PROTEIN BEARING CROPS

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Keywords: crude protein, storage proteins, globulins, prolamis, glutelins, cereal proteins, vegetable proteins, essential amino acids, biological value

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Summary

All the nutrients essential to man, except vitamin B₁₂ and vitamin D, can be obtained from plant foods. At present only about 150 species are actively cultivated, directly for human food or as feed for animals and, of these, 30 produce 95% of human calories and proteins. Approximately, half of our food derives from rice, maize, wheat, and potato. Furthermore legumes, oat, barley and forages are very important protein sources both for humans and animals. Protein is accumulated in leaves, stems, and seeds. Seed proteins are called storage proteins. They can be classified into three main types; globulins, prolamins, and glutelins.

The cereals, the legumes, the non-seed crops other than grass, and the potato are the principal source of protein and calories. Their crude protein content is very variable. The cereals usually do not contain more than 15% of protein in their seeds. Legumes and oilseeds contain rarely less than 20% and often more. Climate, soil fertility, amount and timing of nitrogen fertilization, as well as variety, influence the protein content. Generally higher protein is accompanied by reduced grain yield.

The biological value of protein is determined by its essential amino acid content. Breeding for an improved balance of essential amino acids is even more difficult than breeding for protein content. Raising the level of lysine, threonine methionine, and/or tryptophan would enhance the nutritive value of cereals or legumes. But the potential...
for such increases is limited by the fact that there is only minimal variability for amino acid composition among species, genotypes, or environments. High-lysine varieties have been produced in corn and barley. But it has been associated with reduced yields and kernel weight, greater susceptibility to ear rots and insects and abnormal starch development. As protein content increases, there has been a tendency for the lysine content in the protein to decrease. Probably, environment has no effect on essential amino acid content.

1. Protein bearing plants and the world’s food supply

The world’s food supply, grossly inadequate in many countries today, will need to be increased greatly in the years ahead if the basic nutritional requirements of an explosive world population are to be satisfied. Otherwise, the nutritional gap between the developed and underdeveloped countries will continue to widen.

According to Hurrell (2001) "All the nutrients essential to man, except vitamin B₁₂ and vitamin D, can be obtained from plant foods. They contain the carbohydrates, protein and fat necessary for energy production. They contain the amino acids and fats necessary to make body structures such as muscles and cell membranes, or to make the enzymes, hormones or prostaglandins that help control the main body reactions”.

There are about 350,000 plant species in the world, of which about 80,000 are edible for humans. However, at present only about 150 species are actively cultivated, directly for human food or as feed for animals and, of these, 30 produce 95% of human calories and proteins.

Field crops provide the principal source of the world’s food supply. About half of our food derives from only four plant species—rice (Oryza sativa), maize (Zea mays), wheat (Triticum spp.), and potato (Solanum tuberosum). According to the IMPACT model, that simulates future global food demand and supply, to fulfill demands a compound annual rate of increase in maize, rice and wheat yields of 1.1% is required to 2020.

1.1 Proteins and nucleic acids

Proteins are complex organic compounds of high molecular weight. They contain carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, but in addition they all contain nitrogen and generally sulfur. Some proteins also contain the elements phosphorus, iron and copper.

Proteins are found in all living cells. Each species has its own specific proteins. When proteins are hydrolysed by enzymes, acids or alkalis, amino acids are produced. Over two hundred amino acids have been isolated from biological materials, but only 25 of these are generally regarded as being components of proteins.

Amino acids have a basic nitrogenous group, generally an amino group ( - NH₂), and an acidic carboxyl unit ( - COOH). The α type amino acids are the most frequently occurring ones. Their amino group is attached to the carbon atom adjacent to the carboxyl group. The general formula of the α type amino acids is shown on Figure 1.
Proline and hydroxyproline have an imino (NH) instead of an amino group. Some amino acids have additional amino and/or carboxyl groups.

Because of the presence of an amino and a carboxyl group, amino acids have both basic and acidic properties. In a strongly acid solution an amino acid exist largely as a cation, while in alkaline solution it occurs mainly as an anion.

![Figure 1: General formula of the α type amino acids](image)

There is a pH value for a given amino acid at which it is electrically neutral; this value is known as the isoelectric point.

Amino acids act as buffers, resisting changes in pH. All the α-amino acids except glycine are optically active.

The nature of the 'R' group varies with different amino acids. It may simply be a hydrogen atom as in glycine, of it may be, for example, a phenyl group.

All the amino acids involved in protein structure have an L-configuration of the carbon atom.

Plants and many micro-organisms are able to synthesize proteins from simple nitrogenous compounds such as nitrates. Animals, including humans, cannot synthesize the amino group, and in order to build up body proteins they must have a dietary source of amino acids. Certain amino acids can be produced from others by a process known as transamination, but a number cannot be effectively synthesized in the human and animal body and these are referred to as indispensable or essential amino acids. The ten essential amino acids that were determined using rats fed on purified diets are the following:
Arginine    Methionine
Histidine    Phenylalanine
Isoleucine   Threonine
Leucine      Tryptophan
Lysine       Valine

1.2 Structure and properties of proteins

Proteins are built up from amino acids by means of peptide linkage between the α-carboxyl of one amino acid and the α-amino group of another acid. In the example shown on Figure 2, a dipeptide has been produced from two amino acids. Large number of amino acids can be joined together by this means with the elimination of one molecule of water at each linkage to produce polypeptides.

![Formation of a dipeptide from two amino acids](image)

Proteins have multiple levels of structure. The most basic is its primary structure which refers to the sequence of amino acids along the polypeptide chains of protein. Protein secondary structure refers to certain common repeating structures found in proteins. There are two types of secondary structures: alpha-helix and beta-pleated sheet. An alpha-helix is a tight helix formed out of the polypeptide chain. The polypeptide main chain makes up the central structure, and the side chains extend out and away from the helix. The carbonyl (CO) group of one amino acid (n) is hydrogen bonded to the imido (NH) group of the amino acid four residues away (n + 4). In this way every CO and NH group of the backbone is hydrogen bonded. The peptide chain exists in the form of a right-handed α-helix, which is coiled or folded, thus giving a rigid structure to the molecule. Tertiary structure is the full 3-dimensional folded structure of the polypeptide chain. This structure is belived to be mainly responsible for the specific catalytic properties of many proteins. The quaternary structure refers to the polymerized structures. It is only
present if there is more than one polypeptide chain. For example, phosphorylase \( a \) contains four subunits (monomers) which alone have no enzymatic activity but when joined together (as a tetramer) form the active enzyme.

Most proteins have molecular weights varying from 20000 to 200000. All proteins have colloidal properties; they differ in their solubility in water. They exhibit characteristic isoelectric points, and have buffering properties. All proteins can be \textit{denatured}. The most notable effects of denaturation are the changes in biological properties; for example enzymes are usually inactivated. Changes in solubility and optical activity may also occur.

Proteins may be classified into three main groups according to their shape, solubility and chemical composition.

- **Fibrous proteins**: collagens, elastin, keratins
- **Globular proteins**: albumins, globulins, histones, protamines
- **Conjugated proteins**: phosphoproteins, glycoproteins, lipoproteins, chromo-proteins, nucleoproteins

Storage proteins were historically named after the plants from which they were isolated. A considerable variety of nitrogenous compounds which are not classed as proteins occur in plants and animals. Amino acids form the main part of the non-protein nitrogenous fraction in plants, and those present in greatest amounts include glutamic acid, aspartic acid, alanine, serine, glycine and proline. Other compounds are nitrogenous lipids, amines, amides, purines, pyrimidines, nitrates and alkaloids.

**Amines** are basic compounds present in small amounts in most plant and animal tissues. Many occur as decomposition products in decaying organic matter and have toxic properties. Amines are produced by decarboxylation of amino acids. For example cadaverine is an amine formed from the amino acid lysine.

Asparagine and glutamine are important \textit{amide} derivatives of the amino acids, aspartic acid and glutamic acid.

**Nitrates** may be present in plant materials. Quite high levels of nitrate were found in herbage given heavy dressings of nitrogenous fertilizers. \textit{Alkaloids} occur only in certain plants, and are of particular interest since many of them have poisonous properties. Their presence is restricted to a few orders in the dicotyledons. For example, morphine is present in the dried latex of opium poppy. Solanin can be found in unripe potatoes and in potato sprouts.

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Bibliography


Biographical Sketch

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1985-1987 Research worker at Gödöllő Agricultural University
1988-1989 Senior Lecturer in Classical Genetics and Plant Breeding
1990- Associate Professor - Lecturer in Plant Breeding

**RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

1972-1978 National research program on ‘Biological consequences of applying chemicals’. The genetic effect of applying chemicals and mineral nutrition with normal and high doses on corn and pea plants.
1992- Molecular markers (isozymes, RFLPs and RAPDs) in tetraploid corn breeding. (This program is supported by the National Scientific Research Foundation).
1995- Breeding for earliness and seed quality in soybean by induced mutation. RCM on „Improvement of new and traditional industrial crops by induced mutations and related biotechnology”(supported by the FAO/IAEA Vienna, No. 312.D2.RC.578.3).
2002- Application of molecular markers in poppy and grape variety protection.