contact Effects When Exposing Ants to Fungal Colonies

Ants were directly exposed to 53 fungal isolates (screening) either by walking on the colony surfaces or, in some cases, by cutting and ingesting disc fragments, both of which caused mortality. This fact can be attributed to metabolites produced by the fungi in culture.
Table 1. Endophytic and soil-borne fungi from the restinga used for *in vitro* assessments against *Atta sexdens rubropilosa* leaf-cutting worker ants

| Fungus               | Isolate codes | Common name | Scientific name                  | Origin: host plant/soil/substrate          |
|----------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| *Acremonium* sp.     | ACR1          | Abaneiro    | Clusia hilariana                  | Abaneiro on *Clusia hilariana*             |
|                      | ACR2          | Trapoeraba  | Commelina erecta                  | Trapoeraba on *Commelina erecta*           |
|                      | ACR3          | Pinheirinho-da-praia | Remirea maritima | Pinheirinho-da-praia on *Remirea maritima* |
|                      | ACR5          | Cambucazinho | Eugenia punicifolia              | Cambucazinho on *Eugenia punicifolia*      |
|                      | ACR6          | Massaranduba | Manilkara subsericea             | Massaranduba on *Manilkara subsericea*     |
|                      | ACR8          | Bolo        | Coccoloba alnifolia               | Bolo on *Coccoloba alnifolia*              |
|                      | ACR9          | Pêro        | Psidium cattleyanum               | Pêro on *Psidium cattleyanum*              |
|                      | ACR10         | Malva branca | Sida cordifolia                  | Malva branca on *Sida cordifolia*          |
|                      | ACR11         | Rabo-de-macaco | Machaerium lanceolatum         | Rabo-de-macaco on *Machaerium lanceolatum* |
|                      | ACR12         | Vassoura    | -                                 | Vassoura on -                             |
| *Pestalotiopsis* sp. | PES1          | Gurirí       | Allagoptera arenaria              | Gurirí on *Allagoptera arenaria*           |
|                      | PES2          | Fungo liquenizado | -                      | Fungo liquenizado on -                      |
|                      | PES3          | Feijão-de-porco | Canavalia rosea                | Feijão-de-porco on *Canavalia rosea*        |
|                      | PES4          | Arco-de-pipa | Erythroxylum ovalifolium         | Arco-de-pipa on *Erythroxylum ovalifolium* |
|                      | PES5          | Capororoca-de-folha-larga | Myrsine umbellata | Capororoca-de-folha-larga on *Myrsine umbellata* |
|                      | PES6          | Bolo        | Coccoloba alnifolia               | Bolo on *Coccoloba alnifolia*              |
|                      | PES7          | Almescla    | Protium heptaphyllum             | Almescla on *Protium heptaphyllum*         |
|                      | PES8          | Bolo        | Coccoloba alnifolia               | Bolo on *Coccoloba alnifolia*              |
|                      | PES9          | Pitanga     | Eugenia uniflora                 | Pitanga on *Eugenia uniflora*              |
|                      | PES10         | Cipó-sangue | Paullinia weinmanniifolia         | Cipó-sangue on *Paullinia weinmanniifolia* |
|                      | PES11         | Salsa-da-praia | Ipomoea imperati                | Salsa-da-praia on *Ipomoea imperati*       |
|                      | PES12         | Cambucazinho | Eugenia punicifolia             | Cambucazinho on *Eugenia punicifolia*      |
|                      | PES13         | Fruto-de-guaxo | Cupania emarginata             | Fruto-de-guaxo on *Cupania emarginata*     |
|                      | PES14         | Papagaio    | Maytenus obtusifolia             | Papagaio on *Maytenus obtusifolia*         |
|                      | PES15         | Jenipabinho | Tocoyena bullata                 | Jenipabinho on *Tocoyena bullata*          |
|                      | PES16         | Massaranduba | Manilkara subsericea             | Massaranduba on *Manilkara subsericea*     |
|                      | PES17         | Murici       | Byrsonima sericea                 | Murici on *Byrsonima sericea*              |
|                      | PES18         | Cipó-sangue | Paullinia weinmanniifolia         | Cipó-sangue on *Paullinia weinmanniifolia* |
|                      | PES19         | Capororoca-do-brejo | Myrsine rubra            | Capororoca-do-brejo on *Myrsine rubra*     |
|                      | PES20         | Juramento    | Cynophalla flexuosa              | Juramento on *Cynophalla flexuosa*         |
| Fungus                             | Isolate codes | Common name                      | Scientific name       | Origin: host plant/soil/substrate |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Trichoderma sp.                   | TR1           | Soil                             |                       |                                   |
|                                   | TR2           | Soil                             |                       |                                   |
|                                   | TR3           | Soil                             |                       |                                   |
|                                   | TR4           | Soil                             |                       |                                   |
|                                   | TR5           | Soil                             |                       |                                   |
|                                   | TR6           | Soil                             |                       |                                   |
|                                   | TR7           | Basidimycota (Mushroom)         |                       |                                   |
|                                   | TR8           | Basidimycota (Mushroom)         |                       |                                   |
|                                   | TR9           | Decaying leaves on soil surface  |                       |                                   |
|                                  | TR10          | Soil                             |                       |                                   |
| Alternaria sp.                    | 5B1.1         | Juramento                        | Capparis flexuosa     |                                   |
| Alternaria sp.                    | 61 A          | Batateira-da-praia               | Ipomoea pes-caprae    |                                   |
| Cladosporium perangustum          | 38C2          | Cipo de são joão                 | Pyrostegia venusta   |                                   |
| Colletotrichum brevisporum        | 24B2          | -                                | Passiflora sp.        |                                   |
| Diaporthe perseae                | 35C1          | Rabo-de-macaco                   | Machaerium lanceolatum|                                   |
| Lasiodiplodia theobromae         | 5 A2          | Juramento                        | Capparis flexuosa     |                                   |
| Pestalotiopsis protearum         | 17B3          | Aroeira                          | Schinus terebinthifolius|                               |
| Phomopsis phyllanthicola          | 34C1          | Calombo                          | Pera glabrata         |                                   |
| Rhinocladiella similis           | 8B2           | Aroeira                          | Schinus terebinthifolius|                               |
| Setosphaeria rostrata            | 10B1          | Calombo                          | Pera glabrata         |                                   |
| Stenella musae                   | 20B           | Moloí                           | Annona glabra         |                                   |
| Talaromyces verruculosus         | 15 A2         | Dormideira                       | Mimosa pellita        |                                   |
| Trichoderma atroviridae          | 7 A2 (TR9)    | Cipó-sangue                      | Paullinia weinmanniifolia|                     |
media [20]. Ants that fed on Trichoderma fungal colonies displayed the highest levels of mortality. From this result we decided to use this fungus for the production of the extracts used in the subsequent assays. Recently Trichoderma has been tested as an antagonist of the leaf-cutting ant’s symbiotic fungus. This fungus also produces substances that display potential inhibitory activity of the ant’s normal immune responses [28].

The so called positive control treatments, using the entomopathogenic fungi B. bassiana and M. anisopliae, caused mortality rates of 97% to 100%, respectively on the fifth day of evaluation. This time range was inferior to the one reported by Busetti et al. [29], who have estimated average lethal time of B. bassiana against Atta between four and five days, but M. anisopliae when tested against Acromyrmex killed 100% in around six days when inoculated with spore suspensions.

3.2 Effects of Contact between Ants and Fungal Spores

When ants were inoculated with fungi spores, no direct effect on their mortality was observed until 10 days after inoculation. Mortality occurred, but it was probably due to normal causes under the current experimental conditions, and not by infection [30].

Only nine of the 53 inoculated fungi were recovered from superficially disinfected corpses placed in humidity chambers (Table 2). Amongst the 10 Acremonium isolates inoculated, none were re-isolated and just one Pestalotiopsis was re-isolated, amongst the 20 tested.

Despite fungal proliferation on the ant corpses, death could not be exclusively attributed to the re-isolated fungi because we must consider the fact that the ants might have died from other reasons, such as stress or as a consequence of their manipulation in experimental conditions [31]; therefore, caution is needed when attributing pathogenicity.

Trichoderma exhibited the highest correlation between fungal inoculation and re-isolation: among the eleven isolates tested, seven were recovered from dead ants. As endophytic, saprophytic or soil-borne fungi, Trichoderma might have developed within the ant body before or after their deaths, without provoking an immune response [32]. Such internal growth can be seen in plants when fungi are termed endophytes to indicate that they can grow within the plants apparently without harming them. This association seems to be intimate enough not to activate the plants’ enzymatic defense arsenal: becoming an ecological niche for the fungi, which is beneficial for the host plant and the fungus.

Ghosh and Pal [33] used Trichoderma longibrachiatum spore suspensions to control Leucinodes orbonalis, one of the major pests of aubergine. This treatment showed similar efficacy to that of the pesticide malathion in field trials. Palma [10] showed that Trichoderma harzianum was a pathogenic agent of Atta laevigata workers, based on detection of mycelial growth and conidiogenesis of this fungus on inoculated ant corpses. Trichoderma has also been described in natural environments associated with ants as endophytes of plants which the ants cut and carry into their colonies [34,35].

Even if Trichoderma is not directly pathogenic to the ants, it could be used as an additional tool for ant control as it can act as an antagonist of the symbiotic fungus which the ants cultivate and feed on [36]. Notwithstanding the production of metabolites that adversely act on ant colonies.

In a general, when we consider all isolates from the different species we assessed (Table 2), the low fungal recovery rate might indicate that:

a) Most of them did not behave as entomopathogenic agents in the infection process and were eliminated during superficial disinfection of cadavers.

b) Cadaver disinfection was efficient in eliminating epicuticular fungi, meaning that only the fungi present within the ants were detected.

c) Inoculation without addition of surfactants may not have been efficient in breaking the superficial tension to ensure spores adhesion, germination and posterior ant infection.

Beauveria bassiana occurred spontaneously in three ants inoculated with Phomopsis phyllanthicola and Alternaria sp. It is possible that these ants were carrying this fungi infection since they had been collected in the field, indicating the natural occurrence of this entomopathogen. Cadavers also exhibited other fungal species that had not been inoculated, such as Aspergillus sp., Penicillium sp. e Paecilomyces sp., which have previously been reported as entomopathogenic agents.
It is likely that the ants had already been contaminated with these fungi before being collected in the field and used in bioassays. It is important to point out that more than 30 Fusarium sp. isolates (Table 2) occurred in ants treated with different inoculated fungal spore suspensions. Canali [30] worked on fungal prospection for leaf-cutting ant biological control and analyzed 88 fungi isolated from A. sexdens rubropilosa queens. Among those, 43 isolates were identified as Fusarium, making this genus the most represented within these samples. Several Fusarium species have exhibited entomopathogenic activities and also been considered as promising organisms for the biological control of insects [39] or the ants symbiotic fungus, since some Fusarium species have already been described as potential antagonistic agents of fungi [40].

Thirty ants were inoculated separately with either B. bassiana or M. anisopliae spores. Only one

Table 2. Endophytic and soil-borne fungi from the restinga tested against leaf-cutting ants Atta sexdens rubropilosa. Incidence of re-isolation of these fungi from ant cadavers after inoculation

| Inoculated fungus | Isolate codes | Number of fungi recovered per ant cadaver* |
|-------------------|---------------|------------------------------------------|
| Acremonium sp.    | ACR1          | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
|                   | ACR2          | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
|                   | ACR3          | 1 Fusarium sp1; 1 Fusarium sp2           |
|                   | ACR5          | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
|                   | ACR6          | 1 Fusarium sp1; 1 Fusarium sp2           |
|                   | ACR8          | 1 Fusarium; 1 Penicillium sp.; 1 non sporulated |
|                   | ACR9          | 1 Fusarium sp1; 1 Fusarium sp2           |
|                   | ACR10         | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
|                   | ACR11         | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
|                   | ACR12         | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
| Pestalotiopsis sp.| 117D3         | 1 Pestalotiopsis sp.                     |
|                   | 109D4         | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
|                   | 116D1         | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
| Trichoderma sp.   | TR1           | 1 Fusarium; 1 Trichoderma sp.            |
|                   | TR2           | 1 Fusarium sp1; 1 Fusarium sp2           |
|                   | TR3           | 1 Trichoderma sp.; 1 Fusarium sp1; 1 Fusarium sp2 |
|                   | TR4           | 1 Fusarium sp1; 1 Fusarium sp2; 1 Fusarium sp3 |
|                   | TR5           | 1 Trichoderma sp.                        |
|                   | TR7           | 1 Trichoderma sp.                        |
|                   | TR8           | 1 Trichoderma sp.                        |
|                   | TR9           | 1 Paecilomyces sp.                       |
|                   | TR10          | 1 Trichoderma sp.                        |
|                   | TR11          | 1 Trichoderma sp.; 1 Fusarium sp.        |
| Diaporthe perseae| 35C1          | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
| Phomopsis phyllanthicola | 34C1 | 1 Beauveria sp1; 1 Beauveria sp2 |
| Pestalotiopsis protearum | 17B3 | 1 Penicillium sp. |
| Cladosporium perangustum | 38C2 | 1 non sporulated |
| Lasiodiplodia theobromae | 5 A2 | 1 Aspergillus sp; 1 non sporulated |
| Trichoderma atroviridae | 7 A2 | 1 Fusarium sp. |
| Rhinocladiella similis | 8B2 | 1 Fusarium sp. |
| Alternaria sp.     | 5B1.1         | 1 Fusarium sp.; 1 Beauveria sp.          |
| Alternaria sp.     | 61 A          | 1 Fusarium sp.                          |
| Metarhizium anisopliae | Positive control | 1 M. anisopliae; 1 Fusarium sp1; 1 Fusarium sp2 |
| Beauveria bassiana | Positive control | 1 B. bassiana |

* From approximately 30 cadavers of ants/inoculated isolate
treated ant for each of the two fungi died and exhibited posterior external colonization. This could be explained by the fact that individuals from different casts are more susceptible than others [41,42]. Besides, there is high genetic variability between entomopathogenic fungal isolates, resulting in differences in pathogenicity and levels of virulence [43]. Pathogenicity tests of entomopathogenic fungi against insects can vary greatly even in relation to the two most studied species [44,45,46]. Moino Junior [47] studied 72 B. bassiana and M. anisopliae isolates and reported that the mortality they caused varied greatly in stored grains pests, some were completely inefficient and others caused 100% mortality, hence the importance of studies to select new isolates or promising species for the control of serious pests such as leaf-cutting ants.

3.3 Effect of Ingestion or Contact with *Trichoderma* Extracts and Effects of Volatile Compounds Produced by this Fungus

In the previous bioassay involving direct contact between ants and fungal cultures, worker survival was only affected by *Trichoderma* after the ants had fed on fungal cultures. Thus, as a consequence, only isolates from this genus were considered for the production of extracts to be used in subsequent assays.

Eleven *Trichoderma* isolates were assessed for their toxic effects on ant survival via ingestion. All of them exhibited deleterious effects when compared to the controls (Fig. 1), whose equations are shown in Table 3.

Only four of the isolates were selected due to their high levels of toxicity, causing 93 to 100% mortality of workers during the first four days of the assays.

Based on these results, extracts of isolates TR1, TR4, TR7 and TR10 were used in new tests to assess toxicity via ingestion, contact and exposure to volatile compounds.

Ingestion of extracts accelerated ant death in comparison to controls (Fig. 2A). The estimated 100% lethal time was 2 days for isolates TR1, TR2 and TR10; 4 days for isolate TR7; and 10 days for the control treatment (Table 4). Variation in extract toxicity could be related to their chemical composition, since *Trichoderma* is capable of producing several compounds such as: dehydroacetic acid, anhydromevalonolactone, 2-phenylethane, polyketides, peptaibols, terpenoids/steroids, harzianic acid, alamethicins, anthraquinones, azafilones, daucanes, harzialactones, bisorbigolinoids, butenolides, tricholine, glisoprenins, heptelidic acid, gliovirin, pyrons, trichothecenes, isocyanates, trichosetin, viridine among other compounds [48,49,50,51].

![Fig. 1. Survival curves of *Atta sexdens rubropilosa* ants fed with fungal extracts from 11 *Trichoderma* (TR) isolates. Control: sucrose solution](image-url)
Fig. 2. *Atta sexdens rubropilosa* workers survival curves following ingestion (A), contact (B) and exposure to volatile compounds (C) effects of extracts of four *Trichoderma* (TR) fungal isolates. *P*-value for the Log-rank test was <0.001
Several reports describe the use of Trichoderma bioactive compounds for control of phytopathogenic fungi such as Sclerotinia sclerotiorum, Sclerotium rolfsii, Colletotrichum gloeosporioides, Verticillium dahliae, Fusarium oxysporum and Cylindrocladium sp. [52]; against the Toxoplasma gondii parasite [53]; allelopathic effects on cultivated plants and weeds [50]; and antagonistic effects on bacteria such as Staphylococcus aureus, Streptococcus pyogenes, Escherichia coli, Pseudomonas aeruginosa, Rhodotorula sp. and Candida spp. [54]. However, despite the importance and capacity of Trichoderma as a bioactive compound producer, literature is scarce when it comes to use of these compounds for insect pest control.

Shakeri and Foster [55] studied two strains of Trichoderma harzianum that produced a chitinase and basic proteinase which may play a key role in entomopathogenicity against Tenebrio molitor larvae or when applied to the cuticle together with a serine protease. These results suggested that the virulence factors involved in T. molitor biocontrol are the same as those for insect pathogenicity. This may affect the use of Trichoderma spp. for biocontrol as there may be effects on non-target insect species.

Podder and Ghosh [56] showed that Trichoderma asperellum could be used against Anopheles mosquitoes, vectors of malaria. They investigated the efficacy of crude methanolic extracts and different methanolic fractions of the fungal extracts against anopheline larvae and concluded that the crude methanolic extract has new applications for the control of Anopheles spp.

When extracts were pulverized onto the ants (1 mL applied with a hand sprayer on the parcel containing 10 ants), the survival rate was reduced in comparison to controls (Fig. 2B). Average survival was 1.5 days for ants treated with extracts from isolate TR1; 2 days for extracts from isolates TR7 and TR10; 5 days for TR4. Control mean survival rates were 7 days (Table 4). These lethal time results can be compared to those reported by Oliveira [57] pointed to a lethal time (LT50) of 2 days for topical application of crude cashew (Anacardium occidentale L.) nut oil against leaf-cutting ants. Thus, suggesting that the results for Trichoderma extracts are promising for the prospection of natural compounds for biological control.

When using Trichoderma metabolites as baits, the ideal procedure would be firstly to test a

### Table 3. Regression analysis for mortality following ingestion of Trichoderma extracts by Atta sexdens rubropilosa showing equations and determination coefficients

| Treatments | Polynomial equation | Determination coefficient ($R^2$) |
|------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| Control   | $y = -0.754x^2 + 0.9127x + 99.722$ | 0.9712                         |
| TR1       | $y = 1.25x^2 + 28.44x + 107.98$    | 0.9436                         |
| TR2       | $y = 2.4405x^2 - 31.25x + 97.976$  | 0.9935                         |
| TR3       | $y = 1.25x^2 - 20.536x + 102.92$   | 0.9578                         |
| TR4       | $y = 8.5714x^2 - 56.286x + 93.81$  | 0.9418                         |
| TR5       | $y = 1.6667x^2 - 23.492x + 93.056$ | 0.9416                         |
| TR6       | $y = 0.0595x - 7.7579x + 97.361$   | 0.9439                         |
| TR7       | $y = 0.119x - 24.31x + 110.24$     | 0.9257                         |
| TR8       | $y = -2.5x^2 - 26.167x + 100.5$    | 0.9991                         |
| TR9       | $y = 1.0913x^2 - 17.202x + 97.361$ | 0.9165                         |
| TR10      | $y = 4.6429x^2 - 41.548x + 90.476$ | 0.9358                         |
| TR11      | $y = 2.123x^2 - 29.187x + 102.92$  | 0.9814                         |

### Table 4. Average survival of Atta sexdens rubropilosa after ingestion, direct contact and exposure to volatile compounds of extracts of four Trichoderma (TR) fungal isolates

| Treatments | TR1   | TR4  | TR7  | TR10 | Control |
|------------|-------|------|------|------|---------|
| Ingestion  | 2$^{a}$| 2$^{a}$| 4$^{a}$| 2$^{a}$| 10$^{a}$ |
| Contact    | 1.5$^{a}$| 5$^{a}$| 2$^{a}$| 2$^{a}$| 7$^{b}$  |
| Volatiles  | 4$^{a}$| 7$^{bcd}$| 4$^{ab}$| 5$^{ac}$| 6.5$^{a}$|

* Averages followed by the same letter on the same line do not differ statistically from each other according to Tukey’s Multiple Comparison Test (P <0.05)
fungal extract displaying slower mortality effects [58], as it is desirable that the active ingredient can be picked up and spread to other ants in the colony, including the queen. Consequently, individual assessment of the extract effects is essential for determining their best application.

When assessing the volatile compound effects on ants, extracts TR1, TR7 and TR10 displayed statistically different results from control treatments. However, isolate TR4 was similar to controls (Fig. 2C). Average survival was 4 days for ants exposed to volatile compounds from TR1 and TR7 extracts; 5 days for TR10; and 6.5 and 7 days, respectively, for control treatment and extract TR4.

Polezel [59] considered some *Trichoderma* isolates as possible candidates for leaf-cutting ant control when he detected the production of volatile organic compounds and their negative effects on ants when interacting with the mutualistic fungus.

According to Vey et al. [60], *Trichoderma* produces a wide variety of volatile compounds such as ethylene, ketones and aldehydes. Studies of these compounds, besides exhibiting antifungal characteristics, may also display insecticide action, yet this is an area which has been little explored. One of these studies pointed out that *Trichoderma* produced a wide range of volatile compounds [59] and the effects of such compounds could be variable when confronting *Trichoderma* and the ants mutualistic fungus, without considering the direct action of the volatiles on the insects which has not been verified.

Where leaf-cutting ants are concerned, most studies that describe *Trichoderma* as being active against these insects are based either on spores suspension inoculation or action against the fungal symbiont. Even if no direct effect of the fungus on ants can be determined, indirect effects may occur, such as from chitin-degrading enzymes production [61] or the production of compounds that would negatively interfere with ants or the normal development of the colony.

4. CONCLUSION

Extracts from *Trichoderma* fungal isolates (TR1, TR4, TR7 and TR10) caused high levels of leaf-cutting worker ant mortality and could be used in further research aiming to gain a greater understanding of promising bioactive compounds. Despite the fact that this fungus does not share any co-evolutionary scenario with leaf-cutting ants, it did exert deleterious action against workers.

Further research will be conducted on these *Trichoderma* isolates to compare their antagonism by means of direct action and to verify whether the metabolites affect *L. gongylophorus* as well as *Atta* mini-colonies, as these environments allow workers to interact more naturally with their colony nest-mates and with the symbiotic fungus, enabling the observation of natural responses of the ant-fungus interactions. *Trichoderma* is likely to be useful in the future as a new tool for leaf-cutting ant control, maybe through synergism with entomopathogenic fungi, or through its potential action on the symbiotic fungus. Such interaction might become an advantage to help us overcome the complex defense system of leaf-cutting ants: a system for which a single biological control agent alone, with a narrow action range, would not be successful.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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