



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**AN EXAMINATION OF OIL PALM FLOWERING : MOLECULAR
BIOLOGY AND ANATOMICAL ANALYSIS**

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By

SHARIFAH SHAHRUL RABIAH BT. SYED ALWEE

**Dissertation Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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IN THE NAME OF ALLAH MOST GRACIOUS MOST MERCIFUL



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iii
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
LIST OF PLATES	xi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xiii
ABSTRACT	xv
ABSTRAK	xvii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW	4
Botany of Oil Palm	4
Flowering Habit of Oil Palm	6
Sexual Determination of Oil Palm Flower	9
Inflorescence Development	10
The Female Flower	10
The Male Flower	11
Hermaphrodite Inflorescence	14
Flower Abnormality	16
Possible Causes of Abnormal Development	18
Somaclonal Variation	19
Habituation	20
Fruit Development	21
Shoot Apex Development	23
Morphology of Inflorescence	26
Morphology of Flowers	28
The Androecium	30

	The Gynoecium	31
	Molecular Biology of Flowering	32
	Floral Induction	33
	Floral Evocation	37
	Flower Development	39
	Meristem Identity Genes	40
	Organ Identity Genes	42
III	MATERIALS AND METHODS	46
	Plant Materials	46
	Basal Media for Oil Palm Shoots Growth	47
	Stock Solutions	48
	M+S Macro	48
	M+S Micro	48
	Y ₃ Vitamins	49
	Isolation of Total Proteins	49
	Protein Quantification	50
	Isoelectric Focusing Gels and Two Dimensional Gel Electrophoresis	51
	Polyacrylamide Gel Electrophoresis	52
	Silver Staining of Polyacrylamide Gels	53
	Comparison of Protein Spots	54
	Histology	54
	Periodic Acid Staining	55
	Scanning Electron Microscopy	55
	Extraction of Total and Poly (A) ⁺ RNA	56
	RNA Isolation Protocol by Schneiderbauer <i>et al.</i> (1991).....	56
	RNA Isolation Protocol by Lopez-Gomez and Gomez-Lim (1992).....	57
	RNA Isolation Protocol by Schultz <i>et al.</i> (1994).....	58
	Preparation of Double Stranded cDNA	61
	Incorporation Assay	63
	Differential Screening	63
	Northern Hybridization	64
	Southern Hybridization	67
	DNA Sequence Analysis	68
	Sequencing Gel Casting	69
IV	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	70
	Changes in Protein Composition in Shoot Apices of Oil Palm During Production of Terminal Inflorescences	70

	Developmental Study of Oil Palm Flowers	84
	Optimization of Total RNA Extraction	109
	Differential Screening for Flower-Specific Genes	109
V	CONCLUSION	134
VI	BIBLIOGRAPHY	138
	BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	149



LIST OF TABLE

Table		Page
1	Results of Various RNA Extraction Protocols	110



LIST OF FIGURES

Figures		Page
1	Female flower of <i>Elaies guineensis</i>	12
2	Female flower with accompanying male flowers	13
3	Male flower of <i>Elaies guineensis</i>	15
4	Nucleotide and amino acid sequence of clone 68	116
5	Isoelectric point prediction plot (A) and hydropathy plot (B) of the predicted protein of clone.....	117
6	The homology region between clone 68 and yeast mitochondrial DNA (YSLMTI06) at about 79% homology.....	118
7	The homology region between the predicted protein of clone 68 and cytochrome P450 (CP5L_CANAP) at about 44% homology.....	120
8	Nucleotide and amino acid sequence of clone 65	122
9	Isoelectric point prediction plot (A) and hydropathy plot(B) of the predicted proteins of clone 65for clone 65	124
10	Predicted nucleic acid sequence of clone 65.....	125
11	Nucleotide and amino acid sequence of clone 70	126
12	Isoelectric point prediction plot (A) and hydropathy plot (B) of the predicted protein of clone 70	128



		Page
13	Predicted amino acid sequence of clone 70.	129
14	Nucleotide sequence and amino acid sequence of clone 72 ...	130
15	Isoelectric point prediction plot (A) and hydropathy plot (B) of the predicted protein of clone 72	131
16	Predicted amino acid sequence of clone 72.....	132



LIST OF PLATES

Plate		Page
1	Protein pattern of non-induced oil palm shoot apex at 1 month old	72
2	Protein pattern in region A of both non-induced shoot apex (A) and BAP-induced shoot apex (B)	73
3	Protein pattern in region B of both non-induced (A) shoot apex and BAP-induced shoot apex (B)	75
4	Protein pattern in region C of both non-induced (A) shoot apex and BAP-induced shoot apex (B)	76
5	Protein pattern in region D of both non-induced (A) shoot apex and BAP-induced shoot apex (B)	77
6	Changes occurring in the shoot apex of BAP-induced cultures at 3 months (A) and 4 months (B) old	80
7	Changes occurring in the shoot apex of non-induced cultures at 3 months (A) and 4 months (B) old	81
8	Inflorescence meristem surrounded by a few bracts (stage 1; frond -28; 1 mm inflorescence length)	86
9	Differentiation of primary axes to form spikelet primordia (stage 2; frond -10; 4 mm inflorescence length)	87
10	Development of bracts around female spikelet primordia (stage 3; frond -2; 1 cm inflorescence length)	88
11	Development of bracts on male spikelet primordia (stage 3, frond 1; 1.5 cm inflorescence length)	89



	Page
12	Emergence of flower primordia in female spikelet (stage 4; frond 1; 2.5 cm inflorescence length) 91
13	Differentiation of first bracteole in female flower (early stage 5; frond 2; 3 cm inflorescence length) 92
14	Young triad showing bracteole I,II, and III carrying male and female flowers in its axis (stage 6; frond 6; 4 cm inflorescence length) 93
15	Carpels on female flower (stage 8; frond 8; 6 cm inflorescence length) 95
16	Papilla on carpel of oil palm flowers 96
17	Papilla-like structures on <i>in vitro</i> terminal flowers of oil palm .. 97
18	Cross section of normal carpels(A) from normal flowers and supplementary carpels on abnormal flowers (B) 98
19	Stamen on male flowers carrying bilobed anther 99
20	Cross section of an anther (A) and longitudinal section of an anther 101
21	Triangular pollen grains of oil palm 102
22	Comparison between normal (A) and abnormal (B) anther 103
23	Tissue specific expression of floral predominant clone transcripts 113
24	Stage specific expression of floral-predominant clone transcripts 114



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAP	benzylaminopurine
2-BE	ethyleneglycolmonobutylether
BSA	bovine serum albumin
cDNA	copy DNA
dATP	2' - deoxy-adenosine-5' - triphosphate
dCTP	2' - deoxy-cytidine-5' - triphosphate
dGTP	2' - deoxy- guanosine-5' -triphosphate
dTTP	thymidine- 5' - triphosphate
DEPC	diethyl pyrocarbonate
D X P	dura X pisifera
2,4-D	2,4-Dichlorophenoxyacetic acid
DTT	dithiothreitol
EDTA	ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid
EGTA	ethylene glycol bis- (β -aminoethyl ether)
HCl	hydrochloric acid
hr	hours
IEF	isoelectric focusing
Jacq.	Jacquin



KCl	potassium chloride
kD	kilodalton
LiCl	lithium chloride
MgCl ₂	magnesium chloride
mRNA	messenger RNA
min	minute (s)
NaCl	sodium chloride
Na ₂ CO ₃	sodium carbonate
NaN ₃	sodium azide
(NH ₄) ₂ SO ₄	ammonium sulfate
ORF	open reading frame
PAGE	polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis
PORIM	Palm Oil Research Institute of Malaysia
pI	isoelectric point
PVP	polyvinylpyrrolidone
PVPP	polypolyvinylpyrrolidone
rpm	revolution per minute
SDS	sodium dodecyl sulfate
SEM	scanning electron microscopy
TEMED	N,N,N',N'-tetramethylethylenediamine
UV	ultraviolet



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Flowering is an important part of oil palm crop production. The ability to control flowering will be economically beneficial to the oil palm industry. Before control can be exerted, factors that influence flowering must be studied at the level of physiology, biochemistry and molecular biology. The morphological aspects of oil palm flower development were examined by light and electron microscopy. In



doing so, oil palm flower development was able to be partially staged for future reference to determine the expression pattern of flower-predominant genes.

Protein analysis was carried out to identify unique proteins that are expressed in the vegetative meristem or the floral meristem. Three proteins were identified, the presence or absence of which could be associated with the conversion of a vegetative meristem into an inflorescence meristem. Histological studies made on the flowers produced by the inflorescence meristem revealed that these flowers were not true flowers. These flower-like structures were not found to have any reproductive structures and only contained bracts. This reflected that *in vitro*, under high cytokinin growth condition, the conversion of inflorescence meristem to a floral meristem is disrupted.

Flower-predominant clones were isolated from an oil palm male flower cDNA library by a differential screening procedure. Four out of 10 floral-predominant clones were characterized. Clone 68 has homology to cytochrome P450 while clone 65, 70 and 72 do not have any significant homology with any known functional genes but their characteristics showed that clones 65 and 70 could be a glycoprotein and clone 72, a protein kinase. However, the functions of these genes in oil palm flowering are still unconfirmed.



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KAJIAN KE ATAS PROSES PENGHASILAN BUNGA POKOK KELAPA SAWIT: BIOLOGI MOLIKUL DAN ANALISA ANATOMI

Oleh

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Pembungaan adalah satu proses yang penting dalam penghasilan tanaman kelapa sawit. Kemampuan untuk mengawal penghasilan bunga dapat memberikan faedah ekonomi yang lebih baik kepada industri kelapa sawit. Walaubagaimanapun, sebelum pembungaan dapat dikawal, faktor yang mempengaruhi pembungaan perlu dikaji dan ini meliputi aspek fisiologi, biokimia dan biologi molikul.



Aspek morfologi dalam penghasilan bunga kelapa sawit dikaji dengan menggunakan mikroskop cahaya dan elektron. Dengan cara ini, penghasilan bunga kelapa sawit dapat diperingkatkan sebagai panduan dalam menentukan corak ekspresi gen-gen pembungaan.

Analisa protein dilakukan untuk mengenalpasti perbezaan protein-protein yang diekspres di dalam meristem vegetatif dan meristem bunga. Tiga protein dapat dikenalpasti yang mempunyai kaitan dengan penukaran meristem vegetatif kepada meristem infloresen. Walaubagaimanapun, hasil kajian anatomi ke atas bunga yang dihasilkan oleh infloresen itu menunjukkan bahawa bunga yang dihasilkan adalah bunga yang tidak lengkap. Bunga-bunga ini didapati tidak mengandungi sistem reproduksi. Ini menunjukkan bahawa dalam keadaan *in vitro* dan pertumbuhan pucuk di dalam media yang mempunyai hormon cytokinin yang tinggi, penukaran meristem infloresen kepada meristem bunga terganggu.

Klon-klon pembungaan telah dipencilkan dari cDNA librari bunga jantan kelapa sawit dengan menggunakan kaedah penyaringan berbeza (differential screening). Empat klon telah dikenalpasti. Klon 68 berkemungkinan mengkodkan cytochrome P450 manakala klon 65, 70 dan 72 tidak mempunyai persamaan dengan sebarang gen berfungsi tetapi sifat-sifat proteinnya menunjukkan bahawa protein-protein bagi klon 65 dan 70 ini mungkin berhubungkait dengan glikoprotein dan protein bagi klon 72 pula mungkin berfungsi sebagai protein kinase.



Walaupun bagaimanapun, fungsi sebenar klon- klon ini di dalam proses pembungaan kelapa sawit masih tidak dapat dikenalpasti.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The palm family is generally recognized as a diverse family of woody monocotyledons. There are about 212 genera and about 2500 species that grow in the tropics and subtropics, many of which provide a variety of food and raw materials. The oil palm particularly, is an important species in world trade as a major economic crop. It also has wide usage in the food and non-food industries. Currently, Malaysia is the largest palm oil producer in the world. The production of palm oil has increased tremendously from 0.1 million tonnes in 1960 to 6 million tonnes in 1990 and is predicted to increase to 8 million tonnes by the year 2000. Due to the increase in demand for palm oil, we are always in search of methods to increase the yield of oil palm. Breeding and molecular biology techniques have been used to facilitate increases in yield of oil palm and many other annual oil crops. One area that has not been looked at thoroughly is the control of flowering in oil palm.

Flowers play an essential part in oil palm crop production. As with oil palm and all other fruit crops, the fruit is the final product, but flowers are an important



introductory step to fruit formation. Flowers and fruits also are an integral part of seed production.

Control of flowering, whether positively, by promoting or negatively, by preventing flowering is an important aspect in the growth of most crops. In oil palm, if flowering could be controlled or manipulated, yield could be improved by stimulating flowering in accordance to environmental factors resulting in the prevention or reduction of floral abortion.

In order to learn which factors influence flowering in oil palm, the physiological background of the action of these factors and the flowering process itself must be studied. This is a much more difficult problem and various scientific disciplines such as biochemistry, physiology and molecular biology are needed to provide a better understanding of flowering biology.

Since the appearance of fruit and flower abnormalities in clonal palms was first brought to attention in 1986, a lot of effort has been placed towards solving this problem. Genetic mutations in the APETALA 3 locus of *Arabidopsis* and DEFICIENS in *Antirrhinum* are found to produce phenotypes similar to the floral abnormality in oil palm. Thus by studying floral homeotic mutations, organ identity genes and flower development of oil palm, the problems of floral abnormalities can be better understood and possibly solved.

The objective of this thesis is to understand oil palm flowering from the aspects of protein analysis, anatomy and molecular biology. The meristematic behavior of the oil palm shoots in relation to floral abnormalities has been studied. Alterations in protein profile during the development of a vegetative meristem into an inflorescence meristem are examined. The anatomy of oil palm flower during its development is also documented to assist in staging of oil palm flowering. Finally, flower-predominant genes were isolated using differential screening methods. This combination of protein analysis, anatomical studies and molecular biology will provide us with the groundwork needed for a more comprehensive study of oil palm flowering.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Botany of Oil Palm

The oil palm, *Elaeis guineensis* Jacq., is classified under the family Palmae in the order Palmales. Based on its anatomy it is grouped with *Cocos*, *Coroza* and other genera under the tribe Coconeae. The name *Elaeis* is derived from the Greek word 'elaion' meaning oil while the specific name *guineensis* shows that it originates from the Guinea Coast.

Elaeis guineensis is a large feather-palm having a solitary columnar stem with short internodes. It has short spines on the leaf base and within the fruit bunch. The leaflets are set irregularly on the leaf thus giving the palm its characteristic appearance.

An inflorescence is initiated in the axil of every leaf but some inflorescences abort prior to emergence. Each inflorescence is a compound spike carried on a stout



peduncle of about 12-18 inches in length. The spikelets are spirally arranged on a central rachis in a similar manner to the arrangements of the leaves. The inflorescence is tightly enclosed by an inner and outer spathe until about a month after it has fully emerged. Six weeks before anthesis, the outer spathe opens and 2-3 weeks later, the inner spathe opens. Both spathes disintegrate as the inflorescence pushes its way through (Corley et al., 1976).

The fruit is a drupe borne on spikelets that are spirally arranged to form a large compact bunch. The pericarp of the fruit is composed of three typical layers, namely the exocarp (external skin), the mesocarp (outer pulp which contains the palm oil) and the endocarp (a hard shell enclosing the kernel). The kernel is packed with kernel oil and other food reserves for the young embryo. The seed consists of an embryo embedded within the kernel that is externally covered by a testa (seed coat). The fruit type can be divided into three forms, dura, pisifera and tenera, according to the shell thickness. The shell thickness of the oil palm fruit is controlled by a single gene (Beirnaert and Vanderweyen, 1941). The homozygote dura (sh^+ , sh^+) has a thick shell while the pisifera (sh^- , sh^-) is shell-less. When a dura crosses with a pisifera, the tenera, a heterozygote with a thin shell surrounded by a ring of fibers in the mesocarp is produced. This results in more oil-bearing mesocarp in the tenera in comparison with the thick-shelled dura fruit.