Agrobacterium-mediated transformation and regeneration of Freesia × hybrida

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Received December 18, 2014; accepted March 1, 2015 (Edited by S. Ogita)

Abstract A method for Agrobacterium-mediated transformation of Freesia × hybrida is described. Cormlet-derived calli of two cultivars, ‘Mosera’ and ‘Ishikawa f3’ were co-cultivated with Agrobacterium tumefaciens strain EHA105 harboring the binary vector pIG121-Hm, which included hygromycin phosphotransferase gene and an intron-containing β-glucuronidase gene in the T-DNA region. Callus pieces were co-cultivated with A. tumefaciens on the callus proliferation medium [Murashige and Skoog (MS) medium containing 1 mg l⁻¹ thidiazuron, 1 mg l⁻¹ dicamba, 20 mg l⁻¹ 3′,5′-dimethoxy-4′-hydroxyacetophenone, 1% (w/v) glucose, 3% (w/v) sucrose, and 0.2% (w/v) Gelrite]. Then, they were cultured on the callus proliferation medium containing 300 mg l⁻¹ cefotaxime and 10 mg l⁻¹ hygromycin B. Hygromycin-resistant lines of both cultivars regenerated into plantlets after transfer onto MS medium containing 2 mg l⁻¹ 3-indoleacetic acid and 3 mg l⁻¹ 6-benzyl aminopurine and/or plant growth regulator-free MS medium. Transgenic plants were identified by β-glucuronidase assay and verified by Southern blot analysis. Two transgenic plant lines were obtained from 475 callus pieces of ‘Mosera’, and one transgenic plant line was obtained from 290 callus pieces of ‘Ishikawa f3’. This is the first report of the genetic transformation of Freesia. This method will allow the genetic improvement of this horticulturally important flower.

Key words: Agrobacterium tumefaciens, cormlet, Freesia × hybrida, genetic transformation, nodular callus.

Freesia is a member of the subfamily Ixioideae of the family Iridaceae, and is native to the Cape Province in South Africa. The modern Freesia, Freesia × hybrida, is derived from crosses among several Freesia species. It is a popular cut flower because of plant and flower forms, flower fragrance and wide color variations of flower. In the Netherlands, the sales amount of Freesia as a cut flower was approximately €50 million in 2010 (http://www.cbs.nl/en-GB/menu/home/default.htm). Commercially sold Freesia corms are sometimes infected by viral and/or fungal pathogens. Viruses are particularly problematic for Freesia, because the plants are propagated each year by corms and cormlets that may harbor viruses (Stein 1995). To obtain virus-free plants, there have been some attempts to propagate Freesia using tissue culture techniques such as meristem culture (Brants and Vermeulen 1965; Brants 1968). However, the problem of viral contamination has been solved neither by culture techniques nor by conventional breeding methods because of the lack of available genetic resources for virus resistance. Therefore, genetic transformation is a promising alternative approach. Genetic transformations of Gladiolus and Iris germanica in the same family, Iridaceae, were already reported. Transformation of Gladiolus was demonstrated by particle bombardments of cormel slices (Kamo et al. 1995a), suspension cells and callus (Kamo et al. 1995b). Transformants of Iris germanica were achieved using regenerable suspension cultures via Agrobacterium-mediated method (Jeknic et al. 1999). In this report, we describe the Agrobacterium-mediated genetic transformation of Freesia × hybrida. This is the first report of genetic transformation of members of the Freesia genus.

We used cormlets of two cultivars, ‘Mosera’ and ‘Ishikawa f3’ (bred at the Ishikawa Agriculture and Forestry Research Center). The cormlets were kept at 30°C for 8 weeks to break dormancy. After the heat treatment, the cormlets were sterilized as follows: first, they were immersed in 0.5% (w/v) Benlate T (thiuram 20% and benomyl 20%; Hokko Chemical Industry Co., Tokyo, Japan) for 20 min. Next, they were dipped briefly in 70% (v/v) ethanol and then immersed in a 5% (v/v)
sodium hypochlorite solution containing 0.1% (v/v) polyoxyethylene sorbitan monolaurate (Tween 20) for 20 min. Finally, they were rinsed three times in sterile water. The surface-sterilized cormlets were immediately cut aseptically into ca. 5-mm cubes. The cubes were placed on the callus proliferation medium [MS medium (Murashige and Skoog 1962) containing 1 mg l⁻¹ thidiazuron (TDZ) (Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd., Osaka, Japan), 1 mg l⁻¹ dicamba (Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd.), 3% (w/v) sucrose, and 0.2% (w/v) Gelrite (San-eigen FFI Co., Ltd., Osaka, Japan)]. All the media used in the present study were adjusted to pH 5.8 prior to autoclaving at 120 °C for 15 min. The cultures were maintained at 22 ± 2 °C in the dark. Calli were produced after 6–8 weeks, and were subcultured onto fresh callus proliferation medium every 4–6 weeks. The calli of both cultivars were light yellow and nodular (Figure 1A).

The calli of ‘Mosera’ produced adventitious buds by 3–4 weeks after transfer to the regeneration medium [MS medium containing 3 mg l⁻¹ 3-indoleacetic acid (IAA) (Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd.), 3 mg l⁻¹ 6-benzyl aminopurine (6-BA) (Nakalai Tesque, Kyoto, Japan), 3% (w/v) sucrose, 0.6% (w/v) agar (Gao et al. 2010)]. For ‘Mosera’, the adventitious buds and green spots from nodular calli were transferred onto plant growth regulator (PGR)-free MS medium [MS medium containing 3% (w/v) sucrose and 0.6% (w/v) agar] to induce plantlet regeneration. For ‘Ishikawa f3’, the calli were cultured on PGR-free MS medium. They produced adventitious buds by 6–8 weeks after transfer to this medium. Plantlets of both cultivars were regenerated by approximately 3–4 months after transferring the calli onto the regeneration medium and/or PGR-free MS medium. For regeneration, cultures were maintained at 22 ± 2 °C under a 16-h light/8-h dark photoperiod, and were subcultured onto fresh PGR-free MS medium every 4–5 weeks.

For transformation experiments, we used calli 3–5 weeks after subculture. We used Agrobacterium tumefaciens strain EHA105 (Hood et al. 1993), which harbors the binary vector pIG121-Hm (Ohta et al. 1990). This binary vector contains the neomycin phosphotransferase II gene (nptII), under the control of the nopaline synthase gene (nos) promoter and the nos terminator; the hygromycin phosphotransferase gene (hpt), under the control of the cauliflower mosaic virus (CaMV) 35S promoter and the nos terminator (Figure 2A). This bacterial strain was cultured for 2 days at 26 °C on LB medium solidified with 1.5% (w/v) agar containing 50 mg l⁻¹ kanamycin monosulfate (Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd., Osaka, Japan).
and 50 mg l⁻¹ hygromycin B (Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd., Osaka, Japan). The bacteria were collected and suspended in the co-cultivation medium [MS medium supplemented with 1 mg l⁻¹ TDZ, 1 mg l⁻¹ dicamba, 3% (w/v) sucrose, 20 mg l⁻¹ 3',5'-dimethoxy-4'-hydroxyacetophenone (acetosyringone) (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) and 1% (w/v) glucose]. For Agrobacterium inoculation, the bacterial suspension was adjusted to an OD₆₀₀ of 0.15–0.20, and then shaken on a reciprocal shaker at 120 rpm for 2.5 h, in the dark, at 25°C. Calli of both cultivars were cut into pieces with a diameter of ca. 1 cm, and then the pieces were soaked in the bacterial suspension for 10 min. The pieces were removed from the suspension and blotted dry with sterile Kimwipes (Nippon Paper Crecia Company, Tokyo, Japan) to remove excess bacteria. Then, they were transferred to the co-cultivation medium solidified with 0.2% (w/v) Gelrite and co-cultivated with Agrobacterium at 25°C in the dark for 7 days. After co-cultivation, the calli of both cultivars were transferred onto the callus selection medium, which was the callus proliferation medium with the addition of 300 mg l⁻¹ cefotaxime (Claforan) (Sanofi Aventis, Tokyo, Japan) and 10 mg l⁻¹ hygromycin B. The calli pieces were cultured at 22±2°C in the dark and subcultured every 3 weeks onto the fresh selection medium, in which the cefotaxime concentration was gradually decreased to 0 mg l⁻¹.

The calli of ‘Mosera’ and ‘Ishikawa f3’ were subjected to a β-glucuronidase (GUS) histochemical assay (Kosugi et al. 1990) 2–3 weeks after co-cultivation with A. tumefaciens to identify those harboring the foreign T-DNA. Tissues were incubated for 24 h at 37°C in 150 mM sodium phosphate buffer (pH 7.0), 20% methanol (to eliminate the endogenous GUS activity) and 1 mM 5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl-β-D-glucuronide (X-Gluc). Blue spots were observed in calli of ‘Mosera’ (data not shown) and ‘Ishikawa f3’ (Figure 1B), indicating successful delivery of the gus gene and its expression. Ten calli of each cultivar were subjected to the GUS histochemical assay, and 0–3 blue spots per callus (average, 1 spot per callus) were detected. There was no blue staining in the non-infected calli of ‘Ishikawa f3’ (Figure 1B), but some blue staining was detected in non-infected calli of ‘Mosera’ (data not shown).

At 8–9 weeks after subculture, the calli of ‘Mosera’ and ‘Ishikawa f3’ were transferred onto the regeneration and PGR-free MS media without hygromycin B, respectively. They were cultured at 22±2°C under a 16-h light/8-h dark photoperiod. Hygromycin B tended to inhibit regeneration from calli. Therefore, the hygromycin B-free media were used for the first 3 weeks and then the media which contained 5 mg l⁻¹ hygromycin B were used for 6 weeks. Both ‘Mosera’ and ‘Ishikawa f3’ calli were subsequently cultured on PGR-free MS media containing 10 mg l⁻¹ hygromycin B. In ‘Mosera’ and ‘Ishikawa f3’, the totals of 475 and 290 calli were co-cultivated with A. tumefaciens in six and three independent trials, respectively (Table 1). The calli on hygromycin-containing media became brown within 1–3 months, but hygromycin-resistant (Hygr) lines gradually grew from

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**Table 1. Results of transformation experiments on two Freesia cultivars.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultivar</th>
<th>No. of tested calli</th>
<th>No. of regenerated plantlets</th>
<th>No. of GUS-positive plantlets</th>
<th>No. of transformed plantlets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mosera</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishikawa f3</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aPlantlets showing positive result in β-glucuronidase assay.
the surface of the dead calli (Figure 1C). In total, 27 and 9 independent Hyg' plantlets of 'Mosera' and 'Ishikawa f3', respectively, were regenerated by 10–12 months after _A. tumefaciens_ inoculation (Figure 1D, Table 1).

When the leaves of Hyg' plantlets (i.e., putative transgenic plantlets) were subjected to the GUS assay, a GUS-positive response was observed in 2/27 'Mosera' plantlets and 1/9 'Ishikawa f3' plantlets (Figure 1E, Table 1). The GUS-positive plantlets were transplanted into soil and grown at 23°C under a 16-h light/8-h dark photoperiod in a phytotron after acclimatization (Figure 1F).

Southern blot analysis was used to confirm the integration of foreign genes into the genome of the _Freesia_ plants. Total genomic DNA was isolated from young leaves of putative transgenic plants (GUS positive plants; two plants derived from 'Mosera' and one from 'Ishikawa f3') and wild-type plants (non-transgenic 'Mosera' and 'Ishikawa f3' plants) using the CTAB method (Murray and Thompson 1980). Genomic DNAs were digested with _BamH_I or _Hin_dIII. Southern blotting was performed using the DIG non-radioactive nucleic labelling and detection system (Roche Diagnostics, Mannheim, Germany) according to the manufacturer's instructions. A part of the _gus_ coding region was amplified by PCR and labeled using the primer pair 5′-CTG CTG TCG GCT TTA ACC TC-3′ (forward) and 5′-TGA GCG TCG CAG AAC ATT AC-3′ (reverse). The resulting fragment was used as a probe (Figure 2A). Southern blot analysis with the _gus_-specific probe revealed one to two bands when the genomic DNA from three Hyg' plants was digested with _Hind_III (Figure 2B). This result indicated that the transformants had a single copy or two copies of the introduced genes in different patterns, and that they were independent transgenic lines.

The transgenic plants of 'Mosera' flowered after 60 days of a low-temperature flower-inducing treatment at 10°C. The flower shape was normal (Figure 1G) and corms were formed at the subterranean part after flowering (Figure 1H).

In conclusion, this is the first report of the _Agrobacterium_-mediated genetic transformation of _Freesia hybrida_. The methods may be applicable to a wide range of _Freesia_ cultivars. This transformation protocol for _Freesia hybrida_ could be used to produce varieties with new flower colors, longer flower life and resistance to fungal and viral pathogens.

**Acknowledgements**

This work was partly supported by the Mitani Research and Development Support Foundation.

**References**


