

**GENETIC DIVERSITY OF *RHODIOLA* sp. IN ALTAI AS ASSESSED  
BY INTRON POLYMORPHISM MARKERS****Tagimanova D.<sup>1</sup>, Khapilina O.<sup>1</sup>, Amenov A.<sup>1</sup>, Danilova A.<sup>2</sup>, Kalendar R.<sup>1</sup>**<sup>1</sup>*National Center for Biotechnology  
Korgalzhyn hwy, 13/5 Astana, Kazakhstan*<sup>2</sup>*Altai Botanical Garden, Ridder, Kazakhstan  
tagds@mail.ru***ABSTRACT**

Roseroot (*Rhodiola rosea* L.) is a widely used medicinal herb in Russia, Scandinavia, and China. We used intron polymorphism markers for several genes families with high levels of polymorphism to investigate 32 accessions. In addition, we collected plants from 2 separate natural populations in the Altai region (West Altai and South Altai) of Kazakhstan. Universal PCR primer pairs were based on sequenced genes of related *Rhodiola* species. The intron polymorphism markers were used to assess genetic diversity using the GenAlex 6.5 program. The discriminatory potential of the selected markers was sufficient to determine the intrapopulation variability of *Rhodiola*. Observed heterozygosity at the loci averaged 0.235, compared to the expected 0.249. A dendrogram based on genetic distances was calculated from the results and confirmed that the two populations were genetically diverse. An analysis of molecular variance indicated that species level genetic diversity was relatively high ( $p = 70\%$ ) and an analysis using Shannon's index showed that within and between genetic diversity in roseroot was approximately equal. Nei's genetic distance and unweighted pair-group method with arithmetic averages cluster analysis showed that the two populations formed three major clusters. Understanding the genetic structure of *R. rosea* L. will improve the conservation and management of this endangered species.

**Keywords:** Genetic diversity, intron-length polymorphism, *Rhodiola rosea*, roseroot

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**INTRODUCTION**

Roseroot (*Rhodiola rosea* L.) (*Crassulaceae*) is used extensively in Russia, Scandinavia and China as medicinal herb. Siberian people used *R. rosea* for centuries to deal with the cold climate and stressful life. *Rhodiola* species were used as adaptogens and have been widely accepted as an herb that can reinforce human resistance to stress or fatigue and promote longevity. Chinese people referred to *Rhodiola* species as Hongjingtian and regularly used it as adaptogens, hemostatics, and tonics in conventional Tibetan medicines for thousands of years. *R. rosea* L. type species is a popular conventional medicinal plant in east Europe and Asia, and is known for exciting nervous system, fighting depression, improving work performance, decreasing fatigue, and preventing high-altitude sickness. Therefore, many species of this genus are critically endangered in Asia due to excessive and indiscriminate exploitation. In spite of their wide use and medicinal significance, the identification of closely related species of *Rhodiola* is very hard because of their morphological similarity.

The underground part of *Rhodiola* has about one hundred forty components. The herb is spread throughout the Altai, Northern Mongolia, Sayan mountains. The species occurs in the Alpine belt of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the altitude limit of 1800-2300 m above sea stage at the ridges of the Kazakh Altai. The different growth conditions caused the formation of different forms. *Rhodiola* plants strongly vary both in phytochemical and morphological indices. Geographical and genetic isolation of *Rhodiola* populations led to high morphological differentiation in species, and thus requires study of this species using latest molecular genetic markers [1, 2].

To study genetic diversity, we used molecular markers of polymorphic genes that control biochemical and physiological processes in plant. Mutations can be located in the coding sequence - exon and cause change in the amino acid composition of the proteins, as well as in the regulatory elements, thereby affecting gene transcription.

Introns containing functional elements, such as amplifiers and suppressors, regulate alternative splicing, trans-splicing and other regulatory processes. They are the most variable regions of genes and have higher level of polymorphism than exons, since selective pressure is higher in exons. This can be used to study phylogenetic relationships and population diversity [3-5]

Exon-primed intron-crossing' (EPIC-PCR) (Palumbi and Baker 1994) is based on development of primers that are selected to anneal to highly conserved regions of the exons and the technique is highly favored in genetic study of plants and animals. For instance, this technique was used to study conserved regions within eukaryotic 18S and 28S ribosomal genes and prokaryotic 16S and 23S ribosomal genes, for amplification of variable intergenic regions known as internal transcribed spacers (ITS), containing 5.8S ribosomal gene[6].

EPIC has a number of advantages in the evolution study of populations. Firstly, universal primers of EPIC, complementary to exon regions can be applied across a broad taxonomic range. Secondly, homology of EPIC-amplified sequences can be easily defined by comparing either their exon or intron portion depending on the genetic distance between the taxons. Lastly, exonic and intronic fragments can help in the simultaneous studies of genetic variety at intraspecific and interspecific levels [7-10]. An additional benefit of EPIC is that it avoids development of species-by-species development of DNA markers.

Previously, researches were focused on the study of population structure and genetic diversity of cultivated populations from different producing regions of China. There were no studies focusing on locality-level identification of *R. rosea* L.

In this research, our aim was to study genetic relationships amongst *Rhodiola* sp. growing in different locations of Altai, by using intron polymorphism markers of several genes.

To conduct genetic analysis of *Rhodiola* sp. polymorphism following gene families were studied: eukaryotic translation initiation factor 4e, superoxide dismutase, H-ATPase and auxin response factors. These gene families were selected due to their key roles in regulating physiological processes and adapting plants to stressful environmental factors. These genes should be able to detect the high adaptability of *Rhodiola* plants to significant amplitude of temperatures during the day and high solar radiation. Population's adaptability depends on the magnitude of the genetic polymorphism of the genes that regulate the physiological processes controlling response to stress conditions.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Plant materials and DNA isolation

A total of 27 samples of *Rhodiola*

sp. were collected from three geographically distinct populations in the territory of Kazakhstan's Altai.

Total genomic DNA was extracted from herbarium specimens or green leaves using acid CTAB buffer following established protocols (<http://primerdigital.com/dna.html>) with RNase A treatment. The DNA samples were diluted in 1×TE buffer and the DNA quality was checked electrophoretically and spectrophotometrically with a Nanodrop (ThermoFisher Scientific Inc.). DNA quality was determined by agarose gel electrophoresis. The prepared DNA samples were stored at -20°C for further analysis.

### Design of EPIC primers

PCR primers were designed using genomic sequences for gene families: H-ATPase (ATPase, H+/K+ exchanging, alpha polypeptide) and ARF6 (Auxin Response Factor 6) retrieved from the NCBI database (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/nucleotide/>) and Ensemble Plants (<http://plants.ensembl.org>) (table 1).

DNA multiple sequence alignments of the gene sequences identified regions of DNA conservation within exons, as well as variability within intronic regions. These sequence alignments were used in conjunction with the program, Multalin [11] and Muscle (<http://www.ebi.ac.uk/Tools/msa/muscle/>).

Specific and conservative primer design was performed using [12-14]. It should be noted that the exonic regions chosen for primer annealing show high levels of conservation not only for *Rhodiola* sp., but also for more dicot plants species, thus demonstrating the flexibility of EPIC for plant molecular studies.

**Table 1.** Nucleotide sequences of primers used in this study

ID	Sequence	Tm, °C	CG (%)	Primer location
H-ATPase (ATPase, H+/K+ exchanging, alpha polypeptide) (XM_013610133, 382bp)				
5182	TGTAAAGAGACTCCAGGAT	48.2	29.9	1716→1734
5183	AGGAGATGGCTTTACTCT	48.0	31.9	2080←2097
ARF6 (Auxin Response Factor 6) (XM_011009313)				
5175	AYTTYCCACARGGYCACAGTGARCA	60.7	50.0	1065→1089
5176	TCACAYTGCGNTCAGTNAAGGTT	59.2	47.9	1922→1945
5177	GTCATCTGNGCRTANACTTCATCNGTCTC	60.9	48.3	1199←1227
5178	GAAGATRTGYCTRAAYTTCCATTTCRTTAYCATG	58.4	36.4	1451←1483

5179	GTCAACAATAACAAGCTGCCAGCCTGATCT	62.7	46.7	3353←3382
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### PCR amplification

The PCR was performed in a 20 µl reaction mixture containing 20 ng DNA, 1x Phire buffer, 0.3µM each primer, 0.2 mM each dNTP and 0.2 U Phire Hot Start II DNA Polymerase (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The amplification was performed in the T100 Thermal Cycler (Bio-Rad). The PCR reaction program consisted of 1 cycle at 98°C, 2 min; 30 cycles of 98°C for 10 secs, 60°C for 20 secs, 72°C for 2 min; 72°C for 5 min.

Each primer or primers combinations was tested in PCR reactions using a genomic DNA mixture composed of equal amounts from all the accessions. The PCR products were separated by electrophoresis at 70 V for 8 hours in a 1.3% agarose gel (RESolute Wide Range, BIOzym) with 1×TBE electrophoresis buffer. Gels were stained with EtBr and scanned using a Molecular Imager PharosFX™ Plus System (Bio-Rad) with a resolution of 50 µm.

### Intron markers analyses

From the PCR profiles, all distinct bands were scored as present (1) or absent (0) at each band position for each primer in the 32 samples. Each PCR band was treated as a single locus. The presence or absence of a fragment of a given length was recorded in binary code. The sets that contained missing values were removed from the raw scored data sets. The gels were scored for the presence and absence of bands totaling 62 polymorphic bands for the samples. Based on the primary data, the level of genetic diversity [15] was determined using the Arlequin software. The primary genetic data were bootstrapped with SEQBOOT, after which the pairwise genetic distances were calculated using GENDIST (<http://www.bablok.de/gendist/>), both programs are from the PHYLIP software package (<http://evolution.gs.washington.edu/phylip.html>). The ability of intron markers to reveal genetic relationships among all *R. rosea* L. accessions was evaluated phylogenetically by Neighbor-Joining (NJ) [16]. An algorithm was constructed using PAUP software. Support for the tree was determined by performing one thousand bootstrap operations on the data set generated by distance analysis. To study the partition of intron markers genetic variation to among-and within-population variance components, an analysis of molecular variance (AMOVA) was conducted with the program GenAlex 6.5 [17] and FAMD programs [18]. The number of permutations was set at 999 for AMOVA for a test of significance of the genetic distance among groups.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *PCR amplification of the genes of the plasma membrane family H-ATPase (Nydrogen potassium ATPase) and the family of transcription factors of the auxin response 6 (ARF6) Rhodiola sp. by the EPIC method*

The search for markers revealing polymorphism in introns is an urgent task when studying genetic and geographical diversity and identifying population variability. Various marker systems are used to detect genetic polymorphism, the most commonly used are RAPD, ISSR and AFLP, SSR methods [19-22]. However, works on the use of markers detecting polymorphism in introns are not many. Intron regions of genes have a high level of polymorphism in comparison with exons and this allows using their polymorphism to reveal phylogenetic relationships and population diversity. Studies on the genetic diversity of natural populations of *Rhodiola sp.* have not been carried out although the distribution range of this species is quite wide: significant populations of *Rhodiola* have been identified in Altai, East Kazakhstan, and in the foothills of Altai.

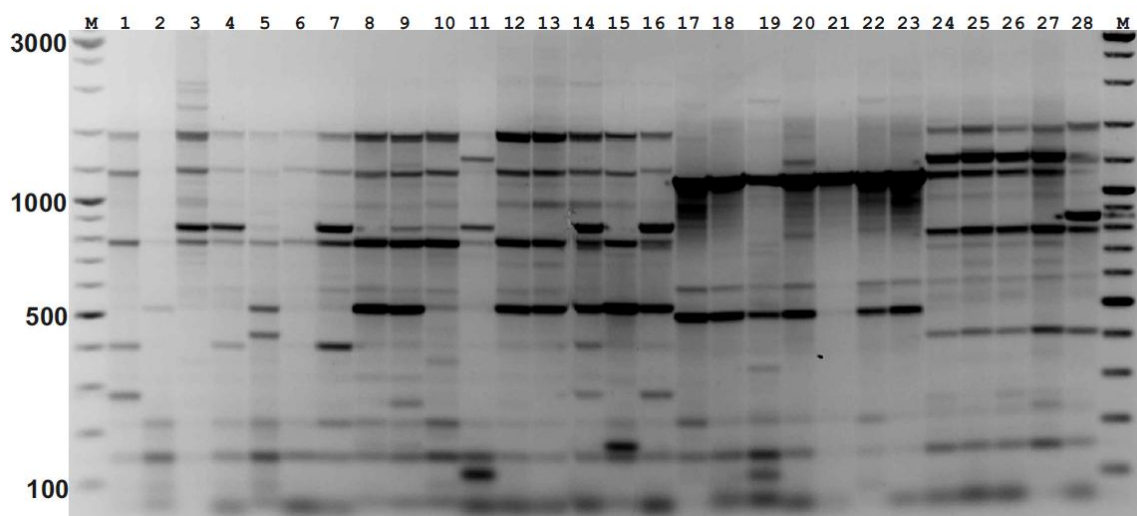
The design of PCR primers for the study of plasma membrane genes and transcription factor 6 of the auxin response was carried out on the basis of the complete nucleotide sequences of the H-ATPase and ARFs genes obtained from the Ensemble Plants database (<http://plants.ensembl.org>). Based on the obtained data, primer design was carried out using the FastPCR software and "universal" EPIC primers were designed which were used to identify polymorphic alleles of the plasma membrane genes and detect the genes of the transcription factors of the auxin response.

PCR with using the designed primers provided the appearance of the corresponding products of amplification of plasma membrane genome regions and transcription factors of auxin response in the explored representatives of the Kazakhstani populations of *Rhodiola*. PCR primers to the H-ATPase and ARF6 genes revealed specific amplification products in all of the studied *Rhodiola* species.

During amplification with primers to H-ATPase genes, PCR products measuring approximately 200-1500 bp were obtained, which corresponds to the expected results (figure 1) The PCR fragments generated with the primers to the gene of the transcription factors of the auxin response of ARF6 had the expected size of 400-1000 bp, which also indicates the specificity of these primers.

The amplification profile data obtained using the primers was evaluated using fingerprinting techniques. The level of detectable polymorphism for the H-ATPase gene using primer pairs 5182 and 5183 ranged from 45 to 67%. A high level of polymorphism of the H-ATPase gene illustrates a high adaptive ability of *Rhodiola*

plants, representing Kazakhstani populations. The variety of alleles of this gene, represented in the populations of Kazakhstan, conditioned by the existence of *Rhodiarosea* under extreme conditions.



1-16– samples of plants of the species *Rhodiarosea* (14-SA1, 16-SA2), 17-23– samples of plants of the species *Rhodiolaalgida*, 24-28– samples of plants of the species *Rhodiolaquadrafita*, M –Thermo Scientific GeneRuler DNA Ladder Mix (100-10,000 bp)

**Fig. 1.** Results of DNA amplification of rodiola populations with primers 5182-5183 to the H-ATPase gene

The polymorphism level was 67% when using the combination of primers 5176 and 5177 to the gene families of the transcription factors of the auxin response (ARF6). Comparative analysis of the amplification spectra with the above primers for the gene families of the plasma membrane of H-ATPase and the gene family of the auxin response of ARFs revealed that *Rhodiolaalgida* and *Rhodiolaquadrafita* species, living under favorable water-temperature conditions on soils with a high humus content (high humidity soils, temperature regime) are distinguished by a smaller variety of alleles of these genes in comparison with samples of *Rhodiarosea* plants.

Allelic variants and frequency of their occurrence are specific for each population of *Rhodiola*. Analysis of allelic diversity within the *Rhodiarosea* species revealed that SA-1 and SA-2 populations from the southern Altai have the greatest variability of alleles compared to the populations of the western Altai. We assume that this explains the possibility of the existence of individuals of this population at an altitude of 2140-2300 m above the sea level, in conditions of extreme habitat.

To determine the discriminatory potential, the developed main criteria for genetic variability, genetic distances and similarities in Neu, an analysis of the molecular dispersion of AMOVA was carried out. An analysis of the genetic diversity of the *Rhodiola* populations was carried out using the GenAlEX program. Parameters of genetic diversity are presented in table 2.

**Table 2.** The main indicators of the genetic diversity of *Rhodiola* populations

<i>Rhodiola</i> species	Na	Ne	I	He	uHE	PIC	%, polymorphism
<i>Rhodiarosea</i>	1,6	1,481	0,412	0,277	0,285	0,8244	80
<i>Rhodiolaaldiga</i>	1,4	1,265	0,267	0,166	0,179	0,8689	60
<i>Rhodiolaquadrafita</i>	1,2	1,501	0,374	0,263	0,283	0,9014	67
Total	1,4	1,416	0,351	0,235	0,249	0,8649	68

Na – observed number of alleles; Ne – effective number of alleles; I – Shannon’s Information index; He– Expected Heterozygosity, uHE– Unbiased Expected Heterozygosity, P – percentage of polymorphic loci

Comparative analysis of populations showed that each of the studied populations of *Rhodiola* is characterized by some degree of uniqueness in the number of alleles. Analysis of the genetic variability of the Kazakh populations of *Rhodiola* showed that the number of alleles per locus varied from 1.2 in the *Rhodiolaquadrafita* population to 1.6 in the *Rhodiarosea* population.

The heterozygosity index is the most common measure of genetic variability in populations. The *Rhodiarosea* population had the highest observed heterozygosity He (0.277), while in the

*Rhodiolaaldiga* population was 0.166. The values of the expected heterozygosity of uHE (estimation of the level of genetic variability in the population) ranged from 0.179 in plants of the *Rhodiolaaldiga* population to 0.285 in the *Rhodiolarosea* population.

The level of genetic variability between the populations studied was determined by calculating the genetic distances of Nei (table 3).

**Table 3.** The matrix of genetic distances, constructed by the method of genetic distance by Nei

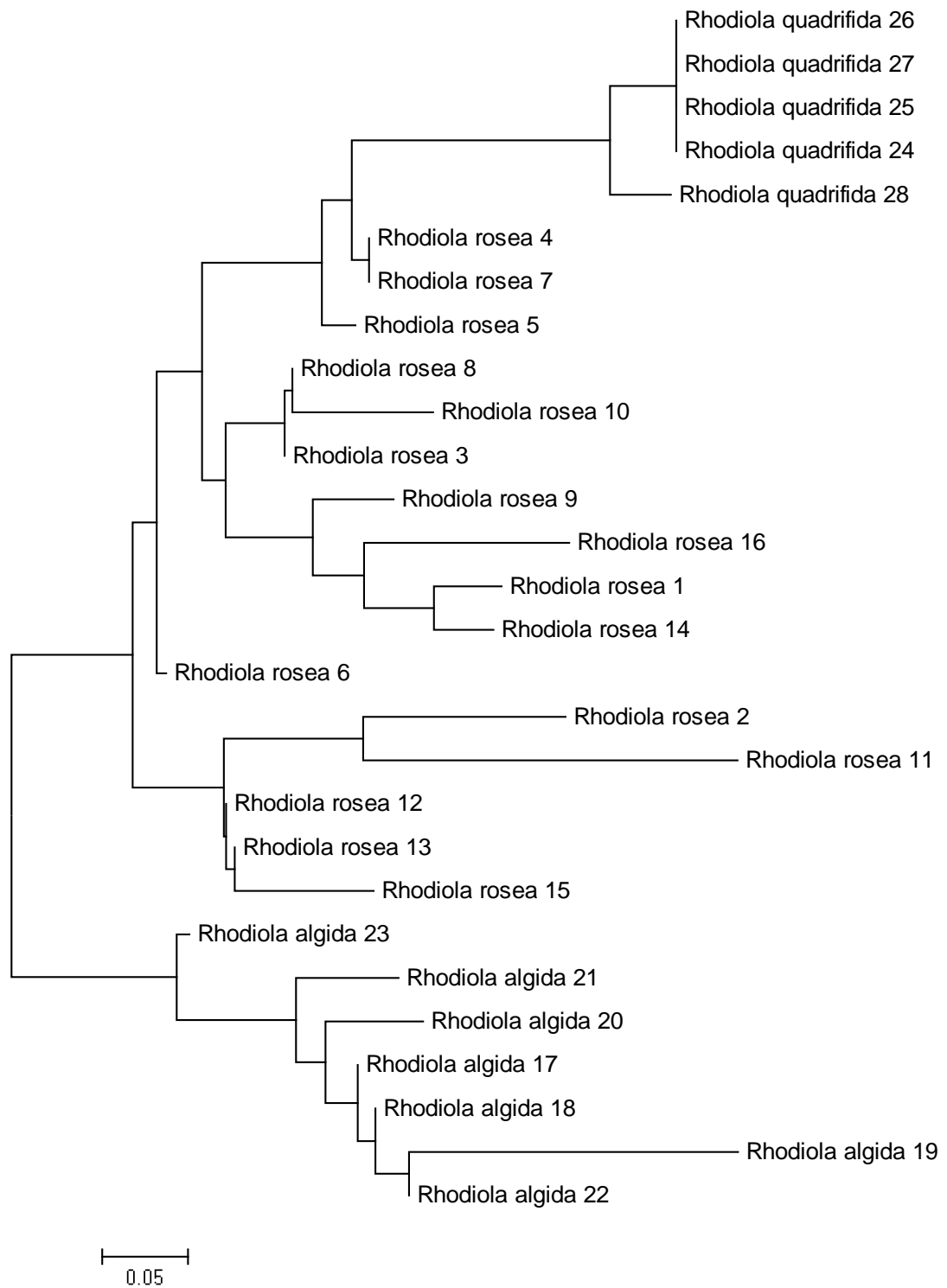
Populations	<i>Rhodiolaquadrafita</i>	<i>Rhodiolaaldiga</i>	<i>Rhodiolarosea</i>
<i>Rhodiolaquadrafita</i>	0,000		
<i>Rhodiolaaldiga</i>	0,098	0,000	
<i>Rhodiolarosea</i>	0,053	0,120	0,000

The lowest genetic distance was found by the populations of *Rhodiolaaldiga* and *Rhodiolarosea* (0.120), the largest - between the *Rhodiolaquadrafita* and *Rhodiolaaldiga* population (0,098).

To assess the interpopulation diversity of *Rhodiola*, the Shannon Information Index was used. The Shannon diversity index expresses the complexity of the population structure and makes it possible to estimate the wealth of the population under study, that is, to determine the number of species and the uniformity of their distribution.

The greatest values of polymorphism and Shannon index (I) were observed in the *Rhodiolarosea* population – 0,412, which lives in extreme natural conditions. Analysis of genetic diversity revealed that the *Rhodiolaaldiga* population living in a favorable water-temperature regime is less diverse compared to samples of *Rhodiolarosea* plants growing under more severe conditions.

A dendrogram constructed on the basis of data was divided into three clusters (figure 2). The dendrogram constructed from the results of cluster analysis breaks up the population into 3 main clusters, with the maximum genetic distance being observed between the populations of *Rhodiolaquadrafita* and the *Rhodiolaaldiga* population, which is confirmed by an estimate of the genetic distances of Nei.



**Fig. 2.** Neighbor-joining dendrogram of showing the genetic relationships among 26 accessions of *Rhodiola* based on H-ATPase intronic markers analysis

AMOVA (molecular dispersion assay) analysis was performed (table 4) to assess intra- and interspecific variability. Advantages and differences AMOVA for the analysis of genetic data from the classical analysis of variance (ANOVA) are that in the analysis of molecular dispersion, different evolutionary models can be used without modifying the basic structure of the analysis. Analysis of the molecular variability of AMOVA demonstrated significant differences within populations (70%) and slightly less between populations (30%).

**Table 4.** The results of the analysis of molecular variability (AMOVA) of *Rhodiola* populations

Source	df	SS	MS	Est. Var.	%
Among Pops	2	19,875	9,938	0,849	30
Within Pops	29	56,500	1,948	1,948	70
Total	31	76,375		2,798	100

Analysis of the genetic diversity of the Kazakhstan *Rhodiola* populations using the primers developed to us for the H-ATPase and ARFs gene showed that the level of differentiation between the studied populations was rather high, the most part of the identified genetic diversity is in the interspecies component (70%), which can be explained by the range of distribution of the individuals within populations, the presence in the population of individuals of different ages, the specific nature of the location of populations within the habitat and the mosaic distribution suitable for the growth areas.

The carried out analysis of population diversity shows that conservative PCR primers we developed allow to obtain unique, well reproducible spectra of amplification products convenient for studying the interspecies and interpopulation polymorphism of *Rhodiola* and confirms our assumption that these gene families may be used as a new type of molecular genetic markers.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the studies showed that the EPIC (exon-primed intron-crossing) PCR amplification method, in which primers complementary to the terminal regions of the gene exons, can be used to search for new types of highly informative markers. The primers developed for the gene family of the plasma membrane of H-ATPase and the family of the auxin response of ARF6 are universal for the detection of alleles of these genes in various *Rhodiola* species. Variable regions of intron genes can be used as a new type of molecular markers, due to high efficiency for interpopulation clustering, in studying genetic diversity and searching for new taxonomic units.

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## АЛТАЙДАҒЫ АЛТЫН ТАМЫРДЫҢ (*RHODIOLA SP.*) ГЕНЕТИКАЛЫҚ ТҮРЛІЛІГІН ИНТРОН ПОЛИМОРФИЗМІН АНЫҚТАЙТЫН МАРКЕРЛЕР НЕГІЗІНДЕ БАҒАЛАУ

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### ТҮЙІН

*Roseroot* (*Rhodiolarosea L.*) Қытай, Скандинавия, Ресейде кең қолданылатын дәрілік өсімдіктердің бірі болып табылады. Бірнеше гендер тұқымдастары үшін интрон полиморфизмін анықтайтын маркерлермен ПТР амплификациясы көмегімен біз 32 өсімдік үлгісін зерттедік. Өсімдіктер Алтай территориясында кездесетін (Батыс Алтай, Оңтүстік Алтай) 3 түрлі табиғи популяциялардан алынды. Біз *Rhodiola sp. Dicots.* қатысты секвенирленген гендердің белгілі бір аймақтарына бағытталған эмбебап ПТР праймерлерін әзірледік. Әзірленген интрон полиморфизмін анықтайтын маркерлер қызғылт родиоланың генетикалық түрлілігін анықтау үшін пайдаланылды. Генетикалық түрлілікті анықтау бойынша талдау жұмысы GenAlex 6.5 бағдарламасы арқылы жүргізілді. Нәтижесінде, әзірленген маркерлердің дискриминационды потенциалы семізот популяцияларының түршілік өзгерістерін анықтау үшін едәуір ақпаратты болатыны анықталды. Бақыланатын гетерозиготтылық орташа 0.235, ал күтілетін 0.249 құрады. Алынған зерттеу нәтижелері бойынша құрылған дендрограмма популяциялар арасында айырмашылықтардың барын дәлелдейді, неғұрлым олар бір-бірінен алыс болса, соғұрлым олардың арасындағы генетикалық дистанция жоғары болады.

Молекулярлық дисперсияны талдауы (AMOVA) генетикалық түрлілік деңгейінің салыстырмалы түрде жоғары болғанын ( $p=70\%$ ), ал Шеннон индексі қызғылт семізоттың популяциялар арасындағы және популяциялар ішіндегі генетикалық түрліліктің біршама



айырмашылықтары бар екенін көрсетті. Генетикалық арақашықтықтарды Ней бойынша талдау мен кластерлі талдау нәтижелері (UPGMA) қызғылт семізоттың қазақстандық популяцияларының 3 негізгі кластерге бөлінетінін көрсетті. *R. Rosea L.* популяциясының генетикалық құрылымын зерттеу мен түсіну осы түрді сақтап қалуға септігін тигізеді.

**Негізгі сөздер:** генетикалық түрлілік, интронды полиморфизм, *Rhodiola rosea*, *roseroot*.