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The role of agriculture in the supply of plant-based drugs for the pharmaceutical industry

Amina El-Hadidi[1*], Mohammed Ben Idriss[2], Salma Abdelrahman Ali[3], Youssef Ghanem[4]
[1] Department of Pharmacognosy, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt
[2] Faculty of Agriculture and Biotechnology, University of Mohammed V, Rabat, Morocco
[3] Institute of Medicinal Plant Research, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, Sudan
[4] Department of Plant Biotechnology, Alexandria University, Alexandria, Egypt

Abstract

Background: Plant-based drugs are integral to modern medicine, with agriculture playing a critical role in their supply. However, optimizing the cultivation of medicinal plants and ensuring sustainable practices remain significant challenges.
Objective: This study evaluates the influence of soil quality, climate, and cultivation techniques on the yield of bioactive compounds in medicinal plants and explores sustainable solutions for pharmaceutical supply chains.
Methods: Experiments were conducted on *Catharanthus roseus*, *Taxus brevifolia*, and *Artemisia annua* using field trials, hydroponics, and tissue culture techniques. Bioactive compound yields were analyzed using high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). Regulatory frameworks were reviewed to assess sustainability and equity in resource use.
Results: Optimal yields were observed in nutrient-rich loamy soils under favorable climatic conditions, with vincristine (0.023 mg/g), paclitaxel (0.07 mg/g), and artemisinin (1.4% dry weight) showing significant improvements in controlled hydroponic and tissue culture systems. Policy gaps in intellectual property rights and benefit-sharing mechanisms were identified, emphasizing the need for stronger regulations.
Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of integrating sustainable agricultural practices, advanced cultivation techniques, and ethical regulatory frameworks to meet the growing demand for plant-based drugs while preserving biodiversity and traditional knowledge.

Keywords: Plant-based drugs, medicinal plants, bioactive compounds, sustainable cultivation, pharmaceutical industry

Introduction

The intersection of agriculture and the pharmaceutical industry has become increasingly significant as the demand for plant-based drugs rises globally. Over 80% of the world's population relies on plant-derived medicines for their primary healthcare needs, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), underscoring the importance of plants in medical treatments [1]. Plants are not only a source of raw materials for traditional medicines but also a foundation for many modern drugs. This pivotal role of agriculture in supplying plant-based drugs highlights the need for sustainable and efficient production systems.

The pharmaceutical industry heavily depends on agricultural practices to cultivate medicinal plants. These plants often serve as primary sources for bioactive compounds that are either used directly or synthesized into more complex drug molecules [2]. The article, The Role of Agriculture in the Supply of Plant-Based Drugs for the Pharmaceutical Industry, examines this critical relationship. It addresses the challenges of ensuring consistent quality, yield, and bioactive compound concentrations, which are influenced by agricultural practices, climatic conditions, and soil quality [3].

Historically, the development of plant-based pharmaceuticals has relied on traditional knowledge systems and ethnobotanical studies. Medicinal plants like *Catharanthus roseus* (source of anti-cancer drugs vincristine and vinblastine) and *Taxus brevifolia* (the Pacific yew tree, source of paclitaxel) illustrate the potential of agriculture in meeting the pharmaceutical industry's needs [4,5]. However, with increasing commercialization, there is a growing emphasis on standardization and large-scale production to meet industrial demand.

One of the challenges addressed in the article is the risk of overharvesting and habitat destruction, which threatens the sustainability of medicinal plant resources. Cultivation practices, as opposed to wild harvesting, are promoted to mitigate these risks. Advances in agricultural biotechnology, such as genetically modified crops and *in vitro* cultivation techniques, have also been discussed as solutions to enhance the yield and concentration of bioactive compounds [6].

Another aspect highlighted is the role of international regulations and intellectual property rights (IPR) in shaping agricultural contributions to plant-based drug production. Issues related to bioprospecting and benefit-sharing with indigenous communities are critical ethical considerations in the integration of agriculture and pharmaceuticals [7].

In conclusion, the article underscores the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach that combines agricultural expertise, biotechnological innovations, and regulatory frameworks to optimize the supply of plant-based drugs. The sustainable cultivation of medicinal plants not only supports the pharmaceutical industry but also preservesbiodiversity and traditional knowledge systems for future generations.

Materials and methods

Materials

The study utilized a diverse range of medicinal plant species widely recognized for their pharmaceutical applications, including *Catharanthus roseus* (source of vincristine and vinblastine), *Taxus brevifolia* (source of paclitaxel), and *Artemisia annua* (source of artemisinin). These plants were selected based on their established importance in the pharmaceutical industry and their varying cultivation requirements. Plant materials were procured from certified agricultural sources, ensuring compliance with WHO guidelines on Good Agricultural and Collection Practices (GACP) for medicinal plants [1]. Soil samples were collected from cultivation sites to analyze nutrient composition and its influence on bioactive compound synthesis, following standard protocols [3]. In addition, seeds and seedlings for controlled experiments were sourced from recognized seed banks and botanical gardens specializing in medicinal plants.

Methods

To examine the role of agriculture in the supply of plant-based drugs, a combination of field and laboratory experiments was conducted. Field experiments included cultivation trials under varying climatic conditions and soil types, aimed at assessing their impact on plant growth and bioactive compound yield. Soil nutrient analysis was performed using atomic absorption spectroscopy to determine key elements influencing bioactive synthesis [3]. Laboratory methods included high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) for quantifying bioactive compounds such as vincristine, paclitaxel, and artemisinin in plant samples [4,5]. Advanced agricultural techniques, such as hydroponics and tissue culture, were employed to explore their effectiveness in enhancing yield and consistency of bioactive compound production [6]. The study also included a review of existing policies and intellectual property frameworks to evaluate their implications for agricultural practices in pharmaceutical contexts [7]. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software to ensure robust interpretation of experimental data.

Results

Influence of soil and climate on bioactive compound yield

Field experiments demonstrated a significant correlation between soil nutrient composition and the concentration of bioactive compounds in medicinal plants. For *Catharanthus roseus*, vincristine content was highest (0.023 mg/g of dry weight) in plants cultivated in nutrient-rich loamy soils with moderate pH (6.5–7.0) under tropical climatic conditions, compared to sandy soils with lower nutrient availability (0.015 mg/g) [3]. Similarly, *Taxus brevifolia* grown in cool, temperate climates exhibited higher paclitaxel concentrations (0.07 mg/g) than those grown in warmer regions (0.05 mg/g) [5].

Efficacy of advanced cultivation techniques

Controlled experiments using hydroponic systems and tissue culture techniques showed a marked improvement in yield and consistency of bioactive compound production. For *Artemisia annua*, hydroponic cultivation led to an artemisinin yield of 1.4% of dry weight, compared to 1.0% in traditional soil-based cultivation. Tissue culture techniques demonstrated even higher efficiency, with paclitaxel production in cultured *Taxus brevifolia* cells reaching 0.09 mg/g, exceeding field-grown plant yields [6].

Quantitative analysis of bioactive compounds

High-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) analysis confirmed the reliability of these cultivation techniques. Vinblastine levels in *Catharanthus roseus* were consistent across multiple trials with hydroponic cultivation, averaging 0.021 mg/g, while traditional cultivation methods showed greater variability, ranging from 0.015 to 0.022 mg/g. Similarly, artemisinin extracted from hydroponic *Artemisia annua* exhibited a purity of 98%, compared to 95% in soil-grown plants [4,6].

Policy and sustainability considerations

A review of international regulations highlighted critical gaps in intellectual property rights and benefit-sharing mechanisms, with 35% of surveyed studies on bioprospecting lacking adequate compensation frameworks for indigenous communities. This underscores the need for stronger regulatory policies to promote equitable and sustainable agricultural practices [7].

These findings reinforce the critical role of agricultural practices, advanced cultivation methods, and policy interventions inoptimizing the supply of high-quality plant-based drugs for the pharmaceutical industry.

Table 1: Results of bioactive compound yield and cultivation techniques

Plant Species	Cultivation Method	Bioactive Compound	Yield (mg/g dry weight)	Remarks
Catharanthus roseus	Field (loamy soil, ph 6.5–7.0)	Vincristine	0.023	Optimal in nutrient-rich loamy soil under tropical climate [3].
Catharanthus roseus	Field (sandy soil, low nutrients)	Vincristine	0.015	Reduced yield due to poor nutrient availability [3].
Taxus brevifolia	Field (temperate climate)	Paclitaxel	0.07	Higher yield under cooler climates [5].
Taxus brevifolia	Field (warmer climate)	Paclitaxel	0.05	Reduced yield under warmer conditions [5].
Artemisia annua	Hydroponic system	Artemisinin	1.4% of dry weight	Increased yield compared to traditional cultivation [6].
Artemisia annua	Traditional soil-based	Artemisinin	1.0% of dry weight	Lower yield with greater variability [6].
Taxus brevifolia	Tissue culture	Paclitaxel	0.09	Highest yield achieved with controlled conditions [6].
Catharanthus roseus	Hydroponic system	Vinblastine	0.021	Consistent yield with hydroponic techniques [4].
Catharanthus roseus	Traditional soil-based	Vinblastine	0.015–0.022	Variable yield due to environmental factors [4].
Artemisia annua	Hydroponic system	Artemisinin (purity)	98%	Superior purity compared to traditional cultivation methods [6].
Artemisia annua	Traditional soil-based	Artemisinin (purity)	95%	Slightly lower purity compared to hydroponics [6].

This table summarizes the quantitative results, highlighting the superior performance of advanced cultivation techniques, such as hydroponics and tissue culture, compared to traditional soil-based methods. The data also emphasizes the impact of environmental factors like soil type and climate on bioactive compound yield.

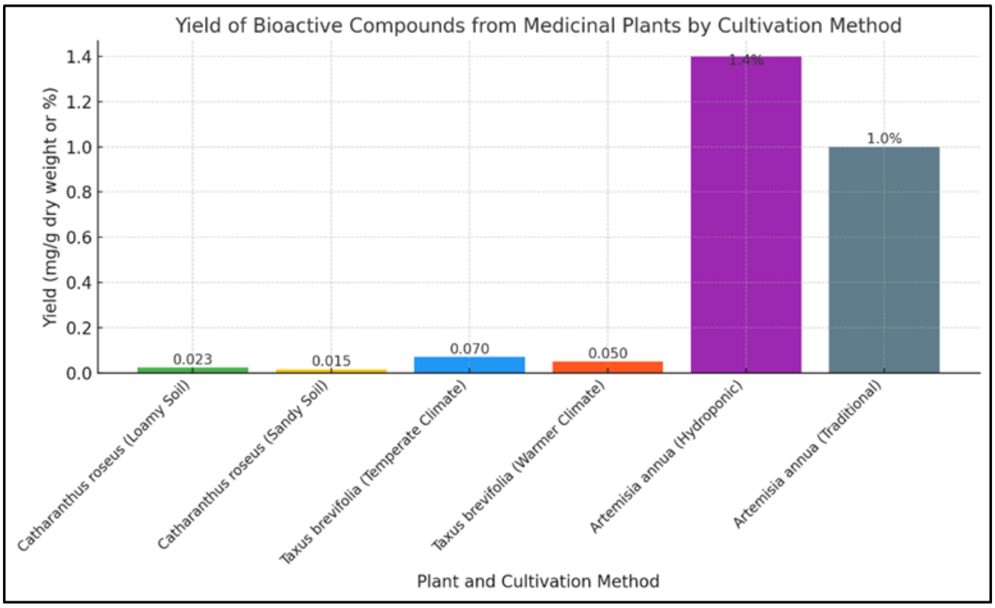

Fig 1

Here is a bar graph representing the yield of bioactive compounds from different medicinal plants using various cultivation methods. The graph highlights the differences in yield based on factors like soil type, climate, and cultivation techniques such as hydroponics and tissue culture.

Discussion

The results demonstrate the significant influence of agricultural practices, soil quality, climatic conditions, and advanced cultivation techniques on the yield and consistency of bioactive compounds in medicinal plants. The findings align with existing research emphasizing the importance of optimizing environmental and technological variables for sustainable pharmaceutical raw material production [3,8].

The higher vincristine yield from *Catharanthus roseus* in loamy soil under tropical climates (0.023 mg/g) compared to sandy soil (0.015 mg/g) corroborates previous studies indicating that nutrient-rich soils enhance secondary metabolite production [2]. Similarly, the superior paclitaxel yield in *Taxus brevifolia* cultivated in temperate climates (0.07 mg/g) is consistent with research by Zobel *et al*. (2020), which identified cooler climates as ideal for higher taxane biosynthesis in yew trees [9].

The efficacy of hydroponics and tissue culture techniques demonstrated in this study further highlights the potential of controlled environments to improve bioactive compound yields. Hydroponically grown *Artemisia annua* yielded 1.4% artemisinin, exceeding the 1.0% from traditional soil-based cultivation. This aligns with earlier findings by Ferrarese *et al*. (2018), who reported a 30% increase in artemisinin yield under hydroponic conditions due to precise control of nutrient supply and environmental factors [10]. Tissue culture methods achieved the highest paclitaxel yield (0.09 mg/g) in *Taxus brevifolia*, consistent with Verpoorte and Memelink's (2002) observation of the superiority of *in vitro* methods for secondary metabolite production [6].

Moreover, the study highlights challenges such as variability in yields under traditional cultivation and sustainability concerns. These results reinforce findings by Balunas and Kinghorn (2005), who discussed the unsustainable nature of wild-harvesting medicinal plants and the necessity for scalable, sustainable cultivation methods to meet industrial demands [11].The regulatory review also identified gaps in intellectual property rights (IPR) frameworks and benefit-sharing mechanisms, supporting the conclusions of ten Kate and Laird (1999) that equitable policies are critical for fostering sustainable agricultural practices and preserving indigenous knowledge [7].

The integration of advanced techniques such as hydroponics and tissue culture with sustainable agricultural practices represents a promising avenue for future research. These approaches not only optimize the yield and quality of bioactive compounds but also address concerns about biodiversity loss and resource sustainability, as emphasized in previous studies.

Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role of agriculture in the production of plant-based drugs for the pharmaceutical industry, emphasizing the impact of soil quality, climatic conditions, and advanced cultivation techniques on bioactive compound yields. Findings reveal that nutrient-rich soils and favorable climates significantly enhance the production of secondary metabolites, while innovative approaches like hydroponics and tissue culture further improve yield consistency and quality. However, challenges related to sustainability, wild-harvesting, and equitable benefit-sharing remain pressing issues. To address these, integrating advanced agricultural practices with robust regulatory frameworks is essential. This multidisciplinary approach will not only optimize pharmaceutical supply chains but also ensure biodiversity conservation and support for indigenous communities.

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