

Preface

Throughout the history of Earth, a tight relationship was established between the high availability of oxygen in the atmosphere and the biological population. Oxygen enrichment of the Archean Earth's atmosphere was initiated by cyanobacteria and further boosted as a consequence of the colonization of the planet's surface by photosynthetic and multicellular eukaryotes which developed into land plants (Bendall et al. 2008). Nowadays, oxygen accounts for about one-fifth of our atmosphere and represents an essential element, which sustains the life of most multicellular organisms, including fungi, animals, and plants. Not only oxygen is required as terminal electron acceptor to ensure respiratory energy production via oxidative phosphorylation, but it also acts as primary substrate in a majority of metabolic reactions that produce structural and signaling components throughout all kingdoms of life. Consequently, when oxygen availability is reduced below the levels required to sustain these biological processes, a situation of crisis is generated. This is especially serious for sessile organisms, such as plants, which are limited in their possibility to move towards area where oxygen availability is sufficient.

For plants, the most common case of restriction in oxygen availability is caused by submergence, due to the slower diffusion of gases in water than in air and exacerbated by the competition for oxygen consumption by soil microorganisms, whose anaerobic metabolism in turn leads to the accumulation of phytotoxic metabolites (Bailey-Serres and Voesenek 2008). Plants do not need to be completely submerged to suffer from oxygen deficiency: reduced oxygen levels (hypoxia) or complete absence of oxygen (anoxia) in waterlogged soil is sufficient to put plant's survival at stakes and has dramatic effect on crop yield (Ahmed et al. 2013). The consequent reduction in size and functionality of the root apparatus of a flooded or waterlogged plant reduce water and nutrient transport towards the shoot. The high probability that every plant will experience restriction in oxygen availability at sometimes throughout its lifespan suggested the concept that these organisms must have evolved efficient strategies to cope with this situation orchestrated by perception and signaling mechanism that integrated them into developmental and growth programs (Bailey-Serres et al. 2012). Additionally, the notion

that oxygen availability is not equal to all plant cell types and certain tissues or organs actually develop at oxygen levels lower than those available in the atmosphere put this element in the perspective of a developmental signal.

Initially, research on plant anaerobiosis developed in the fields of biochemistry, due to its direct effect on primary metabolism, and ecology, as broad differences in tolerance to flooding were traditionally known in wild and cultivated species. Biochemical studies first focused on the metabolic switch from the aerobic respiration to fermentative pathways (reviewed in Davies 1980), but later explored the global adjustment and re-routing of primary metabolic reactions opening the debate over an adaptation of respiratory rates to hypoxia. On the other hand, ecophysiological approaches aimed at the identification and characterization of the strategies adopted by different plant species to restricted oxygen availability throughout evolution (Jackson and Colmer 2005). The characterization of the molecular elements, involved in low oxygen sensing and signaling, initiated at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the current century (Hoeren et al. 1998; Klok et al. 2002) but, in comparison with other abiotic stresses such as heat, cold, and high salinity, knowledge in this field lagged behind. Nevertheless at the descriptive level, very detailed overviews of the transcriptomic adjustment to oxygen deprivation were produced, including time-, oxygen-concentration-, and cell type-specific-resolved analyses (Mustroph et al. 2009; Mustroph et al. 2010). This generated a deep knowledge related to the dynamics of the anaerobic response and greatly contributed to the identification of general and tissue-specific responses. In the last 10 years, two main breakthrough set milestones in the applied and theoretic knowledge with respect to the plant adaptation to low oxygen availability, respectively. First, a joint team of agronomists, physiologists, and molecular biologists revealed the genetic basis for submergence tolerance in wild rice varieties and described for the first time a quiescent metabolic adaptation aimed at saving energy and resources for short-lasting floods (Xu et al. 2006). An opposite strategy was shown a couple of years later to occur in deep-water rice varieties (Hattori et al. 2009). More recently, studies conducted in *Arabidopsis* converged to the identification of an oxygen-dependent pathway for the degradation of transcription factors that orchestrate the core of the anaerobic response in plants (Gibbs et al. 2011; Licausi et al. 2011). Not surprisingly, these three studies hit on the same class of transcription factors, suggesting that species-specific modes of action to respond to low-oxygen stress evolved from the same basic genetic elements. Concomitantly, the gaseous phytohormone ethylene emerged as a key-regulator of the response to flooding and its interaction with other growth regulators such as gibberellins, auxin, and abscisic acid was shown to shape plant growth (Bailey-Serres and Voesenek 2008).

With this book, we bring together the different fields of research which deal with low oxygen conditions in plants and algae to provide an overview of the deep interconnection between their achievements. The monograph consists of seven sections, starting from the mechanisms adopted by plant cells to *perceive oxygen availability and initiate the signaling cascade* that leads to the activation of conserved and species-specific adaptive responses. In this section, both direct

oxygen sensing (Kosmacz and Weits, Chap. 1) and biochemical parameters that are affected as consequence of decreased oxygen availability are discussed, including the level of reactive oxygen species (Blokina et al., Chap. 2), nitric oxide (Igamberdiev et al., Chap. 3), and pH (Ishizawa, Chap. 4). The *molecular response of plants to hypoxia* is presented in the following section, with a focus at the transcriptional (Giuntoli and Perata, Chap. 5) and the posttranscriptional (Sorenson and Bailey-Serres, Chap. 6) level with an additional chapter dedicated to the hormonal interplay that integrate the adaption to oxygen deficiency into growth and developmental programs (Steffens and Sauter, Chap. 7). The third section of this book is dedicated to the *metabolic adaptations* that take place as consequence of a decrease in the oxygen—and thus energy—availability. This section is not limited to higher plants but takes into consideration also green algae whose anaerobic metabolism is of potential economic interest, such as *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii* (Yang et al., Chap. 8). The role of alternative energy storage units, such as PPi, is discussed by Mustroph et al. (Chap. 9) while the effect of changing oxygen availability on respiratory energy production is described by Paepke et al. (Chap. 10). Oxygen-dependent effect on nitrogen and amino acid metabolism is reviewed by Limami (Chap. 11) and Geigenberger (Chap. 12) describes storage metabolism under oxygen limitations. Most of the molecular and metabolic changes described in the previous sections are ultimately aimed at sustaining prolonged conditions of hypoxia, which is also achieved via *morphological adaptations* that ameliorate oxygen supply and transport within the plant tissues (Armstrong and Armstrong, Chap. 14), namely the formation of aerenchyma (Takahashi et al., Chap. 13) and the production of adventitious roots (Sauter and Steffens, Chap. 15). Species-specific strategies which have been developed by plants to maintain photosynthetic activity under water (Pedersen and Colmer, Chap. 16) and cope with flooding conditions (van Veen et al., Chap. 17) are discussed in a specific section dedicated to the *ecophysiological aspects* of the response to low oxygen. Furthermore, the occurrence and impact of low oxygen responses in agricultural practice are discussed taking into consideration the difficulty of oxygen diffusion into bulky fruits (Nicolai et al., Chap. 18), the oxygen supply in artificial substrates used in horticulture (Wessel et al., Chap. 19), and presenting the effect of herbicides that mimic the hypoxic response in plants (Zabalza and Royuela, Chap. 20). Our book concludes with a review about the state-of-the-art techniques used in the past *to measure oxygen concentrations in vivo* and the novel molecular strategies that are being developed to do so in the least intrusive way (Ast and Draaijer, Chap. 21).

We expect that the detailed survey about the various aspects of low-oxygen stress in plants as it is discussed in this monograph will not just contribute to our understanding of the adaptation of plant to low oxygen stress but also extend its potential to the improvement of crops against the damage caused by flooding. Even more so, we hope it will pave the way towards new discoveries that are expected to further boost our knowledge in this field in the next years.

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