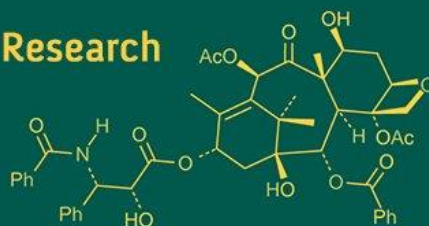
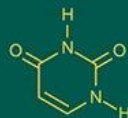


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Marker-assisted selection for disease resistance in crop plants: Approaches and Applications

Addya Singh, Ankit Kumar, Hari Shankar Singh, Anurag, Mayank Kumar, sanjay babu, Naveen Kumar Maurya, Mandeep Kumar, Nisha Yadav and Durgesh Kumar Maurya

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Abstract

The use of marker-assisted selection (MAS) has transformed plant breeding through the ability to select directly for disease resistance genotypes in an accurate and rapid way. The combined approach of principles, methodologies, and applications of MAS to improve disease resistance in important crops is discussed in this article. We also cover the benefits of MAS relative to traditional plant breeding, types of molecular markers employed, and successful examples in wheat, barley, and non cereal crops. We also discuss bottlenecks associated with MAS implementation, such as marker reliability, costs and genetic background effects, and new technologies including genomic selection and high-throughput genotyping that are shaping the future of disease resistance breeding.

Keywords: Disease resistance, Genomic selection, Marker-assisted selection, Plant breeding, QTL mapping

Introduction

Loss of plant production has long been one of causes of the food crisis, which has become major threats to food security throughout the world. Phenotypic selection in traditional breeding for disease resistance is commonly laborious and tedious as well as environmentally sensitive Collard *et al.* (2008) [6]. The use of molecular markers has revolutionized breeding systems, and indirect selection of desired traits through MAS has now been possible. MAS uses DNA markers associated with R genes or QTLs, thus allows early selection with high accuracy. The principal of marker assisted selection is that indirect selection for a trait can be performed by selecting for a marker closely linked to the trait rather than directly for the trait itself. This is of particular relevance to trait that is oligogenically determined since monogenic rate can usually be directly selected unless the expression of the gene is highly marks by variation due to environmental heterogeneity.

2. Principles of Marker-Assisted Selection for disease resistance

2.1 Genetic basis of disease resistance

The disease resistance in plant can be classified into two main types; qualitative (monogenic) resistance, governed by single major gene such as R gene and quantitative (polygenic) resistance controlled by multiple QTLs with smaller, additive effects. While qualitative resistance often provides strong but race- specific protection, quantitative resistance tends to be more durable offering broad-spectrum defence against evolving pathogens population. However, conventional breeding for these traits is hindered by environmental variability, the need for extensive phenotyping and the difficulty of selecting for recessive or late-expressing traits.

2.1.1. Qualitative resistance

Qualitative resistance also known as monogenic or race specific resistance is a plant defence mechanism governed by single major genes that confer complete or near complete immunity against specific pathogen strains.

Corresponding Author:
 Addya Singh
 Department of Genetics and
 Plant Breeding, Sardar
 Vallabhbhai Patel University
 of Agriculture and Technology
 (SVPUAT), Meerut, Uttar
 Pradesh, India

Table 1: Crop Disease Resistance Genes: Functions and References

Crops	Pathogen	Genes	Characteristics	Reference
Cereal crops	Wheat stem rust <i>Puccinia graminis</i> f. sp. tritici)	Sr31	provided durable resistance until emergence of Ug99 race	Salcedo <i>et al.</i> (2017), Plotnikova <i>et al.</i> (2022)
		Sr35	• NLR protein recognizing AvrSr35 effector	• Bolus <i>et al.</i> (2022) [3]
		Sr50	Recently cloned gene effective against Ug99 variants	Edae <i>et al.</i> (2024) [10]
	Rice Blast (<i>Magnaporthe oryzae</i>)	Pi-ta	NLR protein binding directly to Avr-Pita effector	Dolatabadian <i>et al.</i> (2022) [9]
		Pi-b	CNL-type resistance gene	Dolatabadian <i>et al.</i> (2022) [9]
		Pi54	Confers broad-spectrum resistance in Indian varieties	
Solanaceous Crops	Tomato Bacterial Spot (<i>Xanthomonas</i> spp.)	Bs4	• protein recognizing AvrBs4	• Yildirim <i>et al.</i> (2023)
		Xv3/Xv4	RLPs for resistance to <i>Xanthomonas campestris</i> pv. vesicatoria	-
	Potato Late Blight (<i>Phytophthora infestans</i>)	R1	• First cloned late blight resistance gene	• Dolatabadian <i>et al.</i> (2022) [9]
		R3a	Recognizes Avr3a effector	Yildirim <i>et al.</i> (2023)
		Rpi-blb1	• Wild species-derived resistance	• -
Legume Crops	Soybean Cyst Nematode (<i>Heterodera glycines</i>)	Rhg1	• Tandem repeat conferring resistance	• -
		Rhg4	• Serine hydroxymethyltransferase gene	• -
	Bean Anthracnose (<i>Colletotrichum lindemuthianum</i>)	Co-1 to Co-42 series	Multiple alleles at single loci	-

2.1.2 Quantitative Resistance

Quantitative resistance, also known as polygenic or partial resistance, is controlled by multiple genes (quantitative trait loci, QTLs), each contributing small effects to the overall resistance phenotype. Unlike qualitative (monogenic) resistance, which often involves hypersensitive responses and follows a gene-for-gene interaction model, QDR typically manifests as a continuous spectrum of resistance levels influenced by environmental conditions and plant developmental stages. This form of resistance imposes lower selection pressure on pathogen populations due to its complex genetic basis, contributing to its reputation for greater durability compared to major R genes, which pathogens can rapidly overcome through single mutations.

Some Notable Examples in Major Crops

- 1. Wheat Stem Rust (*Puccinia graminis* f. sp. tritici):** The adult plant resistance gene *Lr34* (functioning as a ABC transporter) provides non-race-specific QDR effective against multiple fungal pathogens, including rusts and powdery mildew. Its durability is evidenced by decades of effective deployment without breakdown, attributed to its pleiotropic effects on multiple defense pathways French *et al.* (2017) [11]. Similarly, the *Sr2* gene confers partial, race-nonspecific resistance to stem rust, often pyramided with other QTLs for enhanced durability.
- 2. Soybean Cyst Nematode (*Heterodera glycines*):** Resistance is mediated by the *Rhg1* locus, encoding an atypical amino acid transporter, and *Rhg4*, encoding serine hydroxymethyltransferase. These genes confer incomplete but additive resistance by disrupting nematode development through altered root metabolism and enhanced cell wall fortification French *et al.* (2017) [11].
- 3. Potato Late Blight (*Phytophthora infestans*):** Beyond major R genes like *R1* and *R3a*, quantitative resistance involves metabolite-based defenses. For instance,

accumulation of hydroxycinnamic acid amides, flavonoids, and alkaloids reinforces cell walls, impeding hyphal penetration. Pyramiding multiple QTLs (e.g., from wild species *Solanum demissum*) provides broader and more durable resistance than single R genes.

- 4. Rice Blast (*Magnaporthe oryzae*):** The *Pi21* gene, encoding a proline-rich protein with a putative protein-protein interaction domain, confers partial but broad-spectrum resistance by modulating basal defense signaling rather than direct pathogen recognition. Loss-of-function alleles enhance resistance without complete immunity, highlighting a trade-off between defense and growth.
- 5. Septoria Tritici Blotch (*Zymoseptoria tritici*):** Studies revealed pathogenicity QTLs in the fungus (e.g., *Qzt-I05-6*) interacting quantitatively with resistance QTLs in wheat (e.g., on chromosome 5D). This demonstrates that effector-triggered susceptibility underlies quantitative interactions, blurring the line between qualitative and quantitative resistance mechanisms

3. Basics of Marker-Assisted Selection

Marker-assisted selection involves the use of molecular markers to select plants possessing desirable traits, such as disease resistance, based on their genotype rather than phenotype. These markers are DNA sequences tightly linked to genes of interest and can be detected through various molecular techniques.

3.1 Types of Molecular Markers

- Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism (RFLP)
- Random Amplified Polymorphic DNA (RAPD)
- Simple Sequence Repeats (SSRs)
- Single Nucleotide Polymorphisms (SNPs)

3.1.1 Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism (RFLP)

RFLP (Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism) markers detect genetic variations by exploiting differences in DNA sequences recognized by restriction enzymes. These enzymes cut DNA at specific sites; sequence variations like mutations near these sites alter the resulting fragment lengths. These distinctive fragment patterns are separated by size via gel electrophoresis, transferred to a membrane (Southern blotting), and visualized using labeled DNA probes. Historically pivotal, RFLPs enabled early genetic mapping, forensics, disease gene identification, and paternity testing. However, the technique requires substantial, high-quality DNA, is labor-intensive, often involves radioactive probes, and has lower throughput. Consequently, while foundational for understanding DNA polymorphism detection, RFLPs are now largely replaced by faster PCR-based methods like SSRs and SNPs.

RFLP is a difference in homologous DNA sequences that can be detected by the presence of fragments of different

lengths after digestion of the DNA samples with specific restriction enzyme. RFLP as a molecular marker is specific to a single restriction enzyme or clone. They are first used in genetic analysis of determining the location of temperature sensitive-mutation of adenovirus onto a physical map of restriction fragments Grodzicker *et al.* 1974^[13].

The general procedure for RFLP detection is as follow:

1. Isolation of high molecular weight genomic DNA from different several individuals from related species
2. Each genomic DNA sample is digested individually with a restriction enzyme
3. On the basis of size restriction fragments are separated with gel electrophoresis
4. The fragments are denatured and followed by transferring from gel onto a membrane (a solid suitable support)
5. A labeled probe is used for hybridization with the fragment (Southern hybridization)
6. The fragments involve in hybridization with probes are detected through autoradiography or fluorescence.

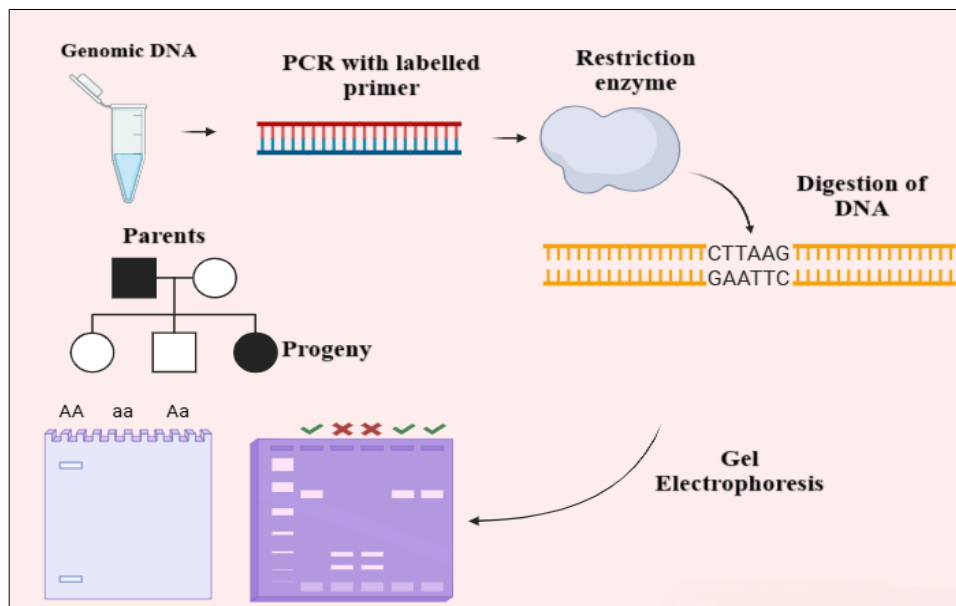


Fig 1: Illustrate the procedure of RFLP marker detection

3.1.2 Random Amplified Polymorphic DNA (RAPD)

RAPD (Random Amplified Polymorphic DNA) is a PCR-based genetic marker technique that uses short, single primers of arbitrary sequence (typically 10-mer) to amplify random segments of genomic DNA. Unlike markers requiring prior sequence knowledge, RAPD primers bind randomly at complementary sites across the genome under low-stringency PCR conditions. Polymorphisms arise from sequence differences (mutations, insertions, deletions) at primer binding sites, leading to the presence or absence of amplified DNA fragments. These differences are visualized as band patterns on an electrophoresis gel.

RAPD is rapid, cost-effective, requires minimal DNA, and needs no species-specific information, making it initially popular for genetic diversity studies, population genetics, and preliminary linkage mapping. However, its major drawbacks are low reproducibility (sensitive to reaction conditions) and dominant inheritance pattern (cannot distinguish heterozygotes), limiting its reliability. Consequently, while historically useful for exploratory

work, RAPD has largely been superseded by more robust, codominant markers like SSRs and SNPs.

RAPD Marker Procedure

1. **DNA Extraction:** Isolate high-quality genomic DNA from the target samples using a standard protocol, ensuring purity and similar concentration across samples.
2. **PCR Reaction Setup:** Prepare PCR master mixes containing: A single, short (usually 10-base) oligonucleotide primer of *arbitrary* sequence. Thermostable DNA polymerase (e.g., Taq). Deoxynucleotide triphosphates (dNTPs). Reaction buffer (with MgCl₂). Diluted template DNA (~10-50 ng).
3. **PCR Amplification:** Load reaction tubes into a thermal cycler. Use a standardized cycling
4. **Electrophoresis:** Separate the amplified PCR products by size using agarose gel electrophoresis (typically 1.5-2.0% agarose). Include a DNA size ladder.

5. **Visualization:** Stain the gel with a DNA-intercalating dye (e.g., ethidium bromide, SYBR Safe) and visualize the DNA fragment bands under ultraviolet (UV) light.
6. **Data Analysis:** Score the presence (1) or absence (0) of distinct, reproducible bands across sample lanes.

Polymorphisms are detected as differences in these banding patterns - the gain or loss of specific amplified fragments due to sequence variations at primer binding sites.

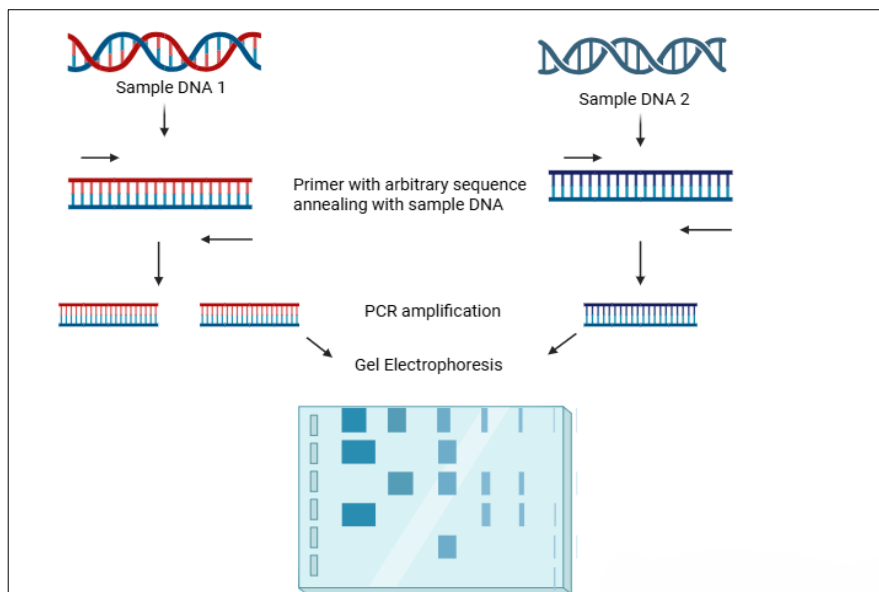


Fig 2: Illustrate the procedure of RAPD marker detection

3.1.3 Simple Sequence Repeats (SSRs)

Simple Sequence Repeats (SSRs), also known as microsatellites, are highly versatile codominant genetic markers based on short, tandemly repeated DNA motifs (typically 1-6 nucleotides long, e.g., (CA)_n, (GA)_n). Polymorphism arises from variation in the *number of repeats* at a specific locus between individuals, caused by DNA polymerase slippage during replication. Detection relies on PCR amplification of the target locus using primers designed from unique *flanking sequences*. The resulting PCR products differ in length proportional to the number of repeats and are precisely separated and visualized, usually via capillary electrophoresis with fluorescently labeled primers. Key advantages include: high polymorphism (many

alleles per locus), codominant inheritance (distinguishing heterozygotes from homozygotes), reproducibility, multiplexing capability (analyzing many loci simultaneously), and requirement for only small DNA quantities. SSRs are widely used for applications demanding high discrimination, such as genetic mapping (QTL/association studies), parentage/paternity analysis, population genetics, cultivar/breed identification, forensics, and conservation genetics. While requiring initial investment to isolate flanking sequences and design locus-specific primers, SSRs remain a gold standard for many applications, though they are increasingly supplemented or replaced by high-throughput SNP arrays for large-scale studies.

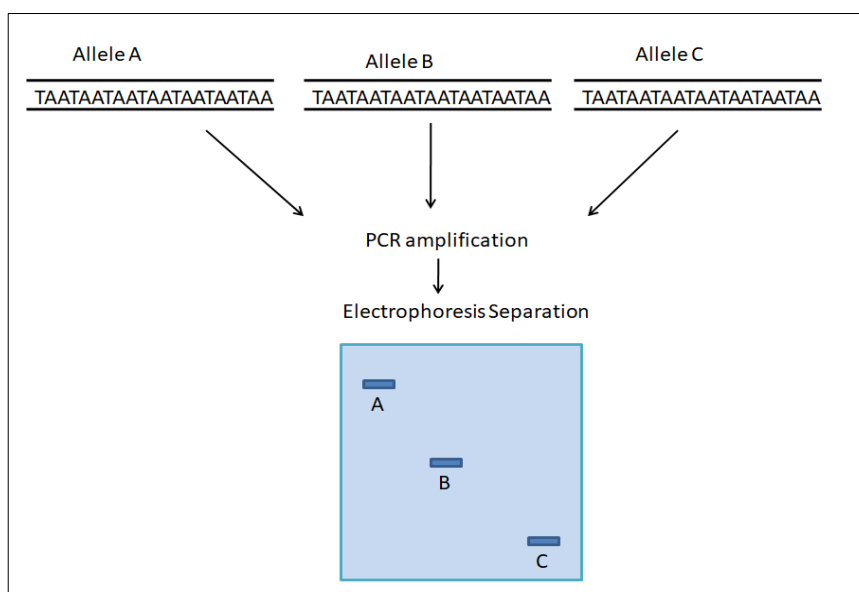


Fig 3: Illustrate the procedure of SSR marker detection

3.1.4. Single Nucleotide Polymorphisms (SNPs)

SNP (Single Nucleotide Polymorphism) markers detect the most abundant genetic variations: single-base differences (e.g., A/T or C/G) at specific positions in the genome. Unlike length-based markers (SSRs, RAPDs), SNPs rely on identifying the exact nucleotide present. Their detection uses diverse technologies, including microarrays, targeted PCR assays, and next-generation sequencing. Key advantages include ultra-high throughput, genome-wide

coverage, low mutation rates (stable across generations), and suitability for full automation. While individual SNPs are biallelic (less polymorphic per locus than SSRs), their sheer density compensates, enabling powerful genome-wide association studies (GWAS), population genomics, precision breeding, and medical diagnostics. Due to their scalability, accuracy, and decreasing costs, SNPs have become the cornerstone marker system for large-scale genetic analysis in research and agriculture.

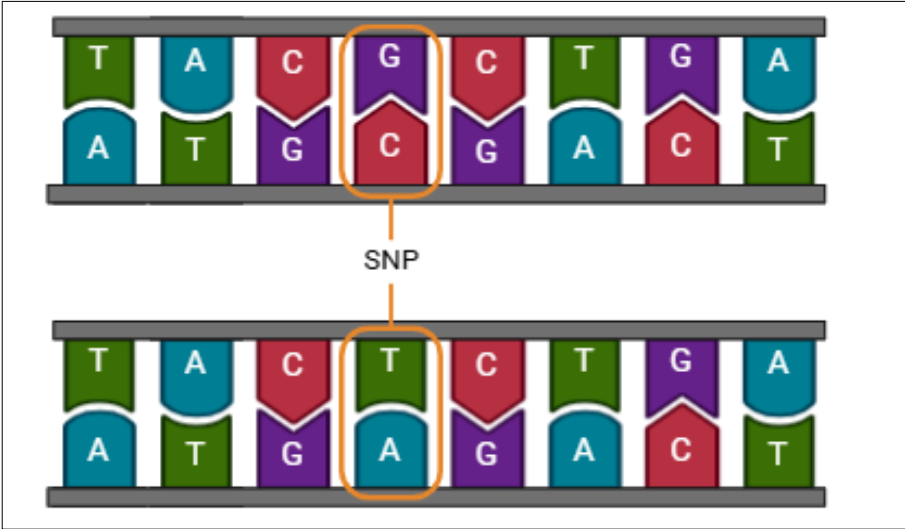


Fig 4: Illustrate the SNP marker

4. Core MAS Techniques used for Disease Resistance

Marker-Assisted Selection (MAS) has revolutionized the breeding of disease-resistant crops by enabling precise, early selection based on DNA-level information rather than laborious and environmentally variable disease phenotyping. Several core techniques form the backbone of MAS strategies specifically targeting pathogen resistance.

4.1 Foreground Selection

Foreground selection is a precision breeding strategy within marker-assisted selection (MAS) that uses molecular markers tightly linked to target genes to identify and select plants carrying desired traits. This approach is particularly valuable for disease resistance breeding, where it enables breeders to bypass complex phenotypic screening and select plants based on their genetic potential rather than observable characteristics.

Table 2: Some notable example of foreground selection application in crop improvement

Crop	Disease(s)	Target Resistance Gene(s)	Foreground Markers Used	Donor/Recipient Parents	Key Outcomes	References
Rice	Bacterial Leaf Blight (BLB)	Xa21, xa13, xa5	pTA248 (Xa21), RG136 (xa13), xa5S/R multiplex (xa5)	Donor: IRBB60; Recipient: Jalmagna (Deepwater rice)	>95% recurrent parent genome (RPG) recovery; Three-gene pyramids showed complete resistance to virulent Xoo strains P7.7; 20-25% yield advantage under disease pressure	Pradhan <i>et al.</i> (2015)
Rice	BLB + Blast	Xa4, xa5, xa13, Xa21 + Pi9, Pi2, Piz	xa5S/R (xa5), xa13prom (xa13), MP (Xa4), pTA248 (Xa21) + NBS4 (Pi9), Pi2-i (Pi2), Piz-S (Piz)	Donor: IRBB60; Recipient: PUTRA-1 (Malaysian elite)	95.9% RPG recovery; Broad-spectrum resistance to 8 Xoo races and 12 blast isolates; Lesion lengths <5 cm (vs. >20 cm in parent)	Chukwu <i>et al.</i> (2019) ^[4]
Soybean	Phytophthora Rot + Powdery Mildew	Rps2 (Phytophthora), Rmd-c (Mildew)	K375_2 (Rps2), Satt_144 (Rmd-c)	Donor: CNS; Recipient: JS335/CO3 (Elite varieties)	Complete resistance to powdery mildew; Medium-high resistance to Phytophthora; Effective nodulation retained via linked rj2 selection	Ramalingam <i>et al.</i> (2020)
Rice	Blast	Pi9 + Pi54	NBS4 (Pi9), Pi54MAS (Pi54)	Donor: 562-4 (NIL of CO43); Recipient: CO51 (Elite cultivar)	88.1% RPG recovery; Pyramided lines showed 98% disease reduction vs. recipient; Enhanced durability over single-gene lines	Thulasinathan <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Basmati Rice	Bacterial Leaf Blight	Xa21, xa13, xa5	Gene-specific markers (not named)	Donor: IRBB60; Recipient: CSR-30 (Basmati)	97.1% RPG recovery; All pyramided lines retained aroma and grain quality; Zero disease incidence in hotspot trials	Baliyan <i>et al.</i> (2018) ^[2]

This approach is particularly crucial for introgressing recessive resistance genes (phenotypically invisible in heterozygotes) and enables precise gene pyramiding where multiple resistance alleles are stacked in a single genotype. By acting as molecular scalpels that cut through genetic

complexity, foreground selection accelerates the development of disease-resistant cultivars while minimizing linkage drag, reducing breeding cycles by 2-4 generations compared to conventional methods.

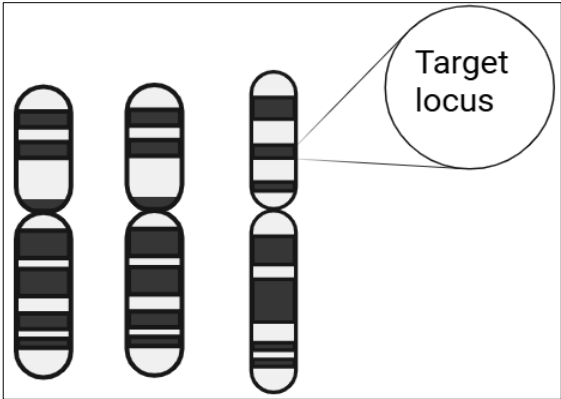


Fig 5: Illustrate the Foreground selection in genome

4.2. Background Selection

Background selection is a precision breeding strategy that

accelerates the recovery of a recurrent parent's genome when introgressing disease resistance genes from donor sources. While foreground selection targets the *specific resistance gene*, background selection uses genome-wide molecular markers (e.g., SNPs, SSRs) to identify and select plants with the highest proportion of the elite parent's genetic background. This minimizes "linkage drag" (the unintentional transfer of undesirable donor DNA segments physically linked to the resistance gene) which often compromises yield, quality, or adaptation. By systematically screening thousands of genomic positions, breeders rapidly discard progeny carrying donor DNA outside the target locus, compressing recovery of the elite genetic background from 6-8 conventional backcross generations to just 2-3. This technique ensures new disease-resistant varieties retain critical agronomic traits while incorporating vital pathogen defenses.

Table 3: Real-World Impact of Background Selection in Disease Resistance Breeding

Challenge	Background Selection Solution	Outcome	References
Tomato Bacterial Wilt (<i>Ralstonia solanacearum</i>)	Used 230 genome-wide SNPs to reduce donor segment carrying <i>Ralstonia</i> -resistance genes from 47 cM to 2.1 cM. Accelerated recovery of elite parent genome.	Preserved critical commercial traits: fruit firmness + 17% yield compared to susceptible lines. Maintained horticultural quality in introgressed lines.	Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2020), Wang <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Wheat Stem Rust (Ug99 lineage)	Selected for >98.7% recurrent parent genome (RPG) while introgressing <i>Sr25</i> , <i>SrWeb</i> , and <i>Sr50</i> genes. Employed 149 microsatellite markers for background screening.	Maintained high gluten strength (SDS sedimentation ≥28 ml) and agronomic performance. Elite lines showed equivalent/marginal yield gains over parent cultivar HUW234.	Yadav <i>et al.</i> (2015), Patpour <i>et al.</i> (2022), Kemboi <i>et al.</i> (2025)
Soybean Cyst Nematode (SCN) (<i>Heterodera glycines</i>)	Minimized linkage drag from wild <i>Glycine soja</i> donor around <i>rhg1</i> locus on chromosome 18 using flanking SNP markers. Achieved >95% RPG recovery in BC ₃ F ₄ lines.	Avoided 12% yield penalty linked to wild segments. Elite cultivars retained high oil/protein content and adaptive traits.	Peng <i>et al.</i> (2021), Shi <i>et al.</i> (2025), Arjouni <i>et al.</i> (2022) ^[1]

Advantages of Background Selection for Disease Resistance:

1. **Accelerated Recovery of Elite Traits:** Speeds up the process of reintroducing ("recovering") the highly desirable characteristics (yield, quality, agronomic performance) of the original elite parent variety (the *recurrent parent*) after crossing it with a disease-resistant donor. This significantly reduces breeding time compared to relying solely on phenotypic selection.

2. **Minimized Linkage Drag:** Disease resistance genes from wild relatives or unadapted sources are often physically linked to undesirable genes on the same chromosome segment. Background selection uses molecular markers distributed *throughout the genome* to select plants carrying the resistance gene *only* where necessary, while ensuring the rest of the genome comes from the elite parent. This minimizes dragging along deleterious genes affecting yield or quality.

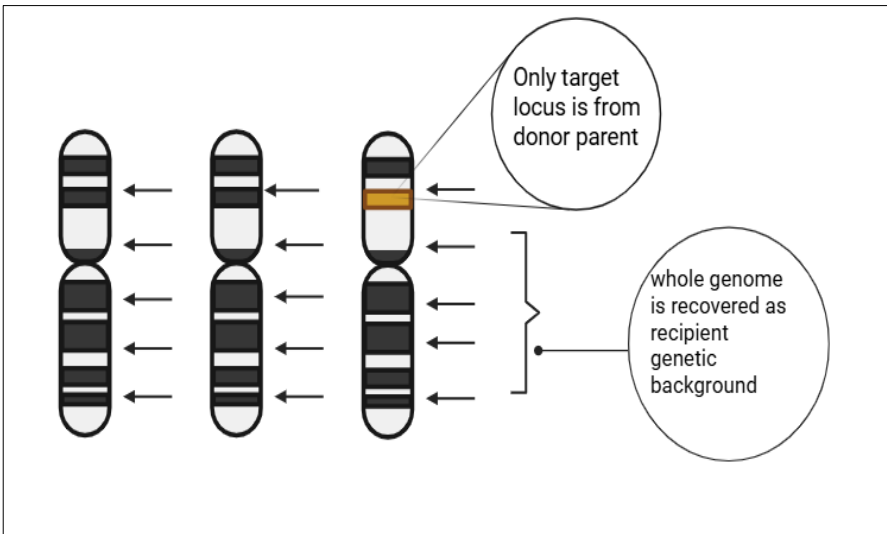


Fig 6: Illustrate the Foreground selection in genome

- 3. Precise Preservation of Elite Background:** Ensures that the final disease-resistant line is genetically as similar as possible (>95-99%) to the original high-performing elite parent, except for the specific resistance locus/loci. This maintains the valuable, market-ready characteristics farmers and consumers expect.
- 4. Resource Efficiency:** Reduces the need for extensive field testing of large populations in later generations solely to assess background traits. Molecular markers allow early identification of plants with the desired genomic background, focusing field resources on confirming resistance and key agronomic performance.

4.3. Marker assisted backcrossing
Marker-Assisted Backcrossing (MABC) revolutionizes the development of disease-resistant crops by strategically combining traditional breeding with DNA technology. The core objective is to transfer a single critical resistance gene from a donor plant (often a wild relative or unadapted variety) into a high-performing elite cultivar while preserving nearly all (>95%) of the elite parent's desirable genetic background. This precision approach addresses a major limitation of conventional backcrossing which is slow, inefficient process of recovering elite traits while minimizing linkage drag (the accidental co-transfer of undesirable genes physically attached to the resistance gene on the donor chromosome).

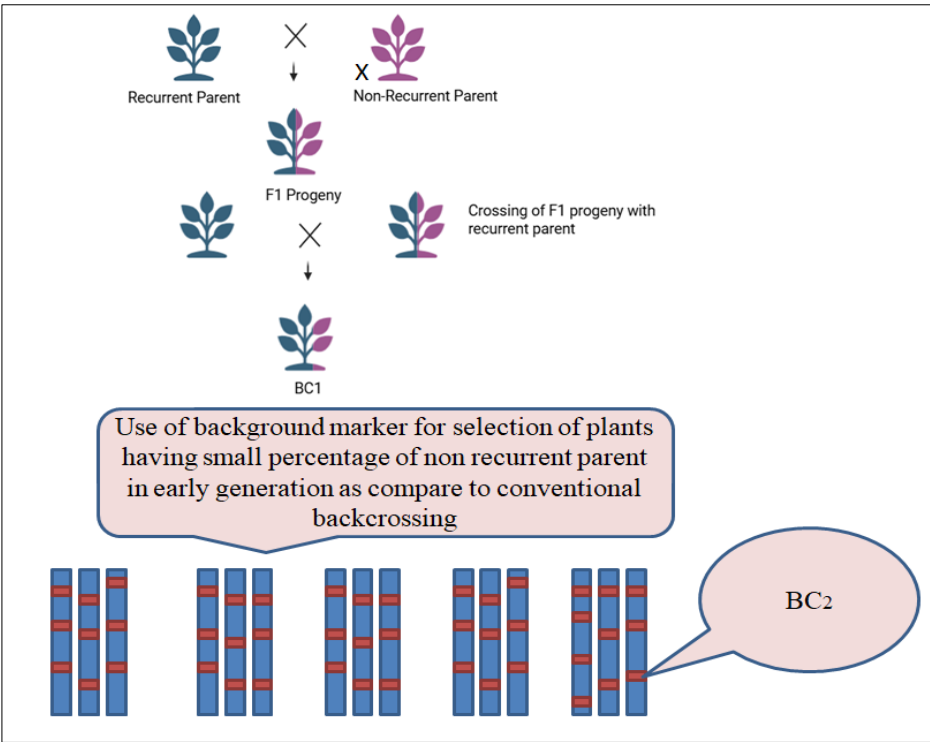


Fig 7: Illustrate the procedure of MABC and comparison with Conventional Backcrossing

Marker-Assisted Backcrossing (MABC): Advantages Over Conventional Backcrossing in Plant Breeding

- 1. Accelerated Recovery of Recurrent Parent Genome**
- **Reduced Backcross Generations:** Conventional backcrossing requires 6-8 generations to achieve ~99% recurrent parent (RP) genome recovery. MABC achieves equivalent or superior recovery (98-99%) in only 2-3 generations through genome-wide background selection using molecular markers
 - **Statistical Efficiency:** Simulation studies confirm MABC reaches 92.2% RP recovery in BC₂ (vs. 87.5% conventionally) and 98% in BC₃ (vs. 93.7%), reducing time and resource investment.

- 2. Precision in Target Gene Introgression**
- **Foreground Selection:** Enables reliable tracking of target genes under challenging conditions (e.g., recessive alleles, traits requiring destructive phenotyping). For example, KASP markers identified the *SSIIa* gene for rice eating quality without phenotyping.
 - **Recombinant Selection:** Minimizes linkage drag (co-transfer of undesirable donor genes) by selecting progeny with recombination events near the target locus. In chickpea, flanking markers reduced donor segments by 38 kb around fusarium wilt resistance genes.

Table 4: Real-World Impact of Background Selection in Disease Resistance Breeding

Crop	Disease/Pathogen	Gene(s)/QTL(s)	Markers Used	Recurrent Parent (RP)	Donor Parent	Reference
Wheat	Stripe rust (<i>Puccinia striiformis</i>)	Yr59 (HTAP resistance)	<i>Xbarc32</i> , <i>Xwgp5175</i> (SSR)	Jimai 22, Chuanmai 42, Zhengmai 9023, Xinmai 26	PI 660061	Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Wheat	Leaf rust (<i>Puccinia triticina</i>) and stripe rust	<i>LrTrk/YrTrk</i>	<i>Xgwm234</i> (SSR) + 86 background SSRs	HD2932	<i>Triticum turgidum</i> cv. Trinakria	Mallick <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Common	Anthraxnose	*Co-42*, *Co-5*	<i>SAB3</i> , <i>SBB14</i> (SCAR)	Urugezi × AND 1062	G2333	Uwera <i>et al.</i>

Bean	(<i>Colletotrichum lindemuthianum</i>)					(2021)
Mung Bean	Bruchid (<i>Callosobruchus spp.</i>)	VrPGIP2	*VrBR-SSR013*, *DMB-SSR158* (SSR)	Kamphaeng Saen 1 (KPS1)	V2802	Wu <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Rice	Submergence tolerance	Sub1	ART5 (InDel), RM464A (SSR)	Improved White Ponni (IWP)	FR13A	Hasan <i>et al.</i> (2015), Dharmaraj <i>et al.</i> (2024) ^[8]

4.4 Gene Pyramiding

Marker-assisted gene pyramiding (MAGP) strategically combines multiple resistance genes into a single cultivar using DNA markers, creating durable and broad-spectrum disease protection. Unlike sequential breeding, MAGP accelerates the stacking process by simultaneously selecting

for target genes in early generations while minimizing linkage drag. This approach counters pathogen evolution where single-gene resistance often fails rapidly by requiring pathogens to overcome multiple genetic barriers simultaneously.

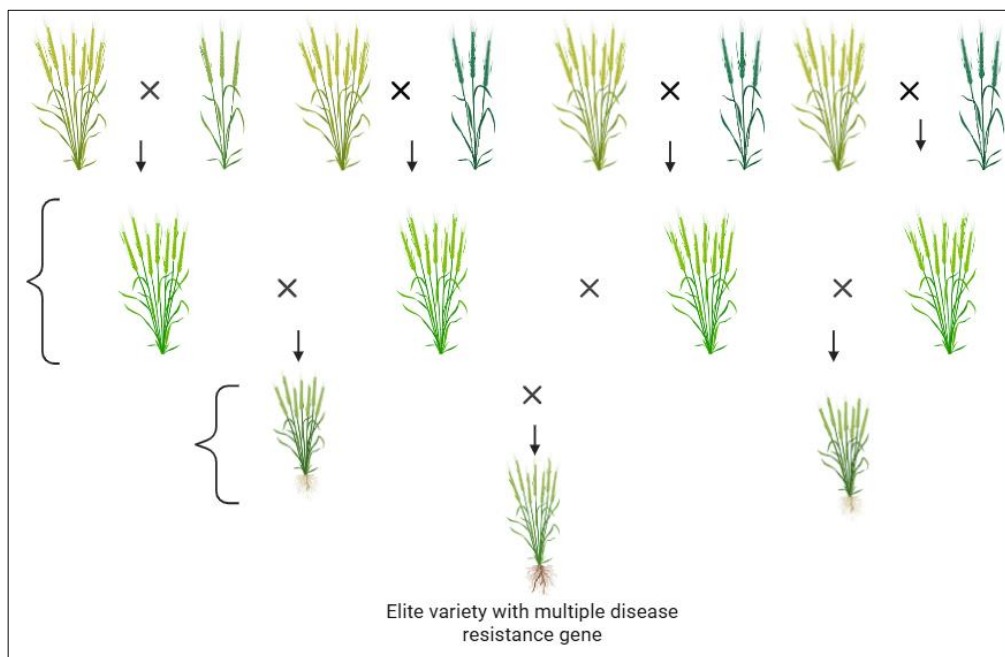


Fig 8: Illustration of gene pyramiding to develop elite cultivar

Some example of pyramiding of genes for crop improvement

1. Rice Blast Resistance (*Magnaporthe oryzae*)

Pyramiding *Pi1*, *Pi2*, and **Piz-5** in elite rice lines using SSR markers resulted in near-complete resistance across diverse blast races. Field trials showed significantly lower disease severity (2-5%) compared to single-gene lines (20-40%).

2. Wheat Rust Management (*Puccinia spp.*)

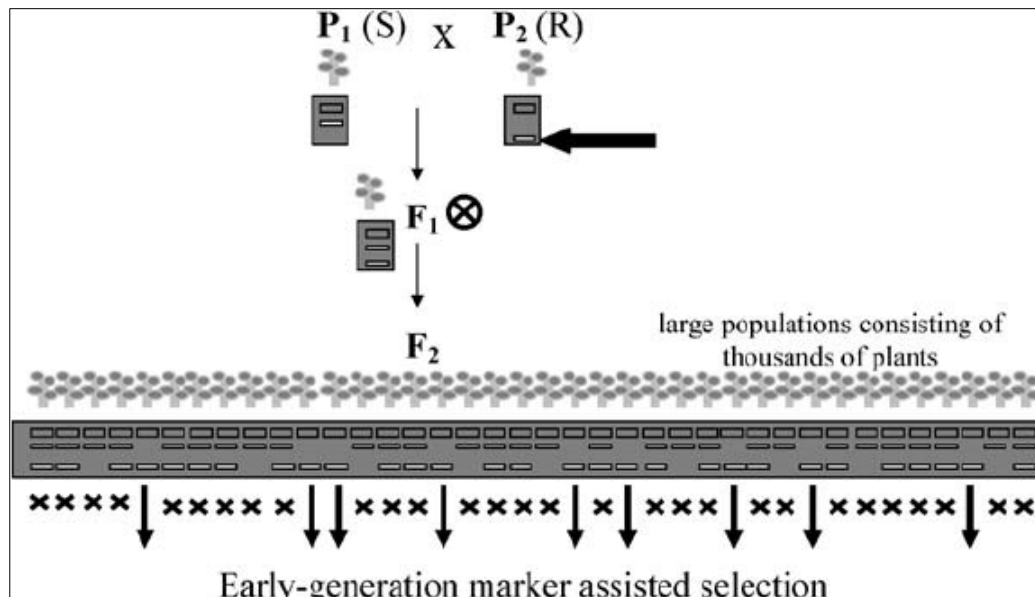
Combining *Sr24* (stem rust), *Lr68* (leaf rust), and *Yr15* (stripe rust) via SNP markers produced lines with 90% resistance retention after 5 seasons in Ug99-endemic regions.

3. Tomato Bacterial Wilt (*Ralstonia solanacearum*)

Stacking **Bwr-6** and **Bwr-12** QTLs using KASP assays reduced wilt incidence from 75% (susceptible) to <15% in infected soils.

4.5 Early Generation Screening

Early generation screening represents a transformative approach in plant breeding that leverages molecular markers to identify and select disease-resistant genotypes at initial breeding stages, significantly accelerating the development of resilient cultivars. Unlike conventional methods that rely on labor-intensive phenotypic evaluations in later generations, early generation screening enables precision selection at seedling or juvenile stages by targeting DNA markers tightly linked to resistance genes or quantitative trait loci (QTLs). This method proves particularly advantageous for traits that are difficult to phenotype (e.g., root diseases), exhibit late expression, or require hazardous pathogen inoculation. By reducing generational cycles and eliminating susceptible genotypes early, early generation screening slashes breeding time by 30-50% while minimizing field trial costs and resource allocation. The integration of foreground selection (for target genes) with background selection (for recurrent parent recovery) ensures not only resistance but also the retention of elite agronomic traits.



Source: Collard *et al.* (2005) ^[5]

Fig 9: Illustrate the MAS scheme for early generation selection

Some example of early generation selection in crop improvement

1. Wheat (Yellow Rust & Powdery Mildew)

In the development of Xiaoyan22-derived lines, MAS facilitated the pyramiding of Yr26 (yellow rust resistance) and Pm92160 (powdery mildew resistance) genes. Early screening with gene-specific SSR markers enabled identification of resistant genotypes in BC₁F₁, reducing the breeding cycle from 8+ generations to just 3-4. The pyramided lines exhibited 95% disease resistance in field trials while recovering 92% of the recurrent parent genome Zheng *et al.* (2020).

2. Rice (Blast, Bacterial Blight, and Gall Midge)

The elite cultivar Improved Lalat incorporated ten resistance genes (*Pi2*, *Pi9* for blast; *xa5*, *xa13*, *Xa21* for bacterial blight; *Gm1*, *Gm4* for gall midge) through MA-EGS. Breeders employed flanking markers (e.g., AP5930 for *Pi2*, GM1-1 for *Gm1*) to screen early-generation populations. This allowed the simultaneous stacking of genes against multiple pathogens, yielding lines with broad-spectrum resistance without compromising yield or grain quality Das *et al.* (2015) ^[7].

3. Cassava (Cassava Mosaic Disease - CMD)

Screening of 605 genotypes across five African populations using six SSR markers (*NS169*, *SSRY106*) linked to the *CMD2* locus achieved 70% accuracy in predicting field resistance. Resistant genotypes identified at seedling stages (1-5 months after planting) showed strong correlation ($r = 0.20-0.35$) with adult plant resistance, enabling 40-60% faster selection of elite clones Olasanmi *et al.* (2021).

4. Drought-Tolerant Rice with Blast Resistance

The variety 'Huhan 1516' combined drought tolerance (*qDTY* QTLs) with blast resistance (*Pi2*) via MAS. Early screening with SNP markers (e.g., 2M19 for *Pi2*) allowed selection before drought phenotyping, ensuring lines retained high yield (+2.2% over controls) and blast resistance under water-limited conditions Li *et al.* (2024).

Conclusion

Marker-assisted selection (MAS) has revolutionized disease resistance breeding by enabling precise, rapid, and cost-effective development of resilient crop varieties. By leveraging molecular markers linked to resistance genes or QTLs, breeders overcome traditional bottlenecks such as phenotypic screening complexity, environmental variability, and lengthy breeding cycles. Success stories across staple crops including *Sr* gene pyramiding in wheat against Ug99 stem rust, *Xa* gene stacking in rice for bacterial blight resistance, and *Rhg* locus introgression in soybean for nematode control demonstrate MAS's capacity to deliver durably resistant cultivars. This approach not only accelerates genetic gain but also minimizes linkage drag, ensuring elite agronomic traits are preserved while fortifying plants against evolving pathogens. The integration of high-throughput genotyping, bioinformatics, and automated phenotyping further enhances MAS scalability, making it indispensable for modern crop improvement programs.

Moreover, MAS will increasingly synergize with emerging technologies to address future food security challenges. The fusion of gene editing (e.g., CRISPR-Cas9) with MAS allows targeted manipulation of resistance pathways, while genomic selection augments MAS by capturing polygenic traits. Climate-adaptive MAS pipelines prioritizing genes with stability across environments are critical for breeding resilient crops in the face of shifting pathogen dynamics. However, democratizing MAS for orphan crops and resource-limited regions requires affordable genotyping solutions and capacity building. As pathogen threats intensify, strategic MAS deployment, combined with evolutionary biology insights, will remain pivotal for designing sustainable disease management strategies that reduce chemical inputs and safeguard global harvests.

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Authors

Addya Singh

Department of Genetics and Plant Breeding, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University of Agriculture and Technology (SVPUAT), Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Ankit Kumar

Department of Crop Improvement, ICAR–Indian Institute of Wheat and Barley Research (IIWBR), Karnal, Haryana, India

Hari Shankar Singh

Department of Soil Science and Agricultural Chemistry, Chandra Shekhar Azad University of Agriculture and Technology, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Anurag

Department of Soil Science and Agricultural Chemistry, Chandra Shekhar Azad University of Agriculture and Technology, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Mayank Kumar Department of Soil Science and Agricultural Chemistry, Chandra Shekhar Azad University of Agriculture and Technology, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Sanjay Babu

Department of Seed Science and Technology, Chandra Shekhar Azad University of Agriculture and Technology, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Naveen Kumar Maurya

School of Agriculture, Sanskriti University, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India

Mandeep Kumar

Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Allied Industries, Rama University, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Nisha Yadav

Department of Agricultural Extension Education, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University of Agriculture and Technology (SVPUAT), Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Durgesh Kumar

Maurya Agronomy, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Sant Kabir Nagar, Uttar Pradesh, India