



## Molecular Detection of Virus Infecting *Cucurbita pepo* L. in Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria

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### Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### ABSTRACT

*Cucurbita pepo* L is a member of Cucurbitaceae family in the genus *Cucurbita*. It is grown in Nigeria as a leafy vegetable and for its edible seeds and fruits. This crop has been reported to play important role in nutrition and medicine. A visit to some gardens in the staff quarters of University of Calabar, Nigeria in 2021 planting season revealed symptoms of mosaic and chlorotic spots. This study was initiated to identify the virus causing infection on *C. pepo*. The diagnostic tools employed were RT-PCR and gene sequence analysis. The result obtained by RT-PCR with cylindrical inclusion (CI) primer showed a fragment of predicted size 700 bp. Sequence alignment and analysis showed that the virus isolate has 86% sequence identity with *Algerian watermelon mosaic virus* (EU410442.1) confirming that the virus under study is a strain of *Algerian watermelon mosaic virus*. This is the first report of *Algerian watermelon mosaic virus* in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *Cucurbita pepo*; cylindrical inclusion; mosaic; sequence; RT-PCR.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Cucurbita pepo* L is an annual, monoecious climber cultivated worldwide for its edible fruits. This crop is a member of Cucurbitaceae family in the genus *Cucurbita*. The stems are fleshy, stout, setose and develop series of multifid tendrils [1-7]. The leaves are simple. The petiole is stout, fleshy, setose and up to 10 cm long. The blade is triangular, 20–30 cm across, irregularly five-lobed, setose, cordate at base, dentate at base and acute at apex. The flowers are massive and solitary on a 2–20-cm-long, setose pedicel. The corolla is orangish, membranaceous, infundibuliform and five-lobed and can grow up to 10 cm long. In male flowers the calyx is campanulate and develops five linear segments which are 1–2.5 cm long. The androecium includes three stamens with 1.5-cm-long filaments. Female flowers present a reduced calyx and an ovary which is ovoid and unilocular. The fruiting pedicel is robust and pentagonal. The fruit is a berry which has a multitude of shapes and colors according to the varieties. The seeds are ovoid, flattened, 1–1.5 cm × 0.5–1 cm, white and smooth [8].

This crop is native to the America (originating from northeastern Mexico and Texas), where it has been cultivated for several thousand years [8]. Pumpkins were dispersed to other countries by transoceanic voyagers at the turn of the 16th century. The image *Quegourdes de turquie* (completed no later than 1508) represents the earliest-known representation of *C. pepo* in Europe. Native Americans dried strips of pumpkin and wove them into mats. They also roasted long strips of pumpkin and ate them. Galen, Hippocrates, Plinius, and Dioscorides used pumpkin seeds in form of compresses against swelling [9]. Later, pumpkin was used for management of nephritis, tuberculosis, and internal worms and parasites. A famous painting entitled *Fruittivendola (The Fruit Seller)*, located in Milan and painted in 1580, depicts the flower buds of *C. pepo* which were used for culinary purposes [9].

*C. pepo* is assumed to be a treasure house of antioxidants, polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) and fibers which are known to have hepatoprotective and antiatherogenic properties [10]. In most countries of the world it is vigorously used in diabetes where it is used internally and superficially for treatment of worms and parasites. Pumpkin is also rich in oleic acid, linoleic acid, and tocopherols and has very high

oxidative stability [11]. Linoleic acid, a PUFA present in pumpkin seed oil, is known to increase membrane fluidity and allows for osmosis, intracellular, and extracellular gaseous exchange [12]. Pumpkin oil may play an important role in the protection against alcohol-induced hepatotoxicity and oxidative stress. Pretreatment with pumpkin oil may have hepatoprotective effects, which are varied and include oxidation, antilipid peroxidation enhanced detoxification, and protection against glutathione depletion [13].

Many factors decrease the quantity and quality of the production of this crop. Plant viruses are ranked the most common causal agent of diseases affecting this crop worldwide [14]. At least 60 viruses can infect plants in the Cucurbitaceae family, and new virus species on these hosts are described every year [14,15,16].

*C. pepo* is widely cultivated in Nigeria including the South Eastern part of the country. This crop as well as other members of the cucurbit family are important vegetable crops worldwide but are subjected to more than 200 plant diseases [17]. Viruses rank among the most common causal agents of cucurbit diseases worldwide [14]. Cucurbits have been reported to be infected by as many as 60 plant viruses worldwide and many are yet to be reported [18,15]. Reports have shown that plant viruses have become a threat to production of this crop [19].



**Fig. 1. Mosaic and chlorotic spot on *Cucurbita pepo***

A visit to some farms and gardens in Calabar Municipality Local Government Areas of Cross River State, Nigeria in 2021 planting season revealed widespread infection of this crop with symptoms ranging from mosaic, chlorotic spots, mottling, leaf malformation/deformation, leaf reduction and stunting (Fig. 1). The aim of this study is to isolate and characterize the virus

causing infection on *C. pepo* in Obubra Local Government Areas of Cross River State with a view to identifying it.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Isolation of Virus

Infected leaf sample from *C. pepo* with typical virus-like symptoms was collected from Obubra Local Government of Cross River State, Nigeria. This crop was found growing on farms and gardens in the location named above. Infected leaf samples were collected into Ziploc air tight polyethylene bags to keep them fresh to ensure the viability of the virus particles and later transported to the molecular laboratory of National Institute of Horticulture (NIHORT) Ibadan for the molecular diagnosis.

### 2.2 RNA Extraction from Infected Leaf Samples

Total RNA was extracted from the infected leaf samples using the cetyltrimethylammonium bromide (CTAB) protocol as described by [20]. One hundred milligrams of infected leaf sample was grounded in sterile mortar and pestle in 1 ml extraction buffer (100 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0; 1.4 M NaCl; 20 mM EDTA; 2 % CTAB) (hexadecyltrimethylammonium bromide); and 0.4 %  $\beta$ -mercaptoethanol, added just before use. Each of the homogenates was poured into a new 1.5 ml Eppendorf tube. The tubes were vortexed briefly, incubated in a 60°C water bath for 10 minutes and allowed to cool to room temperature. Then 0.75 ml of phenol chloroform isoamyl (25:24:1) was added to each tube containing the homogenate. Each tube was then vortexed vigorously to form an emulsion and then centrifuged at the speed of 12000 rcf for 10 minutes. The supernatant was then transferred to a clean 1.5 ml tube. Three hundred of cold isopropanol was added to the supernatant to precipitate the nucleic acid (RNA) and the mixture was kept at -80°C for 10 minutes. The mixture was centrifuged at 12,000 rcf for 10 min to precipitate the nucleic acid. The supernatant was discarded and the nucleic acid pellet washed in 500  $\mu$ l of 70 % ethanol and centrifuged at 12,000 rcf for 5-10 minutes. The supernatant was decanted and the resultant nucleic acid pellet was air-dried at room temperature. Nucleic acid pellet was then re-suspended in 50  $\mu$ l sterile distilled water and used as a template source for reversed transcriptase polymerase chain reaction (RT-

PCR). Nucleic acid extracts from the leaves of healthy plants were used as negative control.

### 2.3 Reverse Transcriptase Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR)

Virus-specific complementary DNA (cDNA) fragments were amplified from total nucleic acid derived from the infected leaf samples by a RT-PCR method as described by [21]. RT-PCR was performed using the cylindrical inclusion (CI) primers forward 5'-GGIVVIGTIGGIWSIAARTCIAC-3', Reverse 5'-ACICCRTTYTCDATDATRTTIGTIGC-3' as described by [22]. The RT-PCR reaction mixture (50  $\mu$ l) consisted of 1  $\mu$ l each of C1CP 5' and C1CP 3', 5x Go Taq green buffer (10.0  $\mu$ l), MgCl<sub>2</sub> (3.0), dNTPs (1.0  $\mu$ l), Reverse transcriptase (0.24  $\mu$ l), Taq DNA polymerase (Promega) (0.24  $\mu$ l), sterile distilled water (30.52  $\mu$ l) and nucleic acid from infected leaf sample (1:10 dilution) (3.0  $\mu$ l).

Amplifications were carried out in a GeneAmp 9700 PCR system thermalcycler (Applied Biosystem Inc., USA) using the following thermocyclic conditions; 42° C for 30 min for reverse transcription, 94° C for 3 min for initial denaturing, followed by 40 cycles of denaturing at 94° C for 30 sec, an annealing step at 40° C for 30 s, an extension at 68° C for 1 min and a final extension at 72° C for 10 min ended the RT-PCR reaction. The PCR reaction products were separated on 1.5 % agarose gel, subsequently stained with ethidium bromide, visualized in UV light and photographed.

### 2.4 Amplicon Purification and Sequencing

The RT-PCR amplicon for each sample was purified by adding 95 % ethanol to 40  $\mu$ l of the amplicon in a new 1500  $\mu$ l Ependorff tube and the solution was kept in - 80° C for 10 minutes. The tube was centrifuged for 10 min and the supernatant discarded. Five hundred of 70 % ethanol was added and centrifuged at maximum speed for 5 min. The supernatant was discarded and the tube was left at room temperature to dry after which the purified cDNA was dissolved in 30  $\mu$ l of sterile distil water. The product was sequenced at Bioscience Laboratory of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) Ibadan.

### 2.5 Sequence Analysis

The sequence identity between the virus under study was established by comparison with known





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