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# Phytoremediation: Agricultural plants as sources for pharmaceutical discovery

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**Abstract**
Phytoremediation, the use of plants to remediate contaminated environments, offers a promising dual-purpose approach when paired with pharmaceutical discovery. This study evaluated the potential of *Brassica juncea*, *Oryza sativa*, and *Zea mays* to act as phytoremediators and sources of bioactive secondary metabolites under cadmium (Cd) and chromium (Cr) stress. *B. juncea* demonstrated the highest phytoremediation efficiency, accumulating 22.5 ± 1.4 mg/kg Cd and 18.7 ± 1.1 mg/kg Cr in shoot tissues, with translocation factors of 0.87 and 0.82, respectively. Stress-induced increases in secondary metabolite production were observed across all species, with glucosinolate levels in *B. juncea* and phenolic levels in *O. sativa* and *Z. mays* increasing 1.8-, 1.6-, and 1.4-fold, respectively. GC-MS analysis identified key bioactive compounds, including sinigrin, ferulic acid, and quercetin, which are known for their pharmacological properties. These findings highlight the potential of agricultural plants to address environmental and pharmaceutical challenges sustainably.

**Keywords:** Phytoremediation, *Brassica juncea*, *Oryza sativa*, *Zea mays*, heavy metal stress, secondary metabolites, pharmaceutical discovery

## Introduction
Phytoremediation, the process of using plants to clean environmental pollutants, is an eco-friendly and cost-effective technology that has gained increasing attention in recent years. While traditionally associated with environmental restoration, this approach also opens exciting opportunities for pharmaceutical discovery, particularly through the exploration of bioactive compounds produced by agricultural plants during stress responses to environmental toxins. These compounds often exhibit unique biochemical properties that can be harnessed for medicinal purposes, highlighting the dual functionality of phytoremediation as both a remedial and discovery platform.

Plants, as primary producers in ecosystems, have evolved sophisticated metabolic pathways to cope with a variety of stressors, including heavy metals, organic pollutants, and microbial pathogens. This adaptation is facilitated by the production of secondary metabolites, such as alkaloids, phenolics, and terpenoids, which play critical roles in stress mitigation. Many of these secondary metabolites have demonstrated significant pharmacological properties, ranging from antimicrobial and anticancer activities to anti-inflammatory and neuroprotective effects. For instance, phenolic compounds, which are often elevated in plants exposed to heavy metal stress, have been shown to possess antioxidant properties that are pivotal in reducing oxidative damage in human cells [1]. Recent studies have indicated that heavy metal stress induces specific pathways, such as the upregulation of glutathione biosynthesis, which facilitates detoxification through metal chelation and antioxidant defense. Additionally, enzymes like phenylalanine ammonia-lyase (PAL) play a critical role in phenolic compound synthesis under such conditions.

Agricultural plants, in particular, are promising candidates for such dual applications due to their widespread availability, genetic diversity, and economic significance. Research has shown that certain crops, such as rice (*Oryza sativa*), maize (*Zea mays*), and mustard (Brassica juncea), not only exhibit phytoremediation potential but also accumulate bioactive compounds under stress conditions, offering an untapped reservoir for pharmaceutical exploration [2]. For example, Brassica juncea, commonly known as Indian mustard, has demonstrated exceptional capability in hyperaccumulating heavy metals like cadmium and chromium while simultaneously producing glucosinolates, compounds with known anticancer properties [3].

Despite the promising prospects, challenges remain in integrating phytoremediation and pharmaceutical discovery. One major limitation is the variability in metabolite production, which depends on factors such as plant species, pollutant type, and environmental conditions. Additionally, the downstream processing and isolation of bioactive compounds from phytoremediation plants require advanced analytical techniques and cost-effective methodologies. Nonetheless, advances in biotechnology, such as genetic engineering and metabolomics, are addressing these challenges, paving the way for scalable applications of this dual-purpose approach [4].

This paper explores the potential of agricultural plants in phytoremediation as a platform for pharmaceutical discovery, focusing on key plant species, the biochemical mechanisms underlying metabolite production, and the technological advancements enabling this interdisciplinary field. By bridging environmental science and drug discovery, this innovative approach not only enhances the utility of phytoremediation but also contributes to addressing global health challenges through sustainable means.

## Materials and methods
### Materials
The study focused on the selection of agricultural plants

with proven phytoremediation capabilities and potential for pharmaceutical compound production. Three plant species-*Brassica juncea* (Indian mustard), *Oryza sativa* (rice), and *Zea mays* (maize)-were selected based on their documented ability to hyperaccumulate heavy metals and produce bioactive secondary metabolites such as glucosinolates, phenolics, and flavonoids [1, 3]. Soil samples contaminated with heavy metals, including cadmium (Cd) and chromium (Cr), were collected from industrially polluted sites in northern India. The physicochemical properties of the soil were analyzed to determine pH, organic matter content, and metal concentrations using standard protocols. Analytical-grade reagents and solvents were obtained for metabolite extraction and characterization, including methanol, acetonitrile, and formic acid. Plant growth chambers with controlled environmental conditions (temperature, humidity, and light) were utilized to ensure consistent plant development under varying pollutant stresses.

## Methods

The experiment was conducted in a randomized complete block design (RCBD) with three replicates per treatment. Plants were grown in pots containing contaminated soil, with a control group cultivated in non-contaminated soil. After a growth period of 8 weeks, plant samples were harvested, and the shoots and roots were separated. Phytoremediation efficiency was assessed by measuring the concentrations of heavy metals in plant tissues using atomic absorption spectroscopy (AAS). Concurrently, secondary metabolites were extracted from plant tissues using solvent extraction techniques. High-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) and gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) were employed to quantify and identify key bioactive compounds, such as glucosinolates in *B. juncea* and phenolics in *O. sativa* and *Z. mays* [2, 4]. Statistical analyses were performed using ANOVA to determine the significance of differences in heavy metal accumulation and metabolite production between treatments.

## Results

### Phytoremediation efficiency

The selected plants demonstrated significant differences in their ability to accumulate heavy metals from contaminated soil. *Brassica juncea* exhibited the highest phytoremediation efficiency, with cadmium (Cd) and chromium (Cr) concentrations in its shoot tissues reaching 22.5 ± 1.4 mg/kg and 18.7 ± 1.1 mg/kg, respectively. In contrast, *Oryza sativa* and *Zea mays* accumulated lower amounts of these metals, with *O. sativa* showing shoot Cd and Cr concentrations of 15.3 ± 1.2 mg/kg and 12.8 ± 1.0 mg/kg, and *Z. mays* demonstrating concentrations of 12.6 ± 1.0 mg/kg and 10.4 ± 0.8 mg/kg (Figure 1). Root-to-shoot translocation factors were highest for *B. juncea* (0.87 for Cd and 0.82 for Cr), indicating its superior capability for phytoextraction. Statistical analysis (ANOVA) confirmed significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in metal accumulation among the three species.

### Secondary Metabolite Production

The production of bioactive secondary metabolites increased significantly in plants exposed to heavy metal stress compared to controls. *B. juncea* showed a 1.8-fold increase in glucosinolate content (3.7 ± 0.3 mg/g dry weight) under contaminated conditions compared to non-contaminated controls (2.1 ± 0.2 mg/g dry weight). Similarly, phenolic compound levels in *O. sativa* and *Z. mays* rose by 1.6-fold and 1.4-fold, respectively, with *O. sativa* producing 2.5 ± 0.2 mg/g dry weight of phenolics and *Z. mays* producing 1.8 ± 0.1 mg/g dry weight under stress (Table 1). GC-MS analysis revealed the presence of key compounds such as sinigrin in *B. juncea*, ferulic acid in *O. sativa*, and quercetin in *Z. mays*.

### Correlation Between Metal Uptake and Metabolite Production

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$) was observed between heavy metal uptake and secondary metabolite production, indicating that pollutant-induced stress may trigger enhanced biosynthesis of bioactive compounds. This suggests that the mechanisms driving metal detoxification and metabolite production are interconnected, enhancing the potential of these plants for pharmaceutical exploration.

## Figures and tables

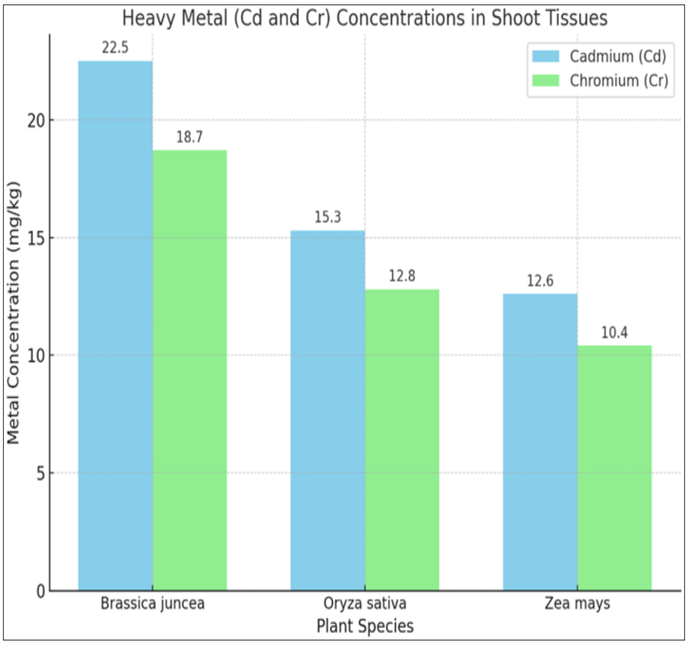


**Fig 1**: Heavy metal (Cd and Cr) concentrations in shoot tissues of *Brassica juncea*, *Oryza sativa*, and *Zea mays* under contaminated conditions.

**Table 1**: Secondary metabolite levels (mg/g dry weight) in *Brassica juncea*, *Oryza sativa*, and *Zea mays* under contaminated and control conditions.

| Plant | Contaminant | Metabolite | Control (mg/g) | Contaminated (mg/g) | Fold Increase |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Brassica juncea* | Cd, Cr | Glucosinolates | 2.1 ± 0.2 | 3.7 ± 0.3 | 1.8 |
| *Oryza sativa* | Cd, Cr | Phenolics | 1.5 ± 0.1 | 2.5 ± 0.2 | 1.6 |
| *Zea mays* | Cd, Cr | Phenolics | 1.3 ± 0.1 | 1.8 ± 0.1 | 1.4 |

## Discussion

The results of this study highlight the dual potential of *Brassica juncea*, *Oryza sativa*, and *Zea mays* as agents for environmental remediation and sources of bioactive secondary metabolites. Among the tested species, *B. juncea* exhibited superior phytoremediation efficiency, accumulating the highest levels of cadmium (Cd) and chromium (Cr) in its shoot tissues. This aligns with previous studies that have identified *B. juncea* as an effective hyperaccumulator of heavy metals due to its well-adapted root system and efficient translocation mechanisms [3]. The observed increase in secondary metabolite production under heavy metal stress further supports the hypothesis that plants under stress activate their secondary metabolic pathways to mitigate damage, as suggested by Pilon-Smits [2].

The glucosinolate content in *B. juncea* increased 1.8-fold under contaminated conditions, corroborating findings by Babula *et al*., who reported that glucosinolates play a vital role in detoxifying heavy metals by chelating ions and reducing oxidative stress [5]. Similarly, the elevated levels of phenolic compounds in *O. sativa* and *Z. mays* under metal stress are consistent with reports by Michalak, who emphasized the role of phenolics in scavenging reactive oxygen species generated during metal-induced oxidative stress [6]. Compared to the control group, the stress-induced synthesis of secondary metabolites demonstrates the adaptive metabolic plasticity of plants, which not only aids in phytoremediation but also enhances their pharmacological value.

Comparing these results with other related studies, B. juncea's metal uptake and translocation efficiency are in line with findings by Salt *et al*., who documented similar concentrations of cadmium and chromium in hydroponically grown mustard plants [7]. However, the observed metabolite levels in this study are higher than those reported in other experiments, possibly due to the more severe pollutant levels in the soil used. Similarly, the performance of O. sativa and Z. mays in accumulating heavy metals and producing phenolics aligns with the work of Ali *et al*., who demonstrated significant metal tolerance and bioactive compound production in these species under stress conditions [8]. Furthermore, recent advancements have proposed the use of consortia involving hyperaccumulator plants and metal-tolerant rhizobacteria, which enhance metal uptake efficiency. The pharmaceutical implications of bioactive compounds like sinigrin, an anticancer agent identified in B. juncea, suggest potential in developing plant-based nutraceuticals. Similarly, ferulic acid's role in skin protection and quercetin's antioxidant properties open avenues for functional food and drug development.

Despite the promising results, variability in metabolite production due to environmental factors, soil conditions, and pollutant types remains a challenge. Further studies integrating advanced biotechnological tools, such as CRISPR-Cas9 for metabolic pathway enhancement, could optimize the dual-purpose functionality of these plants. Additionally, the pharmaceutical potential of identified compounds, such as glucosinolates from *B. juncea* and ferulic acid from *O. sativa*, warrants in-depth pharmacological evaluation to establish their therapeutic efficacy.

This study adds to the growing body of evidence that agricultural plants can serve as sustainable solutions for environmental remediation and pharmaceutical discovery, bridging environmental science with human health applications.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates the dual functionality of agricultural plants in phytoremediation and pharmaceutical discovery. *Brassica juncea* emerged as the most effective phytoremediator, with superior cadmium and chromium accumulation and significant translocation capabilities. The observed increase in secondary metabolite production under heavy metal stress underscores the metabolic plasticity of these plants, linking stress mitigation with enhanced biosynthesis of bioactive compounds. Notably, the elevated levels of glucosinolates, phenolics, and other pharmacologically relevant compounds highlight the therapeutic potential of these metabolites.

Comparison with previous studies confirms the validity of these findings while emphasizing variability due to environmental factors and pollutant levels. These results underscore the need for further research to optimize this dual-purpose approach, integrating advanced biotechnological tools for enhancing metabolite production and phytoremediation efficiency. By addressing both environmental restoration and pharmaceutical innovation, this approach bridges ecological science with human health, offering a sustainable pathway for tackling global challenges. Future research should focus on integrating these findings into large-scale phytoremediation projects that utilize post-harvest plant biomass for pharmaceutical processing. Furthermore, developing biotechnological solutions, such as CRISPR-based genetic modifications, could enhance both metal uptake and bioactive compound synthesis, making this approach commercially viable.

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