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# The leaf ionome as a multivariable system to detect a plant's physiological status

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The contention that quantitative profiles of biomolecules contain information about the physiological state of the organism has motivated a variety of high-throughput molecular profiling experiments. However, unbiased discovery and validation of biomolecular signatures from these experiments remains a challenge. Here we show that the *Arabidopsis thaliana* (*Arabidopsis*) leaf ionome, or elemental composition, contains such signatures, and we establish statistical models that connect these multivariable signatures to defined physiological responses, such as iron (Fe) and phosphorus (P) homeostasis. Iron is essential for plant growth and development, but potentially toxic at elevated levels. Because of this, shoot Fe concentrations are tightly regulated and show little variation over a range of Fe concentrations in the environment, making them a poor probe of a plant's Fe status. By evaluating the shoot ionome in plants grown under different Fe nutritional conditions, we have established a multivariable ionic signature for the Fe response status of *Arabidopsis*. This signature has been validated against known Fe-response proteins and allows the high-throughput detection of the Fe status of plants with a false negative/positive rate of 18%/16%. A "metascreen" of previously collected ionic data from 880 *Arabidopsis* mutants and natural accessions for this Fe response signature successfully identified the known Fe mutants *frd1* and *frd3*. A similar approach has also been taken to identify and use a shoot ionic signature associated with P homeostasis. This study establishes that multivariable ionic signatures of physiological states associated with mineral nutrient homeostasis do exist in *Arabidopsis* and are in principle robust enough to detect specific physiological responses to environmental or genetic perturbations.

*Arabidopsis* | biomarker | ionomics | multivariable signature

There has been an explosion of interest in the use of biomolecular signatures (e.g., RNA, protein, and metabolites) as a way to predict both the early onset of disease and possibly the susceptibility of certain individuals to a particular disease (e.g., refs. 1–3). There is also strong interest in using such molecular signatures as a data reduction tool to screen large multivariable datasets, for identification of the molecular networks that link a particular physiology to the genes that control it (e.g., ref. 4). To be practical, such molecular signatures should be tightly linked to the particular physiology of interest, and there is a growing consensus that signatures composed of multiple components are likely to be most useful (5). Although in recent years there has been an explosion of high-throughput profiling experiments, unbiased discovery and validation of molecular signatures is frequently hampered by limited availability of biological samples, difficulties in handling large datasets, and heterogeneous sources of variation.

The shoot ionome of a plant represents its mineral nutrient and trace element content (6), and is controlled by multiple physiological processes starting in the rhizosphere, and ending with evapotranspiration and phloem recycling. Alterations in any of the processes that transport inorganic ions from the soil

solution to the shoot could potentially affect the shoot ionome. Because of this, the shoot ionome is likely to be very sensitive to the physiological state of the plant, with different ionic signatures being reflective of different physiological states. Because the shoot is a much more accessible tissue for profiling than roots, such shoot ionic signatures would be useful as markers for the particular physiological condition with which they are associated. Using a high-throughput elemental profiling and data handling pipeline to rapidly analyze the shoot elemental composition of thousands of *Arabidopsis* plants, we have identified and used multivariable ionic signatures that are diagnostic for a plant's response to reduced Fe or P nutrition.

Iron is an essential nutrient required for many biochemical processes in plants, including photosynthesis and respiration, where it participates in electron transport processes. Plants respond to Fe deficiency by increasing both Fe bioavailability and Fe transport (7). In dicotyledonous plants, including *Arabidopsis*, this is achieved through Strategy 1 processes in the roots that include increases in  $H^+$  efflux, ferric-chelate reductase (FRO) activity, and the accumulation of the  $Fe^{2+}$  transporter IRT1 facilitating uptake of Fe. Here we show that these mechanisms are capable of maintaining stable concentrations of shoot Fe in plants across a 10-fold range of available Fe concentrations in the growth media. Because of this homeostasis, shoot Fe concentrations are not a good indicator of the Fe response state of a plant, making it difficult to detect the Fe status of plants by simply measuring shoot Fe concentrations. However, by evaluating the *Arabidopsis* shoot ionome in plants grown under different Fe nutritional conditions, we have established a multivariable shoot ionic signature, consisting of manganese (Mn), cobalt (Co), zinc (Zn), molybdenum (Mo), and cadmium (Cd), that is indicative of a plant's Fe nutritional status. This signature has been validated against known Fe response genes (*IRT1* and *FRO2*). Using a logistic regression model (LRM), trained on this multivariable ionic signature, we can successfully classify the Fe response state of individual plants. This model can detect alterations in the Fe response status of a plant before the onset of changes in shoot Fe concentrations that are driven by a breakdown in the Fe homeostatic mechanisms. It is this failure of the Fe homeostatic mechanisms that generally leads to chlorosis and reduced plant growth, the classic symp-

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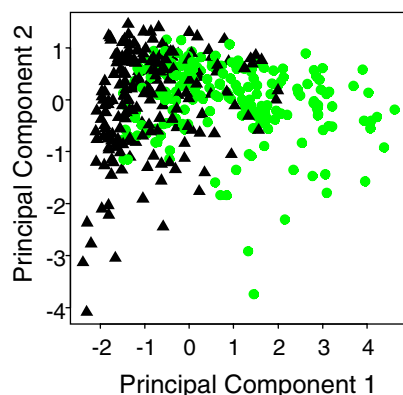
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**Fig. 2.** Box plot of the Mn, Co, Zn, Mo, and Cd concentrations of *Arabidopsis* (Col-0) shoots when grown with varying concentrations of FeHBED. For each concentration, the box represents the interquartile range (IQR), the bisecting line represents the median, the whiskers represent 1.5 times the IQR, and the dots represent outlier points. All five elements are significantly different ( $P < 0.001$ ) between treatments. Plants ( $n = 21$ ) were grown for 5 weeks in soil.

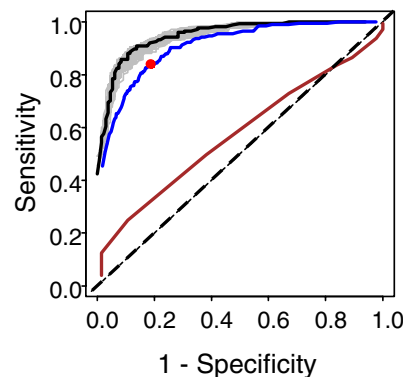


**Fig. 3.** PCA based on the shoot concentrations of Mn, Co, Zn, Mo, and Cd of *Arabidopsis* (Col-0) plants grown with low ( $1\ \mu\text{M}$  FeHBED) or high ( $10\ \mu\text{M}$  FeHBED) Fe fertilization. The analysis was performed on data from  $n = 200$  plants for each group. Green circles and black triangles represent data from plants grown under low and high Fe conditions, respectively.

Cd, all of which can be transported by IRT1 (10), and decreases in the concentration of Mo in shoot tissue (Fig. 2).

**Classification of the Fe Response Status Based on the Shoot Ionome.** Given that shoot concentrations of Mn, Co, Zn, Mo, and Cd vary with the Fe nutritional status of *Arabidopsis*, we wanted to establish whether the concentration of these elements in shoot tissue could be used to discriminate plants responding to sufficient and deficient Fe. Principal component analysis (PCA) is a nonsupervised dimension reduction method. It attempts to select a small number of orthogonal coordinates (expressed as linear combinations of inputs) to maximize the overall explained variation in the data, regardless of class labels (11, 12). PCA with the shoot concentrations of Mn, Co, Zn, Mo, and Cd from a random selection of 200 plants grown under Fe-sufficiency and 200 plants from Fe-deficiency conditions revealed systematic, nonrandom structure within the data (Fig. 3). We observed that the principal components 1 and 2 provided reasonable separation between Fe-sufficient and -deficient plants (Fig. 3).

Given that the PCA established that shoot concentrations of Mn, Co, Zn, Mo, and Cd contain information that can discriminate plants based on their Fe status, we developed a statistical model that could be used to classify plants as either responding to Fe deficiency or Fe sufficiency, based on their shoot Mn, Co, Zn, Mo, and Cd concentrations. To develop a statistical classification model, we randomly selected a training set of 200 plants responding to Fe sufficiency and 200 to Fe deficiency, from the larger set of 1,769 Fe-sufficient and 407 Fe-deficient plants. Thus, the training set can be considered representative of a larger population of plants grown under conditions of either Fe sufficiency or Fe deficiency. Using this training set, we derived a classification model for plants responding to Fe sufficiency versus Fe deficiency based on logistic regression (13). A logistic regression takes as input the values of multiple predictor variables, such as the shoot ionome, and outputs a probability of showing a response to Fe deficiency, in this example. Classification is then performed by selecting a probability cutoff. Plants with probabilities above this cutoff are classified as responding to Fe deficiency. To determine an optimal set of predictor variables, we considered eight logistic regressions that take as input combinations of shoot concentrations of Mn, Co, Zn, Mo, and Cd and their interactions [supporting information (SI) Table S1; also available as SI are SI Text, Figs. S1–S4, Table S2, Dataset S1, and the script and input files discussed below, which are available at [www.ionomicshub.org/publications](http://www.ionomicshub.org/publications)] and selected the model with the best predictive ability. We measured the predic-



**Fig. 4.** Receiver-operator curves of the various logistic regression models. Black line, simple model built and tested on training set; gray lines, simple models built on the bootstrapped set and tested on training set; blue line, simple model built on training set and tested on validation set; brown line, model built solely by using shoot Fe concentrations and tested on the full training set; red dot, cutoff level chosen for further studies; dotted line, unity, a model with no predictive ability.

tive ability of each model using the area under the receiver-operator curve, which plots sensitivity (i.e., the fraction of plants responding to Fe deficiency classified as such) versus one minus specificity (i.e., the fraction of plants responding to Fe sufficiency that are classified as such) for each model under various probability cutoffs. The model maximizing the area under the curve has the best predictive ability.

Because each fitted logistic regression model is optimized with respect to the training dataset, the training set-based estimates produce an inadequate estimate of performance of the model on future data. To obtain a more realistic estimate of performance of each of the eight logistic regressions, we separated the training set into 11 randomly selected subsets, estimated the predictive error of the model on each subset using bootstrap, and reported the estimates of the area under the receiver-operator curve and the associated standard error (Table S1). The bootstrap is an established statistical technique frequently used for logistic regression and involves repeated resampling of the training set and model fitting for improved estimation and prediction (14). Our final selected model is the simplest logistic regression (i.e., the regression with the smallest number of predictor variables) that had the area under the receiver-operator curve, which was within the 99% confidence interval (only a 2% difference in area) of the area of the best-performing model. Models built by using any four of the five elements were 4–20% worse than the five-element model.

The next step of the analysis was to determine an optimal probability cutoff for classification of the Fe response status of plants in future experiments. To this end, we used bootstrap to repeatedly fit the selected logistic regression to the resampled training set of 200 plants responding to Fe sufficiency and 200 responding to Fe deficiency (Fig. 4, gray lines), determined the probability cutoff that maximized sensitivity and specificity at each bootstrap iteration, and calculated the optimal cutoff as the median value of optimal cutoffs over all bootstrap iterations (Fig. 4, red dot). Median values were used because they are less sensitive to outliers.

Finally, the performance of our selected model combined with the selected probability cutoff was characterized by using a validation dataset, namely 1,569 plants grown under Fe-sufficient and 207 under Fe-deficient conditions not selected for the training set (Fig. 4, blue line). Because the validation set was not used at any stage of model fitting and selection, it provides an unbiased estimate of the performance of logistic regression



**Table 1. Prediction of Fe status of *Arabidopsis* Col-0 plants grown in altered nutrient environments**

Element (Hoagland's)	Level	Concentration	Plants predicted to be Fe-deficient, %
P (250 $\mu$ M)	Low	62.5 $\mu$ M	7*
	High	nd	nd
Mg (0.5 mM)	Low	0.0	0
	High	4 mM	0
Mn (2.25 $\mu$ M)	Low	0.0	0
	High	18.3 $\mu$ M	11*
B (11.5 $\mu$ M)	Low	0.0	0
	High	90 $\mu$ M	11*
Ca (1 mM)	Low	0.0	0
	High	8 mM	0
NO <sub>3</sub> (2.5 mM)	Low	0.0	0
	High	24 mM	0
Zn (0.2 $\mu$ M)	Low	0.0	0
	High	1.6 $\mu$ M	11*
Cu (75 nM)	Low	0.0	0
	High	0.6 $\mu$ M	0

Each element in the nutrient solution was either increased or decreased/removed from the standard concentration in our normal Hoagland's nutrient solution (shown below element name). The Fe model was used to predict the Fe response status of the plants. All of the *Arabidopsis* (Col-0) plants grown at the same time with the normal nutrient solution had <25% of the plants predicted to be in the low-Fe state. nd, not determined.

\*Values do not exceed the miscall rate predicted from the modeling and are therefore not significant. Nine plants were grown in each treatment except for P where  $n = 108$ .

model in future experiments. The logistic regression model produced a sensitivity of 82% (false negative rate of 18%) and a specificity of 84% (false positive rate of 16%) when applied to the validation set, which results in a >80% accuracy in assigning the Fe response status of a given plant, based on its shoot ionome. A logistic regression model built by using only the shoot Fe concentrations has no predictive power (Fig. 4, compare brown line with dashed line).

To test whether the logistic regression model was specific for a response to Fe nutritional status, we grew Col-0 wild-type plants in growth media fertilized with nutrient solution containing either reduced or elevated concentrations, compared with the normal nutrient solution, of B, Ca, Mg, Mn, Cu, Zn, P, and nitrate, all under sufficient Fe (Table 1). The model did not identify significant numbers of plants (i.e., greater than the error rate predicted from the modeling) grown in any of these conditions as responding to Fe-deficient growth conditions.

**Identification of Plants Responding to Fe Deficiency Under Fe-Sufficient Growth Conditions.** The trained and validated logistic regression model was tested to establish its utility for the identification of *Arabidopsis* lines showing altered Fe homeostasis. We used the logistic regression model to perform a metascreen of previous collected shoot ionomic data of 880 homozygous T-DNA insertional mutants, fast neutron and EMS mutants, and natural accessions, a dataset of over 70,000 plants, for plants with altered Fe responses. We used the model to predict the Fe status of all plants from lines run in experiments where  $\geq 75\%$  of the Col-0 wild-type plants were classified as Fe-sufficient, and the test line had more than three replicate plants. Lines where >75% of the plants were identified as responding to Fe deficiency by the logistic regression model were classified as Fe-deficient (Dataset S1). This approach identified the known Fe mutants *frd3-1* and *frd1-1* (15–18), which have mutations in *FRD3* encoding an Fe-citrate transporter involved in translocation of Fe from roots

to shoots (16), and *FRO2* (19), a gene encoding a ferric chelate reductase known to be required for normal Fe homeostasis.

**Response to Phosphate Deficiency.** To determine whether this approach would be applicable for other environmental conditions, we developed a multivariable, shoot ionomic model of the response of *Arabidopsis* to varying phosphate levels in the growth media (SI Text). Plants were watered with fertilizer solution containing either 62.5  $\mu$ M phosphate (deficient) or 250  $\mu$ M phosphate (sufficient). The occurrence of a P response in plants grown in these conditions was confirmed by using expression of a purple acid phosphatase (*PAP23*) known to be elevated in roots under P deficiency (8, 20) (Fig. S1). Unlike Fe as described above (Fig. 1), plants grown in P-deficient conditions accumulated less shoot P than those grown in sufficient conditions (Fig. S2), so shoot P could be used as a marker for P-deficient growth conditions. However, a six-element logistic regression model based on the shoot concentrations of B, P, Co, Cu, Zn, and As performed significantly better than P alone, with a 4% false negative rate and a 6% false positive rate when detecting whether plants were responding to P deficiency. This P response model was also shown to be insensitive to alterations in the concentrations of B, Ca, Mg, Mn, Fe, Cu, Zn, and nitrate in the nutrient solution (Table S2), confirming the specificity of the model for detecting plants responding to P-deficient growth conditions.

## Discussion

Iron concentrations in *Arabidopsis* shoots are tightly regulated and do not vary even when the concentration of available Fe in the growth media is changed 10-fold (Fig. 1). Such homeostasis involves the Strategy I response that includes enhanced activity of a root-specific ferric-chelate reductase *FRO2*, increased Fe uptake via the Fe-transporter *IRT1*, and increased acidification of the rhizosphere (for review, see ref. 7). Not only do these responses lead to increased Fe uptake, but a side effect of these changes is an increase in the uptake and accumulation of Mn, Co, Zn, and Cd (10, 18, 21) via elevated *IRT1* expression (10). Furthermore, the reduced rhizospheric and apoplastic pH caused by this Strategy 1 response is also likely to reduce the availability of molybdate in the rhizosphere, because the solubility of molybdate is reduced as the pH is reduced (22). Such decreased solubility of molybdate would be expected to cause reduced Mo bioavailability and plant uptake (22). In support of this model, we recently observed that hyperacidification of the apoplast/rhizosphere, by overexpression of the vacuolar pyrophosphatase (*AVP1-1*) in *Arabidopsis* (23), causes an 81–85% reduction in shoot Mo accumulation (experimental trays 369, 407, and 1,066; data available at [www.purdue.edu/dp/ionomics](http://www.purdue.edu/dp/ionomics)). Interestingly, Mn, Co, Zn, and Cd were not significantly altered in this line, suggesting that rhizosphere pH changes in the *AVP1-1* overexpression line affect Mo only.

Similar to Fe homeostasis, plants also respond to changes in P availability in the environment to maintain adequate supplies of inorganic phosphate for essential biochemical processes. These involve biochemical responses both to conserve internal inorganic phosphate and to enhance the bioavailability and uptake of external P (for review, see ref. 24). Side-effects of these responses to P deficiency are the alterations in shoot B, P, Co, Cu, Zn, and As concentrations we observe. Under P deficiency, the expression of several high-affinity phosphate transporters, which are thought to be required for As uptake, are increased (25–28). Also, the suggestion that under P deficiency *Arabidopsis* scavenges metals such as Zn to limit the formation of complexes with P (8) may explain the increased shoot Zn observed under P deficiency. However, the molecular basis for interactions between P nutrition and the accumulation of B, Co, and Cu is less clear.



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