

Biologists solve plant hormone enigma

Gardeners and farmers have used the plant hormone auxin for decades and now U.S. scientists have found how plants produce and distribute the hormone.

University of California-San Diego researchers say their findings have valuable applications in agriculture.

The study describes the discovery of a whole family of auxin genes, and shows each gene is switched on at a distinct location in the plant. Contrary to the current thinking, the research shows the patterns in which auxin is produced in the plant influence development -- a finding that can be applied to improving crops.

"The auxin field dates back to Charles Darwin, who first reported that plants produced a substance that made them bend toward light," said Yunde Zhao, an assistant professor of biology at UCSD. "But until now, the auxin genes have been elusive. Our discovery of these genes and the locations where auxin is produced in the plant can be applied to agricultural problems, such as how to make seedless fruit or plants with stronger stems."

The research is detailed in the journal *Genes and Development*.

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