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Use of Entomopathogenic Fungi in Pest Control

Meenakshi Devi, Surendra Singh Shekhawat and Ishika
Assistant Professor Entomology, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, SGT University, Gurugram
Student of M.Sc. Entomology, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, SGT University, Gurugram

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Entomopathogenic fungi (EPF) are a unique group of fungi that act as natural enemies to insects. They have emerged as an essential tool in integrated pest management (IPM), offering a sustainable and environmentally friendly alternative to chemical pesticides. Entomopathogenic fungi for pest control are gaining attention due to their ability to target specific insect pests while minimizing adverse effects on non-target organisms, human health, and the environment.

What are the Entomopathogenic Fungi?

Entomopathogenic fungi can infect and kill insects or other arthropods. Unlike traditional chemical pesticides, EPF infects the host through contact with the fungal spores. Once the fungal spores attach to the insect's cuticle (outer covering), they germinate and penetrate the cuticle, reaching the hemocoel (body cavity). There, the fungi proliferate, leading to the eventual death of the insect by producing toxins or nutrient depletion.

Some of the most well-known entomopathogenic fungi include *Beauveria bassiana*, *Metarhizium anisopliae*, *Isaria fumosorosea*, and *Lecanicillium lecanii*. These fungi have shown efficacy against various pest insects, including aphids, whiteflies, beetles, grasshoppers, termites, and many others.

Mechanism of Action

The infection process of entomopathogenic fungi typically involves several steps:

1. **Attachment and Germination:** The fungal spores come into contact with the insect's cuticle and adhere to it. Under favorable environmental conditions (humidity, temperature), the spores germinate.
2. **Cuticle Penetration:** The fungus produces enzymes that degrade the cuticle, allowing the germ tube to penetrate the insect’s body.

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3. **Proliferation and Toxin Production:** Once inside, the fungus multiplies and produces toxins that disrupt the host's physiological processes, weaken its immune system, and eventually lead to death.
4. **Sporulation:** After the host's death, the fungus may grow out of the cadaver and produce new spores that can infect other insects, thus perpetuating the infection cycle.

Advantages of Using Entomopathogenic Fungi

1. **Eco-friendly Pest Control:** EPF are biodegradable and have no adverse environmental impact compared to chemical insecticides.
2. **Target Specificity:** EPF tends to be specific to insect species and poses no risk to other beneficial insects, pollinators, humans, animals, or plants.
3. **Reduced Pesticide Resistance:** Unlike chemical pesticides, where pests can develop resistance over time, EPF works by diverse mechanisms, making it harder for pests to develop resistance.
4. **Persistence in the Environment:** EPF can persist in the ecosystem, providing long-term auto pest control.
5. **Compatibility with IPM:** These fungi can be used alongside other biological control agents, cultural practices, and selective chemical controls in an integrated pest management approach.
6. **Importance in Organic Crop Production:** As chemical pesticides are restricted in organic crop production, EPF can be essential in insect pest management.

Application Methods

1. **Spray Application:** The fungal spores are suspended in a liquid and sprayed directly onto the crops where the pest insects are present. This is commonly used for crops such as vegetables, fruits, and ornamental plants.
2. **Soil Application:** For soil-dwelling pests, the fungi can be applied to the soil, infecting the pests through contact.
3. **Seed Treatment:** Coating seeds with EPF before planting protects against soil-borne insect pests.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite their many advantages, the use of entomopathogenic fungi also comes with specific challenges:

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1. **Environmental Sensitivity:** EPF requires specific environmental conditions, such as high humidity and moderate temperatures, to germinate and infect their hosts. These requirements can limit their effectiveness in certain climates.
2. **Slow Kill Rate:** Compared to chemical pesticides, EPF may take several days to kill their host, which may not be suitable for situations requiring immediate pest suppression.
3. **Mass Production and Formulation Issues:** Large-scale production and formulation of EPF into stable, effective products still need improvement.

Case Studies and Success Stories

1. ***Beauveria bassiana* in Control of Aphids and Whiteflies:** *Beauveria bassiana* has effectively reduced aphid and whitefly populations in greenhouse vegetable production. Its use has allowed growers to reduce reliance on chemical pesticides, leading to healthier crops and safer working conditions for farmworkers.

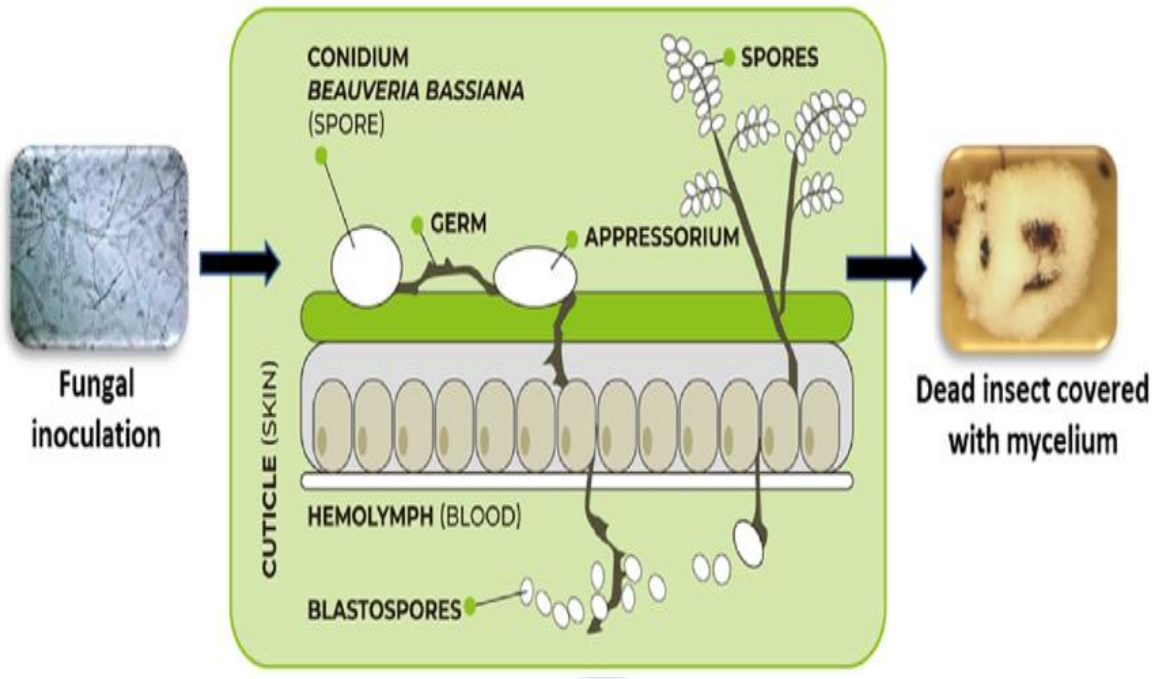

Figure 1: Schematic representation of infection structures of *Beauveria bassiana* (Rachid Sabbahi et al., 2022)

2. ***Metarhizium anisopliae* for Locust and Grasshopper Control:** This fungus has been successfully applied in regions prone to locust plagues. Field trials have effectively reduced locust numbers, providing an eco-friendly alternative to broad-spectrum insecticides.

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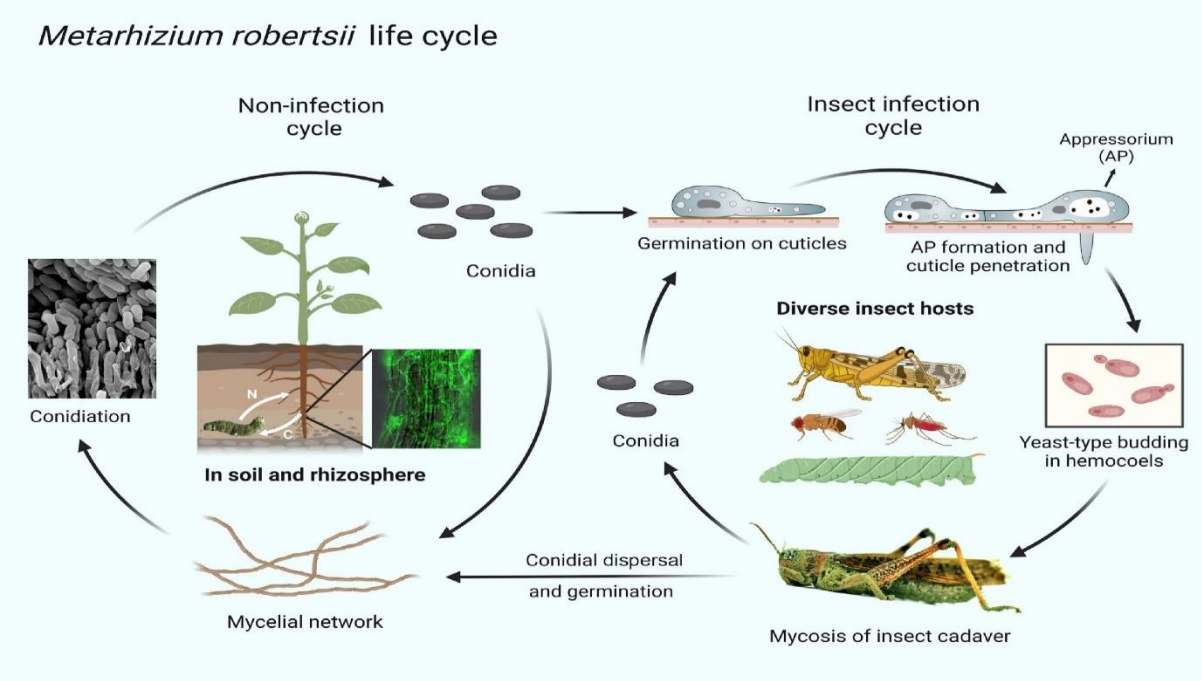

Figure 2. *Metarhizium robertsii* role in controlling insect population (Junmai Shang et al., 2024)

Future Prospects

Research is ongoing to improve the effectiveness of entomopathogenic fungi in pest control. Some areas of focus include:

1. **Genetic Improvement:** Scientists are exploring ways to enhance the virulence of EPF through genetic modification.
2. **Combination with Other Control Methods:** Integrating EPF with other pest control methods, such as pheromones, plant-based insecticides, or microbial insecticides, could improve their efficacy.
3. **Improved Formulations:** Developing formulations that improve the shelf-life, stability, and ease of application of fungal spores is critical for their broader adoption in pest control.

Conclusion

Entomopathogenic fungi offer a promising solution for sustainable pest management. Their unique mode of action, ecological safety, and compatibility with integrated pest management strategies make them valuable tools in modern agriculture. However, optimizing their use and overcoming environmental conditions and challenges with application methods remain crucial for their success. As research and development continue,

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entomopathogenic fungi are likely to play an increasingly important role in reducing the global dependence on chemical pesticides.

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