Introduction

The health benefits associated with the availability of carotenoids in the human diet are becoming increasingly apparent. Carotenoids cannot be synthesised by vertebrates and therefore need to be provided via dietary intake. There would be an undoubted benefit to health therefore if the carotenoid content and balance could be improved in a staple food such as potato. Tuber flesh colour can range from white through to orange and is a direct consequence of the presence of carotenoids. The molecular basis for this wide variation in tuber carotenoid content is not understood. The aim of this study is to compare carotenogenesis in white, yellow and orange-fleshed potato germplasm in order to reveal factors affecting carotenoid levels. This knowledge will then be used to identify possible targets for a transgenic approach.

Results

Comparison of carotenoid profiles during tuber development and storage

The levels of carotenoids during tuber development and storage were compared in a high carotenoid accumulating S. phurea accession (DB375/1) with two S. tuberosum cultivars (Pentland Javelin and Desiree) that accumulate lower levels of tuber carotenoid. In S. phurea tubers at maturity the major carotenoids were zeaxanthin, antheraxanthin and violaxanthin. Following 9 months storage at 4°C the levels of zeaxanthin and antheraxanthin decreased whereas the level of lutein increased however, overall there was only a small decrease in total carotenoid content.

Biosynthetic gene expression profiling

The transcript levels of the genes encoding carotenogenic enzymes have been profiled in a range of germplasm during tuber development. Significant differences in the expression profiles were detected; suggesting that transcriptional control or mRNA stability gives rise to the large variation in tuber carotenoid content. Surprisingly, an inverse relationship between zeaxanthin epoxidase transcript level and total tuber carotenoid content was detected.

Creation of constructs for plant transformation

Partial cDNAs of the genes involved in carotenoid biosynthesis were cloned from S. phurea DB375/1 tuber cDNA by RT-PCR using primers designed to conserve regions of publicly available sequences. These fragments were used as probes in gene expression studies. Lycopene-β-cyclase (β-cyc) and lycopene-β-cyclase (β-cyc) clones were used in the assembly of antisense constructs. An algal (Haematococcus pluvialis) crtO over-expresser construct was also produced. The constructs were driven by the patatin promoter in order to confine the effects to the tuber.

Transgenic modification of tuber carotenoid content

Constructs have been assembled to either down-regulate potato genes encoding the carotenogenic enzymes (β-cyc and β-cyc) or to over-express the algal crtO gene. Analysis of the effects of these transgenes is currently underway. Results are shown for the effects of over-expressing the algal crtO cDNA, encoding β-carotene ketolase in S. tuberosum cv Desiree. Carotenoid profiling reveals significant changes in tuber carotenoid levels. Transgenic plants contain lower levels of lutein and higher levels of carotenoid esters. More importantly, perhaps, is the presence of the commercially and nutritionally important keto-carotenoid astaxanthin in the transgenic tubers.

Work in Progress

Transgene stacking experiments to enhance tuber carotenoid manipulation. Detailed analysis of transgenic potato lines with modified carotenoid content. Microarray experiments using oligonucleotide arrays of carotenoid biosynthetic genes.

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