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► To cite this version:

Pilar Fernandez-Conradi, Bastien Castagneyrol, Hervé Jactel, Sergio Rasmann. Combining phytochemicals and multitrophic interactions to control forest insect pests. *Current Opinion in Insect Science*, 2021, 44, pp.101-106. <10.1016/j.cois.2021.04.007>. <hal-03252404>

HAL Id: hal-03252404

<https://hal.science/hal-03252404v1>

Submitted on 7 Jun 2021

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Combining phytochemicals and multitrophic interactions to control forest insect pests

Pilar Fernandez-Conradi^{1,2}, Bastien Castagneyrol³,
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Forest pests can cause massive ecological and economic damage worldwide. Ecologically sound solutions to diminish forest insect pest impacts include the use of their natural enemies, such as predators and parasitoids, as well as entomopathogenic fungi, bacteria or viruses. Phytochemical compounds mediate most interactions between these organisms, but knowledge of such chemically mediated multitrophic relationships is still at its infancy for forest systems, particularly when compared to agricultural systems. Here, we highlight the main gaps in how phytochemicals of forest trees facilitate or interfere with trophic interactions between trees, insect herbivores, and interacting organisms including predators, parasitoids and microbes. We propose future avenues of research on phytochemical-based biocontrol of forest pests taking into account the characteristics of trees and forests.

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Current Opinion in Insect Science 2021, **44**:101–106

This review comes from a themed issue on **Parasites/parasitoids/biological control**

Edited by **Feng Zhu**

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cois.2021.04.007>

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Introduction

Forests ecosystems cover about one third of the world land base and provide vital services to people, such as climate regulation, wood production or biodiversity reservoir [1]. But forests and their services are threatened by a diversity of forest pests responsible for important ecological and economic losses worldwide [2,3]. Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and distribution of native and invasive insect outbreaks [4],

increasing the need to develop more efficient and sustainable pest control strategies.

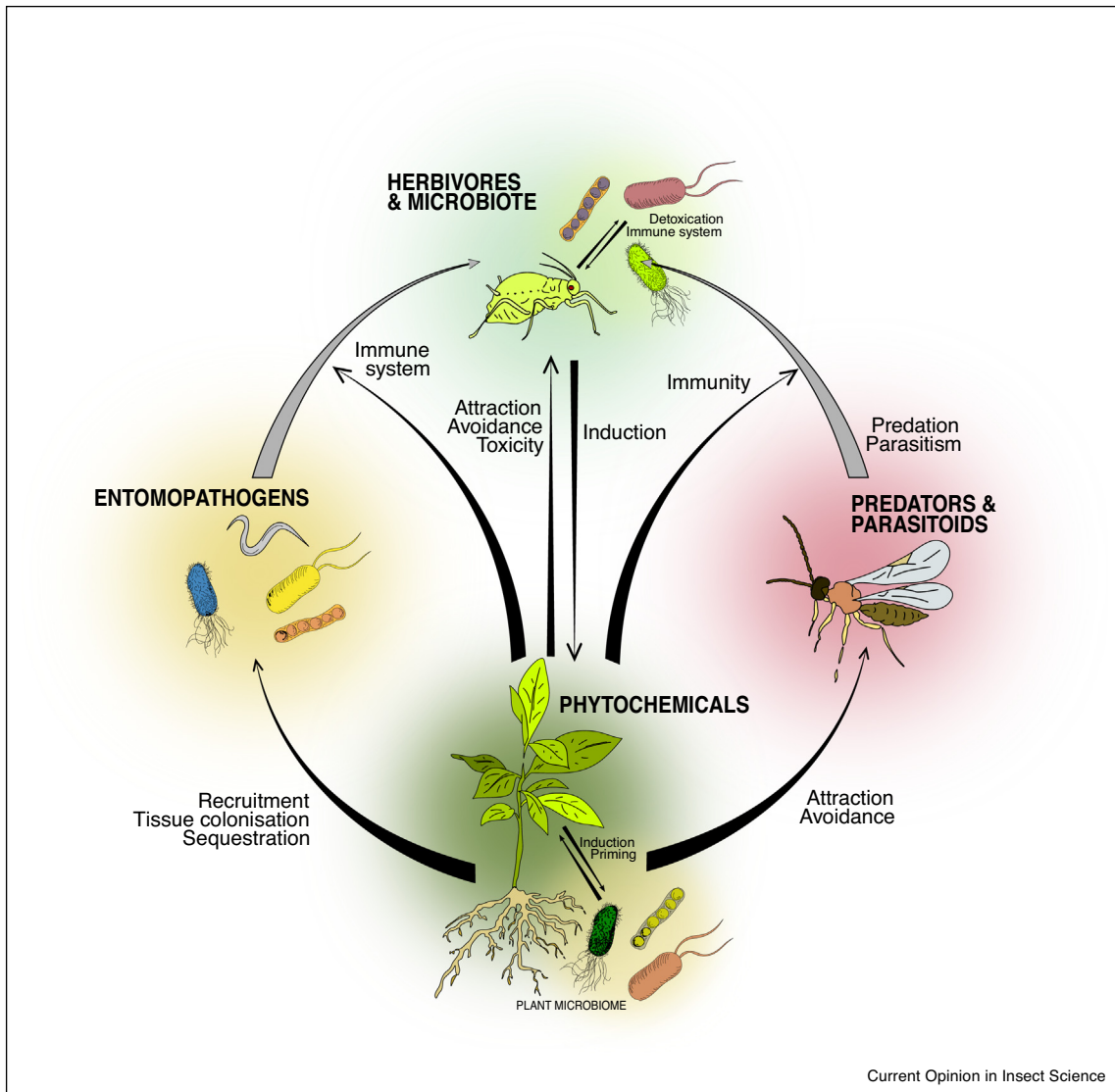
In nature, insect herbivory is ultimately controlled by bottom-up and top-down forces that are both influenced by plant phytochemicals [5]. Bottom-up forces include the production of toxic phytochemicals that inhibit, toxify or even kill the herbivore that has ingested the plant tissues [6]. On the other hand, top-down forces include the production of information-rich chemical cues that attract herbivore enemies, or that modifies insect susceptibility to their pathogens [7]. Therefore, a common pest control strategy in forest systems involves the release and acclimation of non-native natural enemies (classical biological control [8]) or the enhancement of local native enemies (conservation biological control [9]). However, current understanding of how such trophic interactions are mediated or influenced by host plant chemistry remains limited [10–12].

Moreover, the production of phytochemicals by the plants, and how they impact insect pests, is also influenced by the microbes that are intimately associated with the plants and the insects [13]. So far, most work on the chemically-mediated interactions between insect pests, their natural enemies and their associated microbes, and how this can be used for effective biological control, has predominantly focused on agricultural systems. Accordingly, comparatively fewer chemical-ecology studies have been targeted for reducing insect pest load in forest ecosystems, and this merits further attention. Below, we highlight recent research on the mediation of tri-trophic interactions between trees, insect herbivores and their enemies by plant phytochemicals, including the role of the tree and insect microbiomes (Figure 1). We further discuss how this research can be exploited for controlling forest pests in a more ecologically-sound manner.

Chemically mediated trophic interactions between plants, herbivores predators, parasitoids and entomopathogens Semiachemicals mediates insect herbivore host recognition by predators and parasitoids

A wealth of research has shown that when an insect herbivore damages a plant, lays its eggs or sometimes only lands on it, it triggers the production of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) by that plant [14,15]. Such

Figure 1



Overview of how phytochemicals can mediate or interfere with multitrophic interactions between trees, insect herbivores and their enemies. Phytochemicals can influence herbivores directly, by modifying insect searching behavior (i.e. host plant attraction or avoidance) and the quality of their host plant (i.e. toxicity). Moreover, phytochemicals can also influence herbivores indirectly, by modifying their immune response to their natural enemies (entomopathogens, predators and parasitoids) and natural enemy's ability to recognise and/or colonise the tree. Additionally, phytochemical production and its effect on herbivores may depend on plant and insect microbiomes (i.e. some bacteria, fungi, virus, protist and nematodes), respectively. Plant microbiome can modify plant phytochemicals by inducing plant defense against herbivory or even priming the plant against future herbivore attacks. On the other hand, insect microbiome may detoxify or interfere with secondary compounds production by the plant and influence insect immune system. Black arrows represent direct interactions mediated by phytochemicals. Grey arrows represent indirect consequences of phytochemicals on trophic interactions between insect herbivores and their natural enemies.

herbivore-induced VOCs can then be perceived by the natural enemies of the herbivorous insect as semiochemical cues informing on the presence or even the identity of their host or prey [16]. The resulting reduction in herbivory is called induced indirect resistance [17] and indirect defense when it ultimately increases plant fitness [18]. Tritrophic interactions mediated by VOCs are

widespread in the plant kingdom, including tree-based systems; such as in pine [19,20], birch [21], beech [22], hornbeam [23], oak [23], linden [23], willow [24,25], elm [11], wild apple [26], eucalyptus [27] and fig [24]. However, for obvious methodological reasons related to sampling in the tree canopy of mature forests, and sampling in outdoor variable conditions, most studies on VOCs

emitted by trees have been carried out on excised branches or potted saplings. The few experiments conducted in more realistic conditions have thus resolved to use young and small trees [11,22–24; but see Ref. 28]. These issues raise the question about the effectiveness of VOCs in dense forests of tall trees. First, VOCs emitted by the leaves of trees must be perceived by herbivores' natural enemies against a background of abundant and complex odours emitted by the entire canopy [22], which, added to the fact VOCs can degrade quickly by interacting with atmospheric gases [29], may dilute their effectiveness. Second, tree-to-tree signalling or eavesdropping [25,29] can lead to the emission of info-chemicals from neighbouring trees, reinforcing, or, on the contrary, disturbing the perception of attractive signals by natural enemies. Third, forests are characterized by a great diversity of herbivorous species, which can combine their attacks on the same tree, and inevitably induce a larger and more diverse production of VOCs. Finally, VOCs can be perceived by a more or less specialized guild of natural enemies [22]. Thus, the release of VOCs, upon herbivore damage, can influence more complex trophic interactions than predation, such as apparent competition [18] or hyper-parasitism [30]. It would therefore be interesting to combine multiple chemical induction experiments on adult trees with exhaustive arthropod community sampling, and including parasitoid rearing protocols, not only to better understand their ecological and evolutionary relevance [17], but also the application perspectives for forest protection.

Phytochemicals influence insect herbivore susceptibility to natural enemies

Secondary compounds may have direct effects on the predators, parasitoids and pathogens of insect herbivores, thus affecting biocontrol efficacy. For example, Sandre *et al.* [31], found that larvae of the Tussock moth (*Orgyia antiqua*) was more sensitive to the entomopathogenic fungus *Metarhizium anisopliae* when growing on less chemically-defended willows (*Salix* spp.), probably because of the negative effect of plant glycosides on the pathogen. Moreover, phytochemicals can also affect herbivore enemies, indirectly, because they modify the insect immune system [32,33], or because they can be sequestered by some insect species for their own protection [34,35]. For example, woolly bear caterpillars (*Grammia incorrupta*) are able to ingest plant toxins called pyrrolizine alkaloids, improving their survival against tachinid flies endoparasites [36]. Therefore, a better understanding of the phytochemical compounds implicated in insect-enemies interactions could improve biocontrol efficacy against forest pests [7,32], by either increasing or decreasing the natural enemies' efficacy and/or disabling the immune system of the insect. To achieve this aim, future studies will have to perform biological control experiments on various trees species or genotypes, exploring more thoroughly

the role of phytochemicals on these interactions by using chemical ecology approaches such as metabolomic profiling.

The microbiomes of trees and insects influence plant–herbivore interactions

Trees are holobionts. They are associated with a wide variety of microorganisms — the microbiome — that inhabits every tree organ (leaves: phyllosphere; roots: rhizosphere; internal plant tissues: endophytes) and with which they interact in numerous and complex ways [37,38^{*}]. Observational and experimental studies have revealed correlations between the taxonomic and functional characteristics of the plant microbiome and insect herbivory [39–41, but see Ref. 42]. Tree-associated microbes can act as either entomopathogenic agents or as mutualists, boosting tree defenses and producing metabolites which are deterrent or toxic to insects [43,44^{*}]. For example, Miller *et al.* [45] showed that a rugulosin-producing endophyte diminished defoliation by eastern spruce budworm. In addition, later research showed that seedling inoculation by such endophytic fungus can persist and produce rugulosin for a least ten years in the tree [46]. Based on these findings, the manipulation of tree microbial communities may be of great significance for the improved tolerance of forest ecosystems to pests. Moreover, plant microbiomes can induce and/or prime chemical defenses [38^{*},47], and modify the constitutive and induced production of VOCs [37,47], but how these molecules influence tritrophic interactions in forests is yet unknown. In this sense, a major task would be to identify and manipulate plant microbes with a special interest for pest control, taking into account the chemical interactions between the microbe and its host, as well as the indirect consequences on herbivore enemies. The increasing development of sequencing and metabolomic approaches have promising avenues to this end. However, it is primordial to understand how phytochemical compounds mediate plant-insect-enemies' interactions in order to predict ecosystem level consequences of microbiome manipulation.

On the other side, insect herbivores are also tightly associated with a large diversity of microorganisms on their body surface, in their gut or in specialized organs, which, in turn, can interact with phytochemicals in several ways [48^{**},49]. Well-known examples for how insect microbiomes are essential for forest insects is the microbial provision of cellulolytic and lignolytic enzymes, as well as essential nutrients, that the insects, in particular bark beetles, wood borers and to some extent sap-feeders, cannot directly obtain from their woody diet [39,50,51]. Moreover, the insect microbiome interacts with phytochemicals through the detoxification of plant chemical defenses [48^{**},52–54], or the regulation of plant signalling pathways triggered by herbivory [55–57]. For instance, Mason *et al.* [54] demonstrated that the bacteria

extracted from gypsy moth larvae midgut can detoxify phenolic glycosides and condensed tannins produced by trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*), although this results in only a slight increase of insect performance. Although our understanding of the ecological role of insect microbiomes is still very limited, recent research is highlighting their potential applications for forest pest control [58,59,60]. For example, the VOCs produced by conifer bark beetles-associated fungi can act as attractants or repellents for their insect hosts, but also their predators and parasitoids [58,60]. Exploiting these compounds could provide new means for efficient forest pest control. Additionally, the effects of phytochemicals on insect pathogens may also be mediated by the insect microbiome. In this sense, Gasmi *et al.* [61] showed, in an agricultural system, that artificial VOCs sprayed on *Spodoptera exigua* larvae increased their susceptibility to *Bacillus thuringiensis* and multiple nucleopolyhedroviruses, probably because of induced changes in the insect microbiome. Further research along these lines could help to identify new strategies for the biocontrol of pests. However, to our knowledge, this field of research is currently still very scant of examples for forested systems. Manipulations of insect microbiome may largely modify how insect pests exploit their host and improve top-down control by their natural enemies [49]. One of the forthcoming challenges for future studies will be to connect forest insect microbiome manipulations with their effects on higher trophic level organisms.

Conclusions and perspectives for future research

While the chemical ecology and phytochemical-mediated mechanisms of plant-insect-microbe interactions are intensively being addressed in model plants and crop systems, we are confronted with an enormous gap for similar research in forested systems. During the last two decades, phytochemicals have been progressively included as the focus of research for novel pest control strategies in forests. Phytochemicals may be used for developing more efficient biopesticides, repellents for insect pests, volatile based attractants for natural enemies, plant defenses elicitor sprays, as well for developing novel plant selection strategies based on phytochemical traits [14,16,30]. Nonetheless, current agroecological system-based knowledge cannot easily be transposed to forest systems. For example, the use of tree varieties that emit specific HIPVs, or the use of dispensers with natural enemies' attractants are hardly approachable for large forest systems (selection time too long [8] and/or too expensive [62]). Instead, a promising approach would be the 'attract-and-reward' strategy as conservation biological control method [63], which would combine, in a context of mixed-species forests, tree species of economic interest for production, companion species sensitive to herbivores and emitting VOCs and other tree or shrub species providing nesting (e.g. tree-related microhabitats) or food resources (e.g. pollen, honeydew) for the natural enemies. Similarly

challenging for forests' applications, compared to its agricultural counterpart, is the use of inducers of defenses in plants (e.g. by injecting or spraying jasmonic acid, salicylic acid, methyl jasmonate or methyl salicylate [16]), since the magnitude of other confounding factors seems to be much greater than within a crop field. However, recent research is showing that trees' defense induction can indeed be manipulated by exogenous phytohormonal applications [28,64,65,66], and in turn potentially exploitable for forest protection against economically important pests. Furthermore, a major task would be to identify the extent of tree defense inducers, from an individual scale to a forest community perspective, as well as the temporal scale of effectivity of such induction events. In this sense, we call for future studies combining experimental manipulations of tree defenses and diachronic surveys of tri-trophic interactions at different spatial scales in forest systems.

Plant-associated and insect-associated microbiomes are also promising, but yet largely underexplored, targets of research for the improvement of pest management control. For example, VOCs-producing microbes could be applied to trees in order to disrupt tree cues for insect herbivores food source location [14,67]. Moreover, the temporal stability of tritrophic interactions mediated by VOCs remains to be investigated in forests, especially for determining whether it is a sustainable option for managing herbivore damage over the long term of forestry cycles. The sustained release of VOCs can be a selection filter modifying the composition of herbivore communities (e.g. the ratio of specialists to generalists) and natural enemy communities [68]. The response of trees (e.g. induction of defense compounds or changes in leaf traits) depends on the phenotypic plasticity of plants but also on epigenetic processes that can change over time. The microbial communities involved may also be subject to selection pressure leading to micro-evolutionary processes. The combined result of these dynamics is difficult to predict, but working on perennial species such as trees, with a large number of herbivores cohabiting on the same individual, may provide a suitable field of study for such long-term studies.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

Acknowledgements

This project was financed by a Swiss National Science Foundation grant (31003A_179481) to SR. We thank Thomas Boivin and anonymous reviewer for comments on previous versions of the manuscript.

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