

## Effects of 5-aminolevulinic acid on growth and amylase activity in the radish taproot

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1 **Title**

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3

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1 **Abstract** 5-Aminolevulinic acid (ALA) promotes the growth of plants by enhancing their  
2 photosynthetic activities, but there is little information on how ALA influences the metabolism  
3 of sugars produced by photosynthesis. Here, we report the effects of ALA on tissue growth,  
4 sugar content, and amylase activity in the radish taproot. 5-Aminolevulinic acid was applied  
5 with a foliar spray (5.3-13,500  $\mu\text{M}$ ), and application at concentrations of 53, 530, and 2,700  $\mu\text{M}$   
6 enhanced the fresh weight of the taproot. Glucose is a major soluble sugar of the radish taproot.  
7 5-Aminolevulinic acid slightly increased the glucose content but did not influence the fructose,  
8 sucrose, or starch contents. Radishes have  $\beta$ -amylase (RsBAMY1), which is expressed in the  
9 taproot. 5-Aminolevulinic acid enhanced both the amylase activity and the RsBAMY1 protein  
10 accumulation. These results suggest that ALA may control starch accumulation by increasing  
11 the RsBAMY1 expression in the radish taproot. The relationship between taproot growth and  
12 free sugar accumulation by ALA is also discussed.

13

14 **Keywords** 5-Aminolevulinic acid •  $\beta$ -Amylase (EC 3.2.1.2) • Plant growth •

15 *Raphanus sativus*

16

#### 17 **Abbreviations**

18 ALA, 5-aminolevulinic acid

19 DAS, days after sowing

20 RsBAMY1, *Raphanus sativus*  $\beta$ -amylase 1

21

22

#### 23 **Introduction**

24

25 5-Aminolevulinic acid (ALA) is a biosynthetic precursor of porphyrins such as chlorophyll and  
26 heme (Von Wettstein et al. 1995). Recently, various biological activities of ALA, including  
27 agricultural and medical applications, have been studied (Sasaki et al. 2002; Fukuda et al. 2005).  
28 In agricultural applications, ALA was first noted as a biodegradable herbicide (Hotta et al.  
29 1997a) that is effective when used at high concentrations of more than 10 mM. Such high-dose  
30 applications of ALA promote the accumulation of an excess amount of protoporphyrin IX,  
31 which produces a large amount of reactive oxygen species by a photodynamic mechanism  
32 (Chakraborty and Tripathy 1992). Inversely, it has been reported that the application of ALA at  
33 lower concentrations accelerates the growth of many species of plants, especially the edible  
34 parts of root crops such as radishes, potatoes, and garlic (Sasaki et al. 2002). This growth

1 promotion is probably related to the photosynthesis-enhancing effects of ALA, which have been  
2 demonstrated in various plant species. However, further mechanisms of the growth-promoting  
3 effects of ALA have not been elucidated.

4 Radishes have been used to investigate the growth-promoting effects of ALA. The application  
5 of ALA to radishes increased the weight of the taproot, which is a sink organ of the radish  
6 (Hotta et al. 1997b). In this case, CO<sub>2</sub> fixation in light was promoted and CO<sub>2</sub> release in  
7 darkness was suppressed by ALA (Hotta et al. 1997b). Here, we report the effects of ALA on  
8 tissue growth, sugar content, and amylase activity in the radish taproot. We also discuss the role  
9 of amylase in the promotion of taproot growth by ALA.

## 12 **Materials and methods**

### 14 **Plant materials**

16 Radish seeds (*Raphanus sativus* L. cv. Comet, Takii, Kyoto, Japan) were sown in a plastic pot  
17 (100 cm<sup>2</sup> x 10 cm) containing Peatban (Sakata Seed, Yokohama, Japan) in a greenhouse at  
18 Shizuoka University, Japan, in 2007, 2008, and 2009. The plants (3 plants per pot) were watered  
19 with Hyponex solution (500 times dilution) (Hyponex, Tokyo, Japan) every week and harvested  
20 on the 42nd day after sowing (DAS). During cultivation, the ALA solution was sprayed on the  
21 leaves 3 times. The first, second, and third sprays were on the 7th DAS, 21st DAS, and 28th  
22 DAS, respectively. The harvest periods and spray timings were slightly different among  
23 cultivations, because the growth depended on the climate. The volume of solution sprayed was  
24 1.7 ml per pot. Concentrations of the ALA solution were 0, 5.3, 53, 530, 2,700, and 13,500 μM,  
25 respectively. After harvest, each radish plant was divided into the aerial part and the taproot, and  
26 the parts were then weighed. The taproots were maintained at -20°C until use.

### 28 **Determination of sugars**

30 The glucose, fructose, and sucrose contents were measured as described previously (Hara et al.  
31 2003). The ethanol extract of a radish taproot was subjected to an enzyme-linked assay by using  
32 hexokinase plus glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase, glucose-6-phosphate isomerase, and  
33 invertase. The starch content was measured as described previously (Hara et al. 2009). The  
34 ethanol-insoluble material was extracted by potassium hydroxide solution. After the extract was

1 neutralized, the soluble starch was digested by amylase and amyloglucosidase. Glucose  
2 formation was determined by the hexokinase and glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase system.

#### 3 4 Crude enzyme extraction

5  
6 Radish taproots (2 g fresh weight) were ground by a chilled steel musher until they became a  
7 paste. The paste was centrifuged at 10,000 g for 15 min at 4°C. The supernatant was a crude  
8 enzyme extract that was kept at -20°C until use. The amylolytic activity in the enzyme extracts  
9 was stable during storage at -20°C for 6 months. The antigenicity for the anti-*Raphanus sativus*  
10  $\beta$ -amylase 1 (RsBAMY1) antibody in the extracts was also maintained during storage at -20°C  
11 for 6 months.

#### 12 13 Amylase activity measurement

14  
15 The 3,5-dinitrosalicylic acid (DNSA) method (Hara et al. 2009) was applied to determine  
16 glucan-hydrolyzing activities in the radish extracts. An enzyme solution (4  $\mu$ l) was combined  
17 with a substrate solution (36  $\mu$ l) consisting of 20  $\mu$ l of 1% soluble starch and 16  $\mu$ l of 100 mM  
18 sodium acetate buffer (pH 4.8). After incubation at 37°C for 5 min, 40  $\mu$ l of the DNSA reagent  
19 containing 44 mM DNSA, 1 M sodium potassium tartrate, and 0.4 M sodium hydroxide was  
20 added to the reaction mixture. The solution was heated at 100°C for 5 min, and the absorbance  
21 was read at 540 nm. Calibration curves were produced using maltose solutions.

#### 22 23 Protein determination

24  
25 Protein quantification was done using the Quick Start Bradford Protein Assay (Bio-Rad, Tokyo,  
26 Japan) with bovine  $\gamma$ -globulin as a standard. Assays were performed according to the  
27 manufacturer's instructions.

#### 28 29 Immunoblot analysis

30  
31 Protein samples were resolved by 12% sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel  
32 electrophoresis. After electrophoresis, the proteins were blotted onto a nitrocellulose membrane  
33 filter (Hybond-ECL, GE Healthcare, Tokyo, Japan) with a Mini Trans-Blot (Bio-Rad). A  
34 blocked filter was incubated with a primary antibody, i.e., a rabbit polyclonal anti-RsBAMY1

1 antibody (Hara et al. 2009). Horseradish peroxidase-conjugated anti-rabbit immunoglobulin G  
2 (GE Healthcare) was used as a secondary antibody. Positive signals were detected by a  
3 chemiluminescence technique with the ECL Western Blotting Detection System (GE  
4 Healthcare). The signals were detected by an LAS-4000 Image Analyzer.

#### 5 6 Statistical analysis

7  
8 Statistical significance was determined by Dunnett's test ( $P < 0.05$  vs. control) to compare  
9 means.

## 10 11 12 **Results and discussion**

13  
14 5-Aminolevulinic acid was applied to the radishes at concentrations of 5.3, 53, 530, 2700, and  
15 13,500  $\mu\text{M}$  three times intermittently during cultivation, as described in the materials and  
16 methods section. Preliminary experiments indicated that the intermittent application provided  
17 sufficient promotion of taproot growth by ALA (data not shown). After harvest, the plants were  
18 divided into the aerial part and the taproot. The aerial part contained leaves and petioles. The  
19 taproot is a swollen storage organ consisting of the hypocotyl and the upper part of the main  
20 root. The fresh weight of each part is shown in Fig. 1. The growth of the aerial part was not  
21 influenced by ALA administration except that the highest concentration of ALA (13,500  $\mu\text{M}$ )  
22 reduced the growth of the aerial part (Fig. 1A). Taproot growth increased when ALA was  
23 applied at concentrations of 53, 530, and 2,700  $\mu\text{M}$  (Fig. 1B). However, the application of ALA  
24 at 13,500  $\mu\text{M}$  reduced the taproot growth. This indicates that the ALA application affected the  
25 growth of the taproot more than the growth of the aerial part. The concentrations of ALA that  
26 were effective in increasing the growth of the taproot ranged from 53 to 2700  $\mu\text{M}$ . The  
27 highest-dose application of ALA (13,500  $\mu\text{M}$ ) damaged the plants. The error bars attached to the  
28 columns of the 13,500  $\mu\text{M}$  ALA treatment are large (Figs. 1A, B) because the degrees of  
29 damage and growth deterioration were highly different, even between plants in the same  
30 treatment. This damage is likely due to the ALA's herbicidal effect, which is noted in the  
31 introduction section (Hotta et al. 1997a). Further analyses were done using plants treated with 0,  
32 53, and 2,700  $\mu\text{M}$  ALA.

33 We determined the total sugar contents in the taproot. Figure 2A shows the results of the  
34 measurement of free sugars, i.e., glucose, fructose, and sucrose. More glucose was accumulated

1 in the taproot than fructose and sucrose. 5-Aminolevulinic acid enhanced the glucose content  
2 (Fig. 2A, dark columns), but the fructose and sucrose contents were not affected by ALA  
3 application (Fig. 2A, gray and white columns). Determination of the starch content indicated  
4 that ALA did not cause the starch content in the taproot to change (Fig. 2B).

5 Our previous study has shown that the radish taproot has respectable amylolytic activity due  
6 to a taproot-specific RsBAMY1 (Hara et al. 2009). We measured the amylase activity and  
7 RsBAMY1 protein accumulation in plants treated with ALA and plants not treated with ALA  
8 (Fig. 3) and found that the amylase activity (U/g fresh weight) and the specific activity (U/mg  
9 protein) were enhanced by ALA application (Figs. 3A, B), whereas soluble protein content was  
10 not affected by ALA (Fig. 3C). Immunoblot using the anti-RsBAMY1 antibody showed that the  
11 amount of RsBAMY1 protein increased following ALA application (Fig. 3D). This finding  
12 shows that the increase of the RsBAMY1 protein amount was not the result of an elevation of  
13 the total protein level in the taproot. 5-Aminolevulinic acid may directly regulate the expression  
14 of RsBAMY1 proteins.

15 The *RsBAMY1* gene is an ortholog of *Arabidopsis bmy1* (At4g15210) (Hara et al. 2009),  
16 which is likely to involve starch degradation, because the *Arabidopsis* T-DNA insertion lines for  
17 the *bmy1* gene showed a starch-excess phenotype (Kaplan and Guy 2005). In the radish taproot,  
18 the glucose contents were approximately 7 to 10 mg/g fresh weight, but the starch contents were  
19 approximately 0.4 to 0.6 mg/g fresh weight, indicating that the glucose contents overwhelmed  
20 the starch contents. This suggests that RsBAMY1 may participate in starch degradation to  
21 maintain the balance between the high soluble sugars content and the low starch content in the  
22 radish taproot. Since it was demonstrated that ALA enhances CO<sub>2</sub> fixation by photosynthesis  
23 (Hotta et al. 1997b), we assumed that a higher quantity of mobile sugars may be introduced into  
24 the taproots of radishes treated with ALA. As a result, larger amounts of both free sugars and  
25 starch can accumulate in the taproot. However, enhancement of the RsBAMY1 production by  
26 ALA may promote glucose accumulation while maintaining the low starch content. The glucose  
27 accumulation may enhance turgor pressure, which is a driving force in the formation of vast  
28 parenchyma cells in the taproot. Moreover, glucose is degraded through glycolysis and the citric  
29 acid cycle to produce adenosine 5'-triphosphate and nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide, which  
30 are energetic sources for cell division. All of this suggests that glucose accumulation may play a  
31 crucial role in the growth of parenchyma cells in the taproot. The putative mechanisms of the  
32 taproot growth regulated by ALA are shown in Fig. 4.

33 It has been reported that the application of ALA can enhance the stress tolerance of plants.  
34 5-Aminolevulinic acid promoted salinity stress tolerance in cotton (Watanabe et al. 2000),

1 spinach (Nishihara et al. 2003), potatoes (Zhang et al. 2006), date palms (Youssef and Awad  
2 2008), and rice (Wongkantrakorn et al. 2009), and ALA enhanced cold tolerance in rice (Hotta  
3 et al. 1998), melons (Wang et al. 2004), and peppers (Korkmaz and Korkmaz 2009). In the case  
4 of melons, enhancement of the soluble sugar content by ALA may be responsible for the stress  
5 tolerance (Wang et al. 2004). Modulation of the expression of sugar-related enzymes by ALA  
6 may provide such enhancement of the soluble sugar content.

7 Generally it is believed that the growth-enhancing effects of ALA are simply due to the  
8 promotion of photosynthesis by ALA. In this study, however, we found that ALA may regulate  
9 starch-degrading enzyme(s) to enhance the soluble sugar contents in plants. Starch mobilization  
10 may be one of the basic mechanisms by which ALA promotes the growth of plants.

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1 **Figure Legends**

2  
3 **Fig. 1** Effect of ALA on growth of the aerial parts (**a**) and taproots (**b**) of radishes. Values and  
4 bars represent the means and SE of 4 plants, respectively. \* Significant difference at the  $P <$   
5 0.05 level. To determine \*, the value of the leftmost column (0  $\mu\text{M}$  ALA) in each graph was  
6 standardized.

7  
8 **Fig. 2** Effects of ALA on the contents of free sugars (**a**) and starch (**b**) in radish taproots. The  
9 free sugars tested in this study were glucose (dark columns), fructose (gray columns), and  
10 sucrose (white columns) (**a**). Values and bars represent means and SE of 3 plants, respectively.  
11 To determine \*, the value of the leftmost column (0  $\mu\text{M}$  ALA) in each item was standardized.

12  
13 **Fig. 3** Effects of ALA on amylase activity in radish taproots. Amylase activity (**a**), its specific  
14 activity (**b**), and soluble protein content (**c**) are shown. Values and bars represent the means and  
15 SE of 3 plants, respectively. To determine \*, the value of the leftmost column (0  $\mu\text{M}$  ALA) in  
16 each graph was standardized. Immunoblot analysis (**d**) is shown. A constant amount of protein  
17 (3  $\mu\text{g}$  each per lane) was loaded in the immunoblot. Lanes 1, 2, and 3 represent 0, 53, and 2700  
18  $\mu\text{M}$  of ALA, respectively. An arrow represents RsBAMY1.

19  
20 **Fig. 4** Putative mechanism of the growth promotion of radish taproots by ALA. Photosynthesis,  
21 free sugars content,  $\beta$ -amylase activity, and taproot growth were positively affected by ALA  
22 application (solid arrows). Broken lines indicate the directions of metabolic flows. The  
23 enhancement of free sugars content likely involves the promotion of taproot growth (open  
24 arrow).

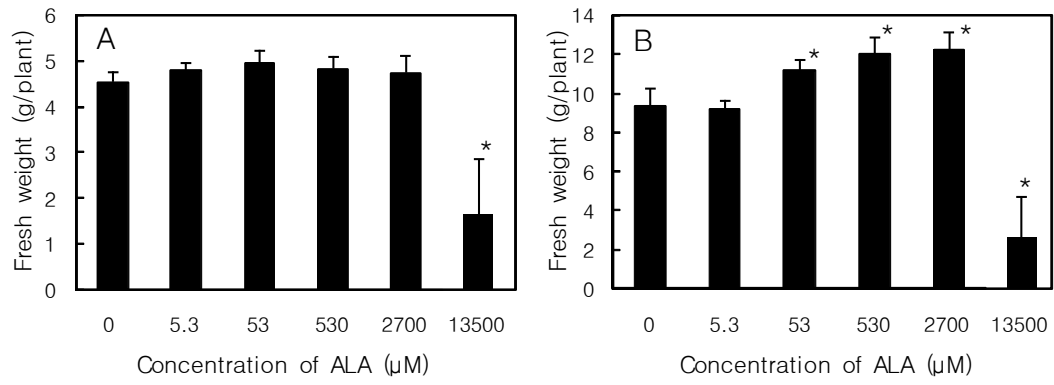


Fig. 1 Hara et al.

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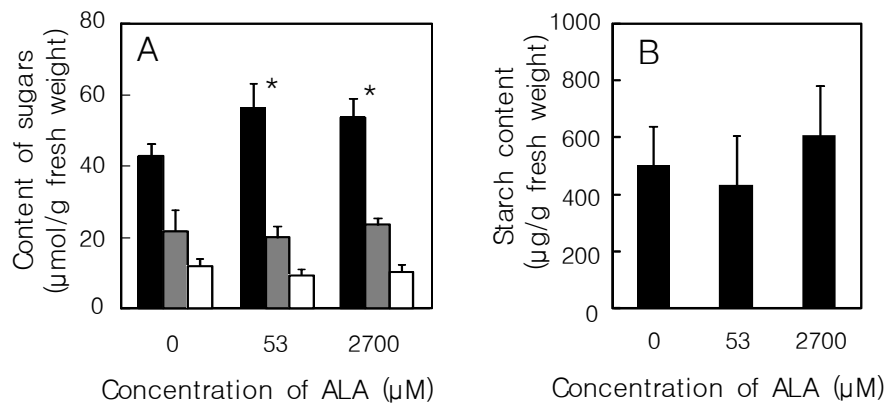


Fig. 2 Hara et al.

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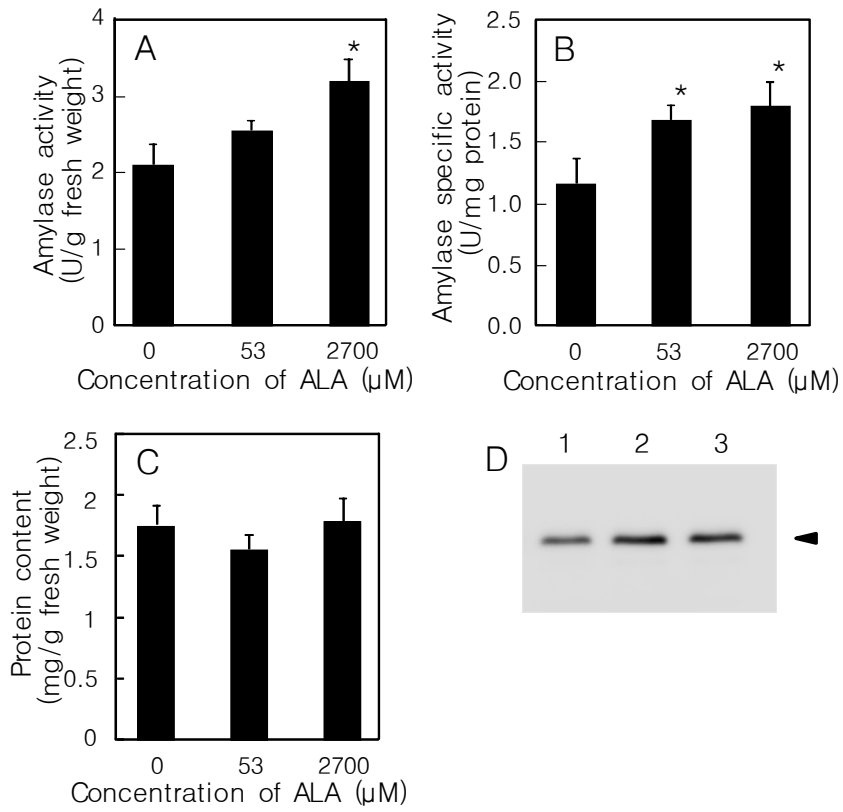


Fig. 3 Hara et al.

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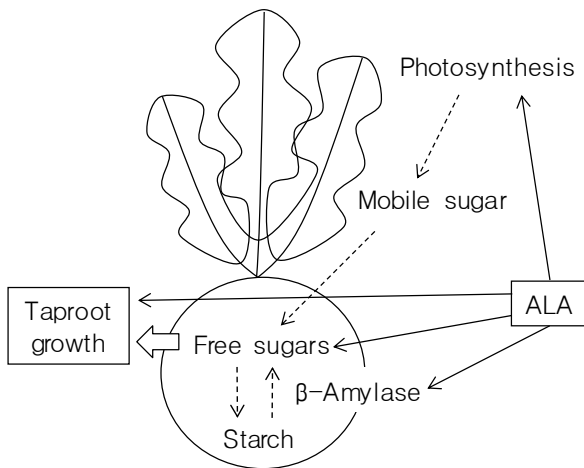


Fig. 4 Hara et al.

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