

RESEARCH ARTICLE

M₄ generation of moringa (*Moringa oleifera* Lam.) mutants revealing genetic diversity for leaf traits based on SSR markers

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Abstract

This study was conducted to develop a variety suitable for high leaf production in moringa. Initially, seeds of PKM 1 variety of moringa were treated with gamma irradiation of 100 Gy (Gray), 200 Gy and 300 Gy at Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Mumbai and raised as M₁ generation. The best-performing mutants were selected and forwarded to further generations (M₁ to M₄) based on leaf-related characters. A total of 10 Indian drumsticks (*Moringa oleifera* Lam.) mutants (derived from 200 Gy of gamma irradiation) from M₄ generation with PKM 1 variety were evaluated for morphological and molecular diversity. To evaluate morphological diversity, 4 features (leaf length, leaf breadth, fresh weight and dry weight) were studied under field conditions. Ten sets of markers for simple sequence repeats (SSR), i.e. GenicSSR1081, SSR25987, SSR2927, GenicSSR859, GenicSSR796, SSR6561, GenicSSR890, GenicSSR1204, GenicSSR983 and GenicSSR778; that generated distinct and repeatable bands; were chosen for analyzing molecular diversity. A total of 24 bands were amplified, of which 17 were polymorphic. With an average of 0.391, the polymorphic information content (PIC) values for SSR markers varied from 0.124 for marker SSR2927 to 0.719 for marker GenicSSR778. Based on the cluster analysis with SSR markers, the mutants are divided into 2 groups. The variety PKM 1 was separated by a group whereas; all the other mutants fell into a single group indicating the diversity of mutants from the control. The diverse mutants (15-1-09-70 and 15-1-09-53) based on both morphological and molecular observations were selected and suggested for evaluation through subsequent generations that have the potential to be released as a variety for high leaf production. By increasing the production of highly nutritious moringa leaf, self-sufficiency and nutritional security can be obtained as well as it could benefit the lifestyle improvement of farmers through export to countries where the crop demand is high.

Keywords

diversity; moringa; mutants; selection; SSR

Introduction

India has been using *Moringa oleifera* as a medicine since the 18th century BC, with various plant parts used as traditional remedies. The plant's root, bark, gum, leaves, fruit, flowers, seeds and seed oil have been used to treat various illnesses, including gout and anemia, skin infections edema, bronchitis, asthma, diarrhea, headaches, joint discomfort and rheumatism (1-5). Traditional medical systems also treat measles, smallpox, conjunctivitis, hemorrhoids, goiter, earache, fevers, digestive disorders, wounds and diabetes (6, 7). When added to food products, *M. oleifera* increases its nutritional value and can be used to produce nutrient-enriched bakery goods that are well-received by consumers and have good storage quality. This is an intriguing strategy to improve people's health and nutritional status, particularly in areas where food is scarce or extreme poverty exists (8). Mutagenesis, the process of introducing mutations into an organism's genome, has been used in plant breeding. With induced mutagenesis and related breeding techniques, various crops can have their quantitative and qualitative characteristics improved in a shorter period of time than it takes with traditional breeding (9). The advantages of mutation breeding as a flexible and useful method for any crop is highlighted by the global impact of agricultural varieties developed from it (10). SSR are areas between microsatellites, which are amplified using primer set called SSR for molecular analysis. With a small proportion of co-dominant template DNA, SSR analysis are highly polymorphic and repeatable, especially when examining the distribution of repeat sequence abundance across genomes (11, 12). The first SSR marker unique to *M. oleifera* was developed in the year 2010 and they have since been suggested as helpful markers for in-depth genetic population research (13). Over time, SSRs have proven useful for classifying underused agricultural germplasm and evaluating molecular diversity (12, 14). Therefore, it is believed that using molecular markers in conjunction with mutation breeding is a good way to increase the frequency and efficiency of genetic variation. In particular, SSR are breeder-friendly markers that simplify counting of the genetic variations arising due to mutagenesis (15). Through this, morphologically and genetically diverse mutants with high leaf yield can be identified and selected, which might be used to attain self-sufficiency in nutrition-rich food.

Materials and Methods

Mutation treatment

At Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Mumbai, the seeds of the PKM 1 moringa variety were subjected to varying doses of gamma irradiation (100 Gy, 200 Gy, 300 Gy) based on the source of irradiation at appropriate times at the rate of 400 seeds per treatment. The seeds were raised and observed for leaf and leaf-attributing traits. The selected best-performing progenies were selfed and forwarded to the M₂ generation (16).

Selection

Mutants exhibiting higher yields and yield-related traits were then advanced to the third generation (M₃). From the M₃ generation, top-performing mutants were chosen and progressed to the M₄ generation (17). Among these selected plants, the mutant family 15-1-09, derived from PKM 1 moringa irradiated with 200 Gy gamma radiations, underwent selection from the M₁ to the M₃ generation and raised in the M₄ generation. All seeds were grown as individual plants without replication. The best progenies from the M₄ generation were selected based on leaf yield and related characteristics and were subjected to further molecular characterization. In this study, the mutants that are the derivative of 200 Gy of gamma irradiation were taken for morphological and molecular characterization.

Leaf traits

Leaf length (cm) and leaf breadth (cm) were observed in the third rachis from the top of each plant. Leaf fresh weight (g) and dry weight (g) was calculated by harvesting on 45th day after transplanting.

Genetic diversity with SSR

The plant DNA sample was extracted by the hexadecyltrimethylammonium bromide (CTAB) method of isolation. The leaf sample was ground with CTAB and a pinch of polyvinyl pyrrolidone and macerated, then placed in Eppendorf centrifuge tubes filled with β -mercaptoethanol (β -ME). The tubes were incubated at 65 °C for 45 min in the water bath, then cooled for 15 min. A mixture of isoamyl alcohol and chloroform was added, mixed by inversion, centrifuged and the supernatant (aqueous phase) was extracted. Ice-cold isopropanol was added to the supernatant and the mixture was then stored at 4 °C or -80 °C for 2-3 hr. The tubes were centrifuged at 4 °C, 7200 rpm for 15 mins and the supernatant was discarded. The pellets were then added to 70% ethanol, centrifuged again and air-dried for 1-2 hr. The pellets were then dispersed in nuclease-free water and stored at -30 °C (18). The genomic DNA isolated from selected mutated lines and control plants was quantified using a Nanodrop Spectrophotometer (Genova Nano 69357). DNA integrity was evaluated through 0.8% (w/v) agarose gel electrophoresis. All DNA samples were uniformly diluted to 50 ng/ μ L with sterile water for use as templates in PCR amplification with selected SSR markers. For PCR amplification, 10 SSR markers (SSR2927, GenicSSR1204, GenicSSR1081, GenicSSR983, GenicSSR796, GenicSSR859, GenicSSR890, GenicSSR778, SSR6561 and SSR25987) were utilized with a slight modification using smART Prime master mix instead of individual PCR chemical components (19). The primer (1 μ L) was combined with DNA template (2 μ L), 1X master mix (3 μ L) and water (4 μ L) to make up a reaction mixture. The amplification was performed using a thermal cycler (Veriti™, Thermo Fisher Scientific), with varying annealing temperatures depending on the melting temperature of the primer pair. The custom oligos were from M/s Bioserve Biotechnologies Pvt Ltd, Hyderabad, India. The amplified products were separated using an ethidium bromide stained 3% (w/v) agarose gel at 120 V for 1.5-2 hr. The gel image was viewed and captured

by UV transillumination using a gel documentation unit (BIO-RAD, Gel Doc XR). The list of SSR markers used in this study is provided in Table 1.

Polymorphism information content (PIC) values

The equation for calculating PIC with the use of a codominant marker is given below:

$$PIC_j = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^n P_i^2 \quad (\text{Eqn.1})$$

where, i is i -th allele of the j -th marker, n is the number of the j -th marker's alleles and P is allele frequency (20-22).

Statistical analysis

The PIC values were calculated using Microsoft Excel. The morphological data were analyzed with progeny-wise analysis for un-replicated data using the TNAUSTAT application. The study used a binary data matrix to analyze genetic diversity, utilizing discrete variables and un-weighted Pair Group Method of Arithmetic Means (UPGMA) with arithmetic averages. The NTSYS-2.02i software was used for cluster analysis and estimating genetic diversity.

Results and Discussion

While there are many breeding techniques available to develop new plant variants, mutation breeding is particularly effective because it can generate new variants randomly without altering the entire genotype. Its ability to preserve recessive alleles enables breeders to create new varieties more quickly. This research aimed to develop new types of leafy biomass in moringa through physically induced mutagenesis (using Gamma rays) and to analyze the resulting morphological and genetic variations to identify desirable mutants.

Performance of SSR markers

Among the 10 SSR markers (GenicSSR1081, SSR25987, SSR2927, GenicSSR859, GenicSSR796, SSR6561, GenicSSR890, GenicSSR1204, GenicSSR983 and GenicSSR778) used, 8 markers showed polymorphism except GenicSSR1204 which was monomorphic. The marker SSR25987 showed no amplification. The PIC value was highest in the marker GenicSSR778 (0.719), followed by GenicSSR859 (0.669) and GenicSSR890 (0.595). PIC values ranged from 0.719 to 0.124. A total of 24 alleles were covered by the 9 markers, among which 17 were polymorphic. 1 monomorphic allele was seen when the markers SSR2927, GenicSSR859 and GenicSSR778 were used, which showed a total of 3 different bands among the 11 samples analyzed. Also, the markers GenicSSR890 and SSR6561 showed 1 monomorphic allele out of four and 2 alleles produced by each respectively. All the other markers viz., GenicSSR983, GenicSSR1081 and GenicSSR796 showed 100% polymorphism. Similarly, among the generated primer pairs of 22336 genomic and genic SSR markers, 117 SSR marker pairs were chosen at random and tested in 4 typical moringa ecotypes and cultivars. Out of the examined moringa accessions, 94.44% exhibited a high degree of DNA polymorphism, producing one to 4 alleles per SSR marker (average of 1.75). The maximum PIC value of these accessions was 0.95 (23). The performance of different markers based on PIC value is given in Table 2.

Gamma rays on leaf characters of M_e mutants

The mutant 15-1-09-70 exhibited a larger leaf breadth (1.96 cm), followed by 15-1-09-39 (1.92 cm). Also, the mutants 15-1-09-44 (1.81 cm), 15-1-09-16 (1.72 cm), 15-1-09-21 (1.71 cm) and 15-1-09-64 (1.62 cm) showed broader leaf comparing the control PKM 1 (1.65 cm). In the case of leaf length, the mutant 15-1-09-70 (2.83 cm) recorded the longest leaf length, followed by 15-1-09-44 (2.82 cm) and 15-1-09-64 (2.81 cm) than the control (2.75 cm) (Fig. 1). Similarly, a study revealed that considerable differences were observed

Table 1. SSR markers used in this study and their primer sequence

SSR marker	Forward	Reverse	Annealing temperature (°C)
SSR2927	CCAGGAGGCAATGCTTAGC	TTTTGCTCAATGGCACCTGC	55
GenicSSR1204	CATGGCCTCTTCCTGACTCC	AAATCACACGCTTTTGCCGG	55
GenicSSR1081	GACAGACCTAGACCCACTGG	GGAGTCTTCGAGGCCTACG	59
GenicSSR983	TGGGCATCATCTGTGGGC	TGTGAAATTCACCTGCCTGAGG	57
GenicSSR859	TCCGTCCCATAGGTACTCC	CCCGATGCAGAAGGAGATGG	59
GenicSSR890	ACTTGCCAGGGTTATGGTGG	ACTCCACCTTGCAAATGGC	55
GenicSSR778	CGTCAACTACCATTGAATCGGC	GGCAATTCATGAAGTCGGAGC	57
GenicSSR796	TCTTAACCTCCTCGCCTGCC	AGAAAGGCATAGAGGTCGCG	57
SSR6561	AGAAAGCATGCAAGTGTGGC	CAAAACGACAACACCACCCC	55
SSR25987	GGAGTATAGGGTTTAGGGCTAAGC	TAGATTGAGCCTGGCCTTGC	56

Table 2. Performance of different markers on PIC value

Primer	No. of alleles	No. of polymorphic alleles	Polymorphism percentage	PIC
GenicSSR1081	2	2	100	0.396
SSR25987	-	No amplification	-	-
SSR2927	3	2	66.67	0.124
GenicSSR859	3	2	66.67	0.669
GenicSSR796	2	2	100	0.165
SSR6561	4	3	75	0.330
GenicSSR890	2	1	50	0.595
GenicSSR1204	1	0	Monomorphic	-
GenicSSR983	3	3	100	0.132
GenicSSR778	3	2	66.67	0.719

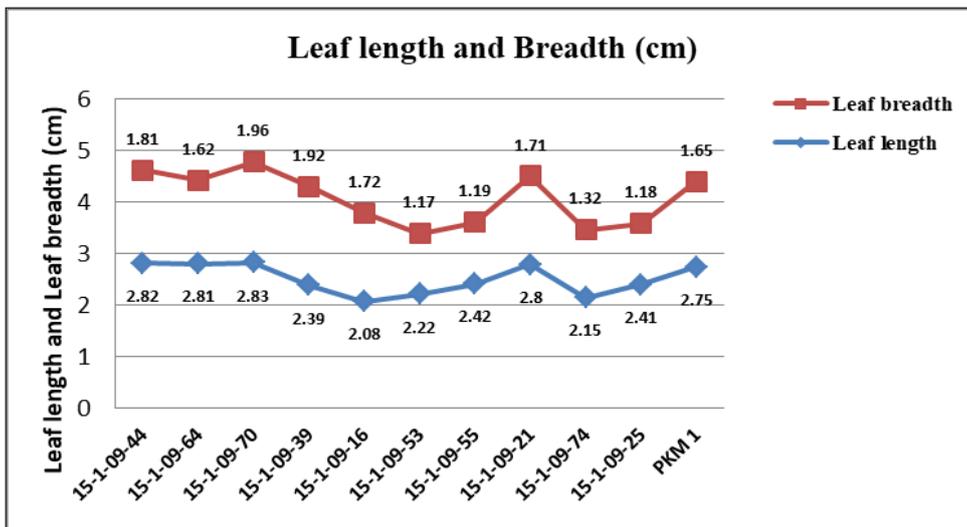


Fig. 1. Performance of mutants on leaf length and breadth.

in leaf length and leaf breadth among the 19 mutant lines of *Amaranthus cruentus* comparing the control that were subjected to gamma irradiation (24).

For fresh weight of the leaf, the mutant 15-1-09-70 recorded the highest of 1022.14 g, followed by 15-1-09-53 (723.4 g) as compared to the control (595.63 g). Similarly, dry leaf weight was the highest in 15-1-09-70 (424.52 g), followed by 15-1-09-53 (238.58 g) in comparison with the PKM 1 (158.72 g) (Fig. 2). Similarly, fresh and dry weight of the moringa leaf was increased in the first generation when gamma irradiation of 40 Gy and 60 Gy was used (25). Also, in *Amaranthus*, leaf dry matter production was increased when treated with different doses of gamma irradiation among which 850 Gy was found to be the better dose (26). The other mutants showed a decreasing trend with the fresh and dry weight of the leaves than the wild type PKM 1. The increase and decrease of performance among the mutants may be due to the direct or indirect effect of biotic and abiotic factors prevailing throughout the cropping period. As there is a difference among each mutant in the given characters, molecular characterization was carried out to identify the genetic variability among them.

Genetic variability with SSR markers

To comprehensively understand the phenotypic variation in the selected lines, it is essential to verify the existence of molecular-level variation. Although various molecular markers are available for analyzing genetic variation across the entire genome, SSR markers are recommended due to their user-friendly nature for breeders (15). This study’s genetic variability analysis using SSR markers revealed that all the ten markers used were polymorphic when comparing ten selected mutant lines (15-1-09-44, 15-1-09-70, 15-1-09-39, 15-1-09-16, 15-1-09-53, 15-1-09-55, 15-1-09-21, 15-1-09-33, 15-1-09-74 and 15-1-09-25) with the wild type, PKM 1. Also, it was reported that these polymorphic markers are linked to specific leaf traits: GenicSSR778 (longer leaf length), GenicSSR796 (leaf length and width), GenicSSR983 (fresh weight), GenicSSR859 (longer leaf length) and GenicSSR890 (leaf morphology) (23, 27). Similarly, genetic characterization of moringa for nutritional characters was done using 9 SSR primers that revealed a strong relationship between nutrition and classification of the genotypes (28). The observed phenotypic variation and polymorphic information on these functional markers demonstrate that the mutant 15-1-09-70 exhibited an increase in leaf length, width, fresh weight and dry weight compared to PKM 1 and it differed from the wild type at the molecular level for the specified

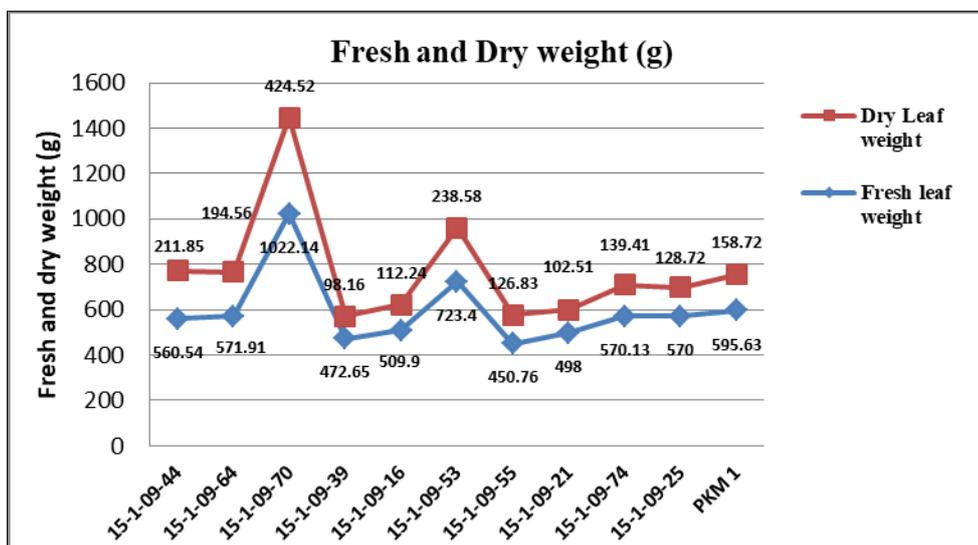


Fig. 2. Performance of mutants on fresh and dry weight.

SSR motifs. Therefore, it was concluded that mutant 15-1-09-70 could be valuable for further screening in successive generations to inherit these desirable leafy traits and as potential donor in various breeding techniques and crop improvement programs. Also, evaluation through subsequent generations and selection can aid in identifying stable performing mutants for leaf yield based on the performance with relation to length, breadth, fresh weight and dry weight of the leaf. This results in high leaf production which has a greater demand in the market that ultimately results in improving the economic status of farmers as well as to combat food and nutrition deficiency.

Cluster analysis of the mutants

Based on the presence and absence of bands with the 10 SSR markers, the 10 selected mutants along with the PKM 1 variety were divided into 2 major clusters. The variety PKM 1 was separated into a single cluster with 6 other mutants (15-1-09-75, 15-1-09-55, 15-1-09-74, 15-1-09-64, 15-1-09-16, 15-1-09-70 and the control PKM 1), whereas the other 4 mutants (15-1-09-44, 15-1-09-53, 15-1-09-21 and 15-1-09-39) fell into a cluster together. Hence, based on genotypic evaluation, the influence of gamma irradiation on the leaf characters can be observed. In-depth analysis revealed further distribution of the members of the clusters, for example, the plants, 15-1-09-44 and 15-1-09-53, were closely related to each other. Similarly, the mutants 15-1-09-55 with 15-1-09-74 and the control PKM 1 with 15-1-09-70 showed a similar trend of relatedness (Fig. 3). In corroboration to this, an earlier study conducted with 32 genotypes of moringa, that were examined using the D² method of variability, revealed that the genotypes CBE MO 13, CBE MO 15, CBE MO 19, CBE MO 28, CBE MO 29 and CBE MO 31 were considered promising with all the necessary qualities for a future breeding program, these genotypes can therefore be further explored (29). Similar to this, in chilli germplasms, genetic diversity was revealed by SSR markers. The study divided the plants into four major clusters based on a similarity matrix utilizing the UPGMA dendrogram (30).

Conclusion

Mutation breeding has gained popularity over the past few years and has been embraced by various nations. With the development of diverse plant breeding techniques, genetics and biotechnological instruments, mutation breeding helps to boost global food and agricultural production, which eventually helps to end world hunger and enhance worldwide nutritional status. Through this study, it was evident that all the mutants are diverse from control in one or the other way. The mutants, 15-1-09-70 and 15-1-09-53, were identified as diverse in leaf-related characteristics; both through morphological and molecular diversity analysis which can be forwarded to the next generation. These mutants have the potential to be released as a variety through further evaluation. However, selfing followed by selection in the next generation can result in stability of its performance. To increase the accuracy of selection in a breeding program, molecular markers that are closely linked to the genes that control the particular traits might

be employed. For highly heritable, marker-assisted selection (MAS) works particularly well. Also, further research in this field could benefit from the investigation of other molecular markers or the integration of genetic information with phenotypic characteristics.

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Authors' contributions

BS carried out the molecular genetic studies and drafted the manuscript. NK, RS AG, GP and RJ designed, corrected and improved the manuscript. WM improved the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest: Authors do not have any conflict of interests to declare.

Ethical issues: None

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