

Review

Harnessing molecular insights into plant biophysical traits: Prospects for priming defense against insect pests

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ABSTRACT

Among plant biotic stresses, insect pests are of major concern as they directly damage plant tissues and also act as vectors for plant pathogens. The co-evolution of crops and insect pests poses persistent challenges to agricultural productivity worldwide. Chemical insecticides have long served as the primary means of pest control. However, their indiscriminate use has resulted in increased production costs, environmental and ecosystem disruption, and increased risks to human health. These limitations underscore the need for sustainable, non-chemical pest management strategies that can effectively integrate and enhance existing Integrated Pest Management (IPM) programs. One of the most sustainable components of IPM is host plant resistance (HPR), in which plants employ antixenosis and antibiosis as defense strategies mediated through various biophysical, biochemical and behavioral responses. Cultivated genotypes and their wild relatives exhibit diverse resistance mechanisms against insect pests. Key biophysical traits contributing to resistance include leaf glossiness, trichome density, pod and leaf sheath pigmentation, plant vigor, pod wall thickness, cuticle thickness, lignification and other structural defenses. These biophysical traits are regulated by complex molecular and metabolic pathways that determine pest resistance. Understanding the genetic basis of these biophysical traits provides valuable opportunities for identifying and manipulating specific resistance-related genes. Deciphering the complex plant biophysical traits and their genetic basis of resistance, offers promising avenues for immune priming by developing improved crop varieties through new breeding techniques (NBTs). By integrating ecological, genetics and breeding perspectives, this review provides a coherent framework for harnessing plant biophysical traits through modern breeding and genome editing to achieve durable and sustainable insect resistance.

1. Introduction

Agriculture faces persistent challenges from various biotic and abiotic stressors, particularly insect pests, which pose a significant threat to production and productivity. These insect pests are responsible for reducing nearly one-fifth of global agricultural yield each year, despite the implementation of multiple management strategies (Junaid and Gokce, 2024). Although conventional insecticides remain the primary means of pest control in most agricultural systems, their use increases

production costs and elevates risks to the environment and human health (Devine and Furlong, 2007). To address these concerns, alternative strategies such as host plant resistance (HPR) can offer a sustainable and effective solution for crop protection.

The HPR refers to the ability of plants to defend themselves against insect pests through heritable traits that influence the extent of pest damage, and can serve as a fundamental component of sustainable long-term pest management strategies (Schoonhoven et al., 2005). HPR is categorized mainly into three types - antixenosis, antibiosis and

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tolerance (Fig. 1). Schuman and Baldwin (2016) proposed a dichotomous scheme distinguishing resistance (traits limiting plant injury) from tolerance (traits minimizing yield loss per injury unit), with resistance further classified into constitutive (e.g., leaf morphology) and inducible (e.g., induced chemical responses) and direct (e.g., leaf morphology or antibiosis) and indirect (attracting natural enemies of the herbivores). These categories of plant resistance mechanisms are governed by the plant's biophysical and biochemical characteristics, which influence insect behavior and development. Biophysical traits in particular play a crucial role during the early stages of plant-insect interactions by influencing insect host finding and settling behaviors.

Crop wild relatives (CWRs), the ancestors and close relatives of cultivated crops (Komal et al., 2023), constitute diverse morphological traits that provide natural defense against herbivores. Structural features such as leaf glossiness, trichomes, pod or sheath pigmentation, pod wall thickness, cuticle thickness, lignification, and overall plant vigor act as the first line of defense against insect attack (Jaba et al., 2021). These traits create unfavorable conditions for insect development or physically hinder feeding and oviposition. Among these structural defenses, non-glandular trichomes have been widely recognized for their role in defense (Jaba et al., 2021). For example, hairy cotton varieties show resistance to leafhoppers (*Empoasca* spp.) and thrips (*Frankliniella* spp.) (Padmavathi and Padmaja, 2022), while the other structural traits, like solid-stem in wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), effectively suppress wheat stem sawfly (*Cephus cinctus* Norton) (Szczepaniec et al., 2015). Extending this concept to seed-associated traits, seed texture and color influence bruchid infestation: smaller and shinier seeds received lower oviposition rates than larger and, duller seeds. In black gram (*Vigna mungo* Hepper), small black seeds show less infestation than larger green seeds (Ponnusamy Duraimurugan et al., 2014). Thus, harnessing these traits through de novo domestication and the introgression of insect-resistant genes from CWRs offers a powerful strategy to enhance desirable traits in cultivated crops.

Despite the importance of morphological traits in conferring resistance, their effectiveness is highly environment-dependent. Some traits may repel generalist herbivores but inadvertently attract specialist feeders, indicating an evolutionary constraint in pest resistance (Thiel

et al., 2020). Likewise, traits are often specific to feeding guilds; for instance, leaf toughness may deter chewing insects, but provide little resistance against gall-forming pests (Caldwell et al., 2016). Resistance within a feeding guild tends to be positively correlated, whereas resistance across guilds may be weak or absent (Maddox and Root, 1990). These complexities highlight the importance of exploring CWRs, which generally possess stronger pest resistance than domesticated crops and represent a valuable genetic resource for breeding (Bohra et al., 2022). Harnessing this natural diversity through crop improvement programs, integrated with advances in genetics, offers a path towards developing insect-resistant cultivars. In this context, the present review highlights the major biophysical traits underlying plant resistance to insects and discusses their integration into new breeding techniques (NBTs) for sustainable pest management. Accordingly, the following section focuses on the constitutive biophysical traits that enable plants to protect themselves against herbivorous insect attack.

2. Biophysical traits conferring insect resistance

Plants protect themselves against herbivorous insects using their constitutive biophysical traits (Fig. 2; Tables 1 and 2). Additionally, volatile-mediated attraction of natural enemies enables plants to indirectly suppress insect populations through increased predation and parasitism. A plant's defense against herbivory may not depend on a single trait but involve a combination of traits (Agrawal and Fishbein, 2006). Some plant species possess distinct defensive components, including morphological traits and phytochemical substances that influence the behavior and physiology of herbivores encountering them. The morphological and structural traits of the host plants influence insect mating, oviposition, and feeding. Combinations of resistance mechanisms include morphological traits that affect insect host selection behavior. The size, shape, and temporal expression of plant traits are closely linked to resistance against insect pests and are often integrated with underlying chemical defense systems. In response, insects have evolved specialized attachment and locomotion mechanisms that enable effective interaction with diverse plant surface structures (Borodich et al., 2024). Consequently, natural selection may have modified the

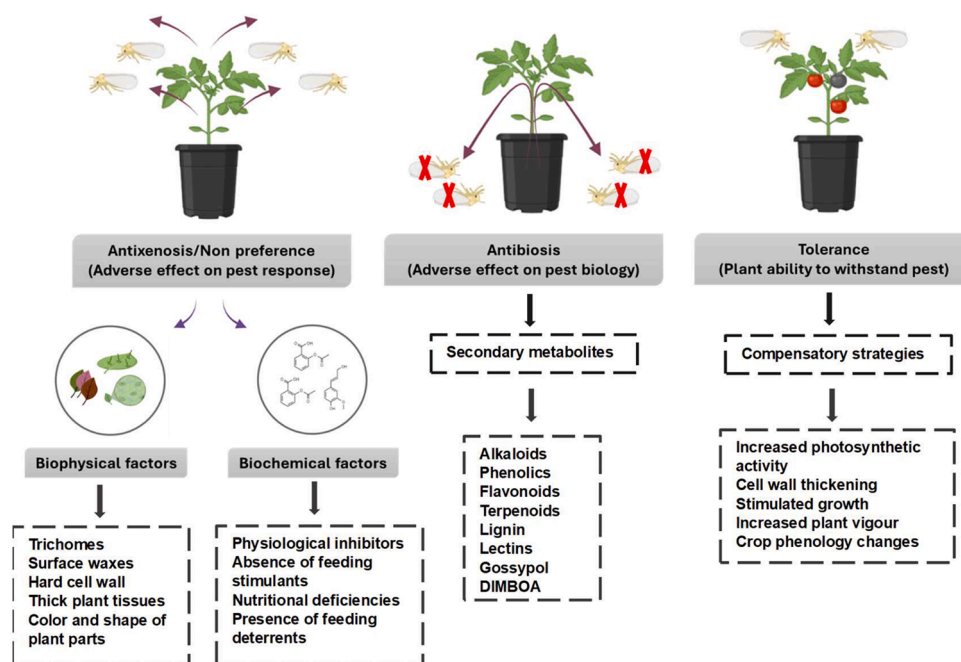


Fig. 1. Insect resistance mechanisms and causal factors.

The figure illustrates the overall mechanisms of host plant resistance (HPR), along with the different categories and the underlying causal factors associated with each category of resistance. Created with BioRender.com.

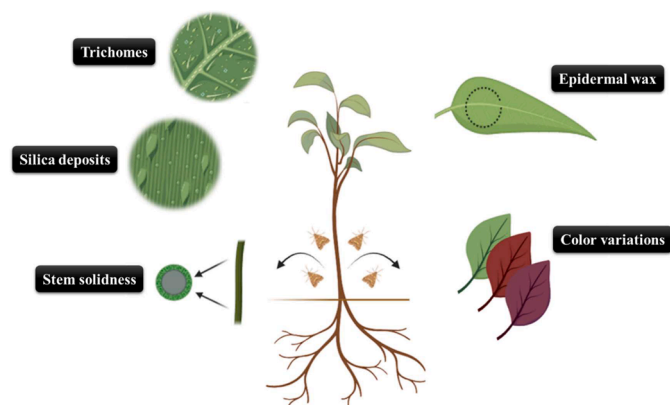


Fig. 2. Biophysical traits imparting resistance to crop insect pests. The figure illustrates various biophysical traits of plants that contribute to resistance against pests. Created with BioRender.com.

architecture of terrestrial plants to prevent insect attachment, thereby imposing evolutionary constraints and limiting the range of insect groups capable of colonizing them.

2.1. Morphological and color-related plant traits

Plant appearance and color influence insect host selection behavior by altering visual cues during host recognition, leading to increased resistance. For example, rice *Oryza sativa* cultivars, with narrow lumens, tight leaf sheaths, strong tissues, and ridged stems, are resistant to stem borers (*Chilo suppressalis* Walker, *Scirpophaga incertulas* Walker, *S. innotata*, and *Sesamia inferens* Walker) and sugarcane *Saccharum officinarum* cultivars with loose leaf sheaths exhibit reduced susceptibility to mealybugs *Saccharicoccus sacchari* Cockerell (Sadasisvam and Thayumanayan, 2003). In rice, a combination of tightly wrapped leaf sheaths with hairy upper surfaces, narrowly ridged stems, and stronger hypodermal layers provide resistance against the rice stem borer *C. suppressalis* (Sadasisvam and Thayumanayan, 2003). Colored rice, including black, crimson, and purple varieties, is less susceptible to storage pests such as the rice weevil *Sitophilus oryzae* Linnaeus than white rice varieties (Jena et al., 2018). Leaf morphology also influences oviposition choice, for example, the plant mirid *Creontiades signatus* Distant prefers cotton genotypes with standard leaf types over okra leaf types (Armstrong et al., 2009).

Sclerophylly is a plant trait characterized by hard, stiff, and often thickened leaves resulting from increased lignification, thereby contributing to the plant's defense by limiting herbivore damage (Hanley et al., 2007). For example, tightly packed husks on sweet corn hybrids protect the ear tip against pests such as the cob borer *Helicoverpa armigera* Hubner and the aphids *Melanaphis sorghi* Theobald. Sorghum genotypes with specific leaf colors and panicle shapes repel the spotted stem borer, *Chilo partellus* Swinhoe (Okosun et al., 2021). For instance, sorghum with open panicles had lower *H. armigera* infestation rates than those with compact panicles (Okosun et al., 2021). Also, traits in sorghum, such as deep pigmentation of leaf sheaths, early vigor, and glossy leaves, conferred resistance to the shoot fly *Atherigona soccata* Rondani (Arora et al., 2021). Development and survival of fall armyworm (FAW) *Spodoptera frugiperda* Smith, were adversely affected by sorghum flavonoids, associated with plant color (Grover et al., 2022). FAW larvae showed reduced preference for maize *Zea mays* Linnaeus cultivars with harder and darker leaves (Prasanna et al., 2022). The volatiles released by the leaves and their color affected the oviposition of FAW moths on maize (Matova et al., 2020). Cotton leaves of different colors showed varying levels of whitefly resistance, and the presence of gossypol glands had a detrimental impact on whitefly *Bemisia tabaci* Gennadius populations (Rizwan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the number of sympodia

Table 1
Biophysical traits associated with insect resistance in crop cultivars.

Crop	Pest	Plant Character	References
Sorghum	Shoot fly <i>Atherigona soccata</i> Rondani	Leaf glossiness, plant vigor, trichomes, and leaf-sheath pigmentation	(Arora et al., 2021)
	Aphid <i>Melanaphis sacchari</i> Zehntner	Greater plant height and greater distance between two leaves and the presence of waxy lamina	
	Midge <i>Contarinia sorghicola</i> Coquillett	Long glumes that do not open during anthesis, fast ovary growth in sorghum panicle, short floral parts, short glume, length short ovary girth	
Pearl millet	Head miner <i>Heliocheilus albipunctella</i> De Joannis	Presence of involucre bristles, their density, length, and orientation	
Cowpea	Pod sucking bug <i>Riptortus pedestris</i> Fabricius	Trichomes on pods	
Pigeonpea	Gram pod borer <i>Helicoverpa armigera</i> Hubner	High density of non-glandular trichomes on pods, Pod wall thickness, small pods with deep constriction between seeds	(Sharma et al., 2022)
	Pod fly <i>Melanagromyza obtusa</i> Malloch	Pod wall thickness, trichome density	
Soyabean	Pod fly <i>Melanagromyza obtusa</i> Malloch	Trichome length	((Ambidi et al., 2021)
	Pod fly <i>Melanagromyza sojae</i> Zehntner		
	Whitefly <i>Bemisia tabaci</i> Gennadius		
	Pod borer <i>Helicoverpa zea</i> Boddie	Leaf tip pubescence	
	Cut worm <i>Spodoptera exigua</i> Hubner		
Groundnut	Soyabean looper <i>Pseudoplusia includens</i> Walker		(Sharma et al., 2022)
	<i>H. armigera</i> , <i>S. litura</i>	Stem thickness, leaflet shape, leaf length, leaf hairiness, standard petal length, stipule and peg length	
	<i>H. armigera</i>	Dark green and small leaves	(Arora et al., 2021)
Chick pea	<i>H. armigera</i>	Pod shape, pod wall thickness, and crop duration	(Jaba et al., 2017)
Black gram	White flies <i>Bemisia tabaci</i> Gennadius	Erect trichomes	(Taggar and Gill, 2012)

(reproductive branches) was identified as a useful morphological trait for selection of pest resistance (Aherkar et al., 2023).

The changes in leaf color constitute a visible and reliable phenotypic indicator of physiological stress and host resistance during insect pest infestation (Mahanta et al., 2024). For example, infestation by wood-boring pests disrupts water and nutrient transport in trees, leading to changes in leaf water content, chlorophyll level, transpiration, and photosynthesis (Luo et al., 2023). These physiological changes are reflected in visible traits, especially leaf color (Liu et al., 2021). Such color changes indicate different stages of infestation and may serve as a useful phenotypic indicator of host resistance or susceptibility.

numerous secretory cells. Capitate trichomes have multicellular stalks of varying length and number, with smaller unicellular heads (Werker, 2000). Dicots frequently have glandular trichomes, which release substances poisonous to insects (Glas et al., 2012).

Tomato and its CWRs possess glandular (I, IV, VI, and VII) and non-glandular (II, III, V, and VIII) trichomes (Glas et al., 2012). Wild progenitors of cultivated tomatoes synthesize a multitude of acyl sugars and volatiles in their type-I/IV and type-VI trichomes, respectively, which may contribute to insect resistance (Kortbeek et al., 2021). Insect movement disrupted and ruptured glandular trichomes, releasing protease inhibitors (Ghosh et al., 2023) that reduced the insect performance by inhibiting protease activity. Glandular trichomes also play an important role in herbivore-induced plant defense by releasing volatile compounds. Wounding or herbivore damage initiates the synthesis of jasmonic acid (JA) through the octadecanoid pathway, which upregulates the synthesis and discharge of volatiles from glandular trichomes (Glas et al., 2012). The volatile blooms released from plants protected them through bottom-up effects on biology and top-down effects by recruiting natural enemies of herbivorous insects. Application of methyl jasmonate (MeJA) to plants induced the synthesis of terpenoids, defense proteins, acyl sugars, and alkaloids in glandular trichomes, thereby priming them against herbivory damage.

When chewing insects feed on plant surfaces densely covered with glandular trichomes, their mandibles frequently become clogged with the sticky exudates, hindering feeding. The glandular trichome exudates of chickpea *Cicer arietinum* Linnaeus that contain succinic, oxalic, and malic acids prevented pod damage by the larvae of the pod borer, *H. armigera* (Golla et al., 2018). The sesquiterpene (E)- β -farnesene in the glandular trichomes of the wild potato *Solanum berthaultii* Hawks attracted the parasitoid wasp *Diaeretiella rapae* Curtis of aphid *Myzus persicae* Sulzer but repelled *M. persicae* (Gibson and Pickett, 1983). The type VI glandular trichomes of certain *Solanum* species released the sesquiterpenes R-curcumene and 7-epizigiberene, which deterred *B. tabaci* (Kennedy, 2003).

Thus, the glandular trichomes play multifunctional roles in plant–insect interactions. They exert direct negative effects on herbivores by deterring feeding, inhibiting larval development and conferring indirect defensive benefits by mediating tritrophic interactions. This underscores that glandular trichomes do not act solely as physical or chemical barriers but also serve as ecological signaling platforms, balancing herbivore deterrence with the recruitment of parasitoids and predators. Harnessing this dual role through breeding or biotechnological approaches could enhance sustainable pest management by reinforcing both direct and indirect plant defense mechanisms.

2.4. Plant surface silicon (Si)

Plants acquire silicon (Si), which increases plant resistance and reduces damage from diseases, insects, and non-insect pests by boosting the plant's innate abilities through constitutive or induced pathways (Alhousari and Greger, 2018). The deposition and accumulation of bioavailable Si, either in the form of amorphous hydrated Si or biogenic opals, particularly in the epidermal cells of leaves, stems and roots, increase both direct and indirect resistance to insect pests (Alhousari and Greger, 2018). Si increased the hardness and abrasiveness of plant tissues by causing mandibular damage to phytophagous insects during feeding, resulting in less plant damage (Frew et al., 2016) and slowing their development (Johnson et al., 2020). *Schistocerca gregaria* Forskal and *Spodoptera exempta* Fabricius are prominent insects that avoid Si-rich grass plants (Massey et al., 2006). FAW larvae feeding on artificial food enriched with Si showed higher mandible wear than those fed only artificial diets (Acevedo et al., 2021). The stalk borer *Eldana saccharina* Walker larvae's mandibles were worn down as they continuously consumed hard plant tissues rich in Si, thereby minimizing the damage they inflicted on the plants (Kvedaras et al., 2009).

Si deposits act as a mechanical barrier for feeding by sucking insects,

preventing stylets from piercing the cell wall (Verma et al., 2021). In other cases, increasing callose Si deposition stops insects from sucking sap and reduces their food intake (Hao et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2017). In addition to providing mechanical protection, Si-mediated defenses increase the synthesis of defensive proteins, enzymes, and secondary metabolites, leading to direct defenses in some plant species (Reynolds et al., 2016). For example, aphids and other phloem-feeding insects avoid abrasive phytoliths; however, their feeding-induced damage can still trigger Si-mediated responses (Alhousari and Greger, 2018). Furthermore, the Si-triggered changes in volatile profiles that attract natural enemies, along with Si-mediated defenses, provide both direct and indirect plant defenses (Kvedaras et al., 2010; Leroy et al., 2019).

Si deposits also form a physical barrier in root systems, which has a major effect on root-feeding insects. For example, soil-applied Si fertilizers enhanced Si uptake in sugarcane and the grass *Brachiaria brizantha* Stapf, which reduced the brown root stinkbug *Scaptocoris carvalhoi* Becker nymphs (Souza et al., 2009). This also increased nymphal mortality and shortened the lifespan of the spittlebug *Mahanarva fimbriolata* Stal (Korndörfer et al., 2011). In the case of rapeseed *Brassica napus* Linnaeus, root applied Si at the seedling and early bud stages increased the root diameter, stem lignin and SiO₂ accumulation and breaking strength (Kuai et al., 2017). In addition to regular Si fertilizers, SiO₂ nanoparticles also contribute to root mediated plant defense. For example, applying silicate as well as SiO₂ nanoparticles to fenugreek *Trigonella foenum-graecum* Linnaeus, increased Si uptake and accumulation, xylem cell wall lignification, cell wall thickness, phenylalanine ammonia lyase (PAL) activity and protein concentration in seedlings (Nazarian et al., 2017).

2.5. Surface/Epicuticular waxes (EWs)

Epicuticular waxes (EWs) form the plant's outermost barrier, and are the first resistance-related trait encountered by herbivorous insects during host contact. EWs also shield plant surfaces from biological stress and desiccation, thereby serving as a crucial interface in the tri-trophic interaction (Van Poecke, 2007). It creates a slippery layer or crystals on the leaf surface, limiting herbivores' ability to grip and feed on host plants (Mitchell et al., 2016). Surface waxes influence mobility, oviposition, and feeding, imparting insect resistance by interfering with the insect's sense organs at the tarsi and mouthparts by sending negative chemical and tactile stimuli (Dhanyalakshmi et al., 2019). This distorts the physiological processes of stimulus processing and response.

Rice plants have evolved an array of physical defenses, including EWs, to protect themselves against insect herbivores. In this context, rice water weevil *Lissorhoptrus oryzophilus* Kuschel and FAW caused more damage when rice expressed lower EWs due to mutations, suggesting higher pest susceptibility at lower EW levels (Bernaola et al., 2021). The wax content in rice sheaths increased as plants grew and their leaves developed, thereby reducing insect attacks (Balakrishnan et al., 2024).

In sorghum plants, wax components such as α -amyryn and isorborinone increase following aphid infestation, indicating their role in induced defense responses (Cardona et al., 2023). Surface waxes altered rind hardness, which remained an essential element in reducing the sugarcane borer *Diatraea saccharalis* Guenee (White et al., 2006).

Concomitantly, the correlation between wax blooms and pest resistance varies across plant species and is complex, as their function can differ by pest species (Canassa et al., 2021). Surface wax also acts as a strong stimulus for insects to lay their eggs on host plants, in contrast to its ability to repel many insects. During the host selection process, insects use particular wax components, such as long-chain alkanes, to select their host plants. These alkanes in the glossy-leaved *Brassica oleracea* Lour encouraged the diamondback moth (DBM) *Plutella xylostella* Linnaeus adults to lay eggs. Interestingly, neonate larvae did not prefer these plants (Wang et al., 2020) and hence, they may act as a death trap for the pest. Contrarily, the wax bloom on cabbage *B. oleracea* var. *capitata* Linnaeus leaves offered protection against feeding and

oviposition by pests, such as the mustard beetle *Phaedon cochleariae* Fabricius and the DBM (Lewandowska et al., 2020). In the case of sesame *Sesamum indicum* Linnaeus, the presence of C₆ compounds in the cuticular wax provided optimal ovipositional signals to generalist feeders (Roy, 2021).

In onion, *Thrips tabaci* Lindeman caused minor damage when fed glossy or semi-glossy leaves containing lower levels of EWs, such as hentriacontanone-16 (H16) and higher concentrations of other waxes, such as fatty alcohols and alkanes. Hence, breeding onions for optimal wax profiles can result in thrips-resistant cultivars (Munaiz et al., 2020).

As previously stated, certain herbivores prefer to live or lay eggs on plants with prominent EW blooms, while others are more susceptible to reduced wax blooms. Minimum level of wax blooms in peas, for example, have been associated with reduced densities of the aphid *Acyrtosiphon pisum* Harris, but the same plants suffered severe damage from leaf weevil *Sitona lineatus* Linnaeus (White and Eigenbrode, 2000). In some cases, these wax blooms affect the attachment of natural enemies to plant surfaces, thereby minimizing indirect effects of plant defense (Eigenbrode, 2004). Still, crop varieties with reduced waxy blooms compared to normal ones enhanced the foraging efficiency of insect predators and therefore, reduced pest populations. For example, resistant cabbage varieties with reduced wax bloom facilitated the activity of insect predators, such as *Chrysoperla plorabunda* Fitch, *Orius insidiosus* Say, and *Hippodamia convergens* Guérin-Méneville, reducing DBM and aphid *Brevicoryne brassicae* Linnaeus populations (Eigenbrode et al., 1996). Interestingly, insect oviposition may modify the composition of plant cuticular waxes; however, egg parasitoids are known to detect these modifications and trace their host eggs. Supporting this, the oviposition of the large cabbage white butterfly *Pieris brassicae* Linnaeus on *Arabidopsis* altered the wax composition, specifically the fatty acids tetracosanoic acid and tetratriacontanoic acid, which attracted the egg parasitoid *Trichogramma brassicae* Bezdenko (Blenn et al., 2012). Overall, epicuticular waxes play multifaceted roles in plant–insect interactions, conferring both deterrent and attractive effects; therefore, their functional diversity must be carefully considered in breeding programs and molecular manipulation using genomic approaches aimed at improving insect resistance.

3. Ecological and genetic influences on biophysical trait-mediated resistance

The effectiveness of biophysical traits is strongly influenced by ecological context and genetic background, resulting in variable outcomes across insect species and environments. Structural defenses such as trichomes, silicon deposition, and epicuticular waxes can impede insect feeding, movement, and oviposition; however, their defensive value is often contingent on the herbivore's feeding guild and biological traits. For instance, high trichome density commonly deters chewing insects and it may also exert neutral or contrasting effects on sap-feeding pests. At the same time, Si-based defenses tend to confer greater resistance against mandibulate insects than against piercing–sucking species (Reynolds et al., 2016). Biophysical traits also influence multitrophic interactions in which moderate trichome density can facilitate the activity of predators and parasitoids by improving prey retention, whereas excessive trichome cover or thick wax layers may hinder natural enemy movement and reduce biological control efficiency.

Despite the importance of biophysical traits in insect population buildup on host plants, their expression is strongly influenced by environmental conditions. As environmental conditions change dramatically across local and global scales, functional research on the ecological implications of variations in plant traits has become increasingly crucial for ecosystem sustainability (Zhan et al., 2022). Abiotic factors such as soil Si availability, drought, and temperature further affect trait expression, leading to variable resistance outcomes under field conditions (Cooke et al., 2016). In addition, substantial genetic variation exists among crop genotypes and CWRs in the expression of these traits,

which offers opportunities for resistance breeding but also highlights the need to evaluate potential trade-offs (Mitchell et al., 2016). Recognizing these ecological and genetic influences is essential for the effective deployment of biophysical traits in sustainable pest management through resistance breeding programs.

4. Genetic basis of resistant traits

There are two types of plant defense traits: qualitative (provides strong, specific and less durable resistance against certain insect species or biotypes and involves mechanisms like toxin production (e.g., alkaloids) or structural barriers (e.g., trichomes) and quantitative (provides partial and more durable resistance, reducing insect damage rather than completely preventing it which involves traits such as thickened cell walls, secondary metabolites, or changes in plant morphology). This resistance is further categorized according to the number of genes that control it: one (monogenic), a few (oligogenic), or many (polygenic). Polygenic resistance is more difficult to integrate into plant breeding programs than monogenic and oligogenic resistance (Padmavathi and Padmaja, 2022) (Table 3). Quantitative resistance is regulated by many quantitative trait loci (QTLs) with small contributory effects by each QTL, enabling partial resistance against a broad range of insect biotypes (Pilet-Nayel et al., 2017) besides involvement in different biological activities in plants, including regulation of morphological phenotypes and developmental processes imparting pest resistance (Zhang et al., 2013) (Table 4).

There is a knowledge gap regarding the genes underlying plant morphological traits that influence HPR against various insect pests.

Table 3
Genes governing the biophysical traits in crops for resistance against major pests.

Crop	Pest	Biophysical traits	Genes	References
Cotton	Boll weevil <i>Anthonomus grandis</i> Boheman	Frego bract	Single recessive gene	(Green, 1955)
	Aphids <i>Aphis gossypii</i> Glover	Red colored leaves	Single partial dominant gene	
	Pink bollworm <i>Pectinophora gossypiella</i> Saunders Whitefly <i>Bemisia tabaci</i> Gennadius	Okra leaf shaped	Single semi-dominant gene	(Zhu et al., 2016)
Black gram	Pod borer <i>Helicoverpa armigera</i> Hubner	Pod pubescence	Single dominant gene	(Arshad et al., 2005)
Castor	Leaf hopper <i>Empoasca flavescens</i> Fabricius	Stem color Waxy blooms	Single dominant gene	(Lavanya et al., 2018)
Sorghum	Shoot fly <i>Atherigona soccata</i> Rondani	Glossy leaves	Single recessive gene; Additive and non-additive genes	(Arora et al., 2025) (Padmavathi and Padmaja, 2022)
		Trichome density	Additive and non-additive genes	(Padmavathi and Padmaja, 2022)
Sorghum	Stemborer <i>Chilo partellus</i> Swinhoe	Number of nodes	Additive	
	Green bug <i>Schizaphis graminum</i> Rondani	Stalk length	Dominant	(Johnson et al., 1981)

Table 4
QTLs governing the biophysical traits in crops for resistance against major pests.

Crop	Pest	Biophysical trait	QTL	Location on chromosome	References
Rice	Rice leaf folder <i>Cnephalocrocis medinalis</i> Guenee	Width and length of flag leaf	RM 3412	Chr 1	(Selvaraju et al., 2007)
			qRLR-3	Chr 3	(Wei et al., 2008)
	Green leafhopper <i>Nephotettix virescens</i> Distant	Leaf lamina thickness	qRLR-4	Chr 4	
			qGRH 4.2	Chr 4	(Phi et al., 2019)
Wheat	Wheat stem fly <i>Cephus cinctus</i> Norton	Stem solidness	Qss.msub-3AL.b	Chr 3A	(Cook et al., 2004)
			Qss.msub-3BL	Chr 3B	(Varella et al., 2016)
			Qss.msub-3DL	Chr 3D	(Lanning et al., 2006)
Maize	Maize weevil <i>Sitophilus granarius</i> Linnaeus	Grain hardness	bnlg 1007	Chr 1	(Bergvinson and García-Lara, 2006)
			bnlg 2180	Chr 1	
			bnlg 1556	Chr 1	
			phi 002	Chr 1	
			umc 128	Chr 1	
Sorghum	Shoot fly <i>Atherigona soccata</i> Rondani	Leaf glossiness	bnlg 609	Chr 5	
			QGdsr 3	SBI 3	(Satish et al., 2009)
			QGdsr 5	SBI 5	
			QGdsr 6	SBI 6	
			QGdsr 10	SBI 10	
		Trichome density on upper surface	QGdsr 1	SBI 1	(Aruna et al., 2011)
			QGdsr 2	SBI 2	
			QGdsr 4.1	SBI 4	
			QGdsr 4.2	SBI 4	
			QEg28.dsr-10	SBI 10	(Gorthy et al., 2017)
		Trichome density on lower surface	QTdu.dsr 10.1	SBI 10	(Satish et al., 2009)
			QTdu.dsr 10.2	SBI 10	
			QTdu.dsr 7	SBI 7	(Aruna et al., 2011)
			QTdl.dsr 1.1	SBI 1	(Gorthy et al., 2017)
			QTdl.dsr 1.2	SBI 1	
Pubescence length	QTdl.dsr 4	SBI 4			
	QTdl.dsr 6	SBI 6	(Satish et al., 2009)		
	QTdl.dsr 10.1	SBI 10			
	QTdl.dsr 10.2	SBI 10			
	QTdl.dsr 3	SBI 3	(Aruna et al., 2011)		
Soyabean	Common cut worm <i>Spodoptera litura</i> Fabricius	Pubescence density	qPL-1-1	Chr 1	(Li et al., 2022)
			qPL-1-1	Chr 1	
			qPL-3-1	Chr 3	
			qPL-4-1	Chr 4	
			qPL-12-1	Chr 12	
			qPL-12-2	Chr 12	
			qPL-12-3	Chr 12	
			qPL-12-4	Chr 12	
			qPL-14-1	Chr 14	
			qPD-1-1	Chr 1	
			qPD-8-1	Chr 8	
			qPD-11-1	Chr 11	
			qPD-11-2	Chr 11	
			qPD-12-1	Chr 12	
			qPD-12-2	Chr 12	
qPD-12-3	Chr 12				
Potato	Leafhopper <i>Empoasca fabae</i> Harris	Long and erect pubescence	qRslx1	Chr 7	(Oki et al., 2012)
	Colorado potato beetle <i>Leptinotarsa decemlineata</i> Say	Glandular trichome Type A	qRslx2	Chr 12	
		Glandular trichome Type B	TG 119	Chr 6	(Bonierbale et al., 1994)
			TG 63	Chr 10	
			TG 441	Chr 5	
			TG 379		
Tomato	White fly <i>Bemisia tabaci</i> Gennadius <i>Trialeurodes vaporariorum</i> Westwood	Glandular trichome type IV and V	Wf - 1	Chr 2	(Vosman et al., 2019)

However, new molecular tools have been developed to detect genomic regions associated with those specific phenotypes. One such tool is QTL mapping, which is frequently used to discover trait-contributing regions on chromosomes (Sehgal et al., 2016). QTL mapping uses two methods: linkage analysis and association mapping. The former refers to the preliminary identification of QTLs within a biparental population's genome, whereas the latter is the discovery of the precise locations of trait-controlling genomic regions in a collection of germplasm that identify the genes driving quantitative traits (Yu et al., 2011). Based on this general genetic basis of resistance, the following section focuses on the specific gene networks and regulatory pathways that govern key biophysical traits involved in insect defense.

5. Gene networks influencing biophysical traits

5.1. Plant leaf traits

Insect-resistant cotton can be developed by manipulating genes linked to traits such as frego bract (a mutation that causes cotton bracts to be narrow and twisted, exposing the buds), nectariless, okra leaf type, and hairiness (Egan and Stiller, 2022). Cotton with okra-leaf shapes exhibited greater resistance to the boll weevil *Anthonomus grandis* Boheman, pink bollworm *Pectinophora gossypiella* Saunders, and the whitefly *B. tabaci* (Chu et al., 2002), which was ascribed to their lower attraction to insects due to a smaller leaf area. In *Gossypium hirsutum*, a

single semi-dominant gene controlled the okra leaf trait with F1 generations displaying sub-okra traits (Zhu et al., 2008). The okra leaf gene *ghokra*, which encodes homeodomain leucine zipper class I proteins Gorai.002G244000 and Gorai.002G244200, regulating leaf shape (Zhu et al., 2016), is amenable to genomic selection.

Cotton plants expressing frego bracts resist boll weevil infestations by interfering with oviposition, a trait inherited in a simple monogenic manner, regulated by a single recessive gene (Sajid-ur-Rahman et al., 2008). Wang et al. (2023) discovered and mapped 14 potential *frego bract* (*FG*) genes on cotton chromosome A03, which are candidates for molecular breeding approaches to develop resistant genotypes.

5.2. Plant color

Plant pigments, such as anthocyanins and carotenoids, offer color-based resistance. Anthocyanin hyperaccumulation has been linked to increased defense against biotic stresses such as herbivory (Malone et al., 2009). The color intensity and pattern are determined by genes that regulate pigment production pathways (Sharma et al., 2022). In purple sorghum genotypes, flavonoid biosynthesis genes are overexpressed, providing defense against FAW. Upon herbivory, the resistant genotype SC1345 accumulated higher levels of flavonoids, indicating a metabolic shift of precursors away from lignin biosynthesis toward the flavonoid pathway (Grover et al., 2022). WRKY transcription factors, including *SbWRKY86*, were hypothesized to play a role in sorghum's defense against sugarcane aphid *Melanaphis sacchari* Zehntner. When *M. sorghi* infested the resistant sorghum line SC265, several genes were expressed at higher levels (Puri et al., 2023).

In cabbage *Brassica* sp., the purple color develops primarily due to the accumulation of anthocyanins. Several genes involved in the anthocyanin biosynthetic pathway, such as *PAL*, *cinnamate-4-hydroxylase* (*C4H*), *chalcone synthase* (*CHS*), *chalcone isomerase* (*chi*), *flavanone 3-hydroxylase* (*F3H*), *flavonoid 3'-hydroxylase* (*F3'H*), *dihydroflavonol 4-reductase* (*DFR*), *anthocyanidin synthase* (*ANS*), and *udp-glucose flavonoid 3-o-glucosyltransferase* (*UFGT*), are upregulated in purple cabbage compared to green cabbage (Zhang et al. 2016). Transcription factors like *R2R3-mylloblastosis* (*MYB*), *basic helix-loop-helix* (*bHLH*), and *WD40* (forming the MBW complex) regulated these structural genes. Transformation experiments confirmed that a specific gene, named *DARK-PUR*, similar to *BrMYB2*, was responsible for the primary determinant of purple coloration in Chinese cabbage *Brassica rapa* Linnaeus (He et al., 2020a). Cotton with red color leaves defended the cotton aphid, *Aphis gossypii* Glover, and suffered reduced foliar damage compared to green-leaved cotton (Hamilton and Brown, 2001). A single partially dominant gene controlled this red color of cotton leaves (Din et al., 2016).

In the tissues of radish *Raphanus sativus* Linnaeus, the genes involved in the anthocyanin biosynthesis pathway - *DFR*, *Udp-glycosyl transferase78D2* (*UGT78D2*), *transparent testa 12* (*TT12*), and *caprice* (*CPC*) exhibited differential expression across various tissues. Furthermore, *RsDFR.9c* and *RsUGT78D2.2c* were identified as possible key regulators of anthocyanin production, contributing to purple coloration in radish (Liu et al., 2024). In the Chinese cabbage cultivar 11S91, the dominant purple-head trait is controlled by the regulatory gene *R2R3-MYB*, *BrMYB2*, located on chromosome A07 (He et al., 2020b). The expression profiles of 86 anthocyanin biosynthesis genes in 11S91 and its breeding parents demonstrated an upregulation of *B. rapa MYB2* and *BrTT8* and downregulation of *BrMYBL2.1*, *BrMYBL2.2*, and *B. rapa lateral organ boundaries domain* (*BrLBD39.1*) during growth. This was accompanied by a significant and continuous upregulation of the gene *BrPAL3.1*, early biosynthesis genes such as *BrCHSs*, *BrCHIs*, *BrF3Hs*, and *BrF3'H*, key late biosynthesis genes including *BrDFR1*, *BrANS1*, *BrUF3GT2*, *BrUF5GT*, *B. rapa malonyl transferase* (*Br5MAT*), and *B. rapa p-coumaroyl transferase* (*Brp-Cout*); as well as transport genes *B. rapa glutathione s-transferase 1* (*BrGST1*) and *BrGST2* (He et al., 2020a).

5.3. Trichome development

Several proteins unite to form complexes in molecular regulatory networks of trichome formation in plants (Fig. 3). In *A. thaliana*, the MBW protein complex containing the *R2R3-MYB* transcription factor *glabra 1* (*GL1*), the *bHLH* transcription factors *GL3* and *enhancers of glabra 3* (*EGL3*), and the *WD40* repeat protein *transparent testa glabra 1* (*TTG1*) (Schellmann et al., 2007) promoted trichome initiation by activating the transcription of the homeodomain protein *GL2* (Wei et al., 2019). The nearest phylogenetic relationships between *Arabidopsis* (Brassicales) and *Gossypium* (Malvales) species suggested that a similar regulatory mechanism for leaf trichome initiation may exist in these species (Lee et al., 2006). The key genes that govern trichome initiation were identified at the T1 locus on chromosome 6 (Lacape and Nguyen, 2005). Multiple QTLs linked to fiber fineness, length, elongation, color, and length uniformity were also found in the T1 locus (Wan et al., 2007). Thus, the T1 locus, which contains genes involved in several epidermal trichome formation pathways, is a prospective region to consider for molecular insect resistance breeding programs.

Genotyping by sequencing (GBS) studies have explored genomic regions in cotton (*Gossypium arboreum* Linnaeus) that regulate hairy/pubescent leaf and stem phenotypes. This study focused on *GaKAN2*, a member of the *kanadi* family, and its role in trichome development. Genome-wide scanning with transcriptomic analysis identified seven *GaKAN* genes that were significantly expressed in the stem and root, and *GaKAN2* was also upregulated in other tissues. Silencing of the *GaKAN2* gene decreased the single-cell trichomes and reduced the internodal distance, highlighting its role in trichome development and plant growth. This research laid the groundwork for further manipulation of *GaKAN2* genes to enhance cotton trichomes and plant development, potentially improving plant defense against insect herbivory (Ren et al., 2024). The susceptibility or resistance of *Gossypium* species against sucking insect pests is related to the extent of hairiness (Dhamayanthi et al., 2020).

In barley *Hordeum vulgare* Linnaeus, trichomes provide resistance against aphids, *Rhopalosiphum maidis* Fitch, *R. padi* and *Sitobian avenae* Fabricius. Two key genes responsible for trichome production in barley have been identified. The first gene, *pubescent leaf blade 1* (*Pub1.a*), is a dominant variant located on chromosome 3H and is prevalent in most of the wild barley genotypes (Huang et al., 2021b), leading to short hairs spreading along the smaller leaf veins on the upper and lower leaf surfaces. The second gene is *hairy leaf sheath 1* (*Hsh1.a*), a dominant mutation on chromosome 4H that induces hairiness at base of the leaf sheaths in barley. The density of these hairs varies between cultivars and is influenced by growing conditions. These trichomes hinder pest movement and feeding (Hansson et al., 2024).

Other cultivated crops have different genes and transcription factors responsible for trichome formation and distribution. For instance, trichome initiation and elongation in rice are regulated by the transcription factor *hairy leaf 6* (*HL6*) (Sun et al., 2017). A pair of dominant genes in rice, *OsGL6* on chromosome 6, which is allelic to the *HL6* gene, governs variation in the hairy phenotype. Transgenic rice lines overexpressing *OsGL6* showed an increased trichome initiation compared to wild lines (Xie et al., 2020). As regulators of trichome development in rice, *OsSPL10* and *OsWOX3B* were found to be important, and their regulated expression was achieved through *OsSPL10* binding to the *HL6* promoter (Li et al., 2021). In wheat, six candidate genes (*TraesCS3A02G406000*, *TraesCS3A02G414900*, *TraesCS3A02G440900*, *TraesCS7D02G145200*, *TraesCS3A02G149200*, and *TraesCS3A02G152400*) were identified for trichome-related traits (Fan et al., 2023). Tolerance against flea beetle *Phyllotreta cruciferae* Goeze and DBM was achieved by introducing the *A. thaliana* trichome regulatory gene *AtGL3* into semi-glabrous canola *B. napus*, which increased the trichome density, enabling resistance to pests (Alahakoon et al., 2016).

Despite extensive characterization of genes regulating trichome initiation and density, most functional insights to date have come from

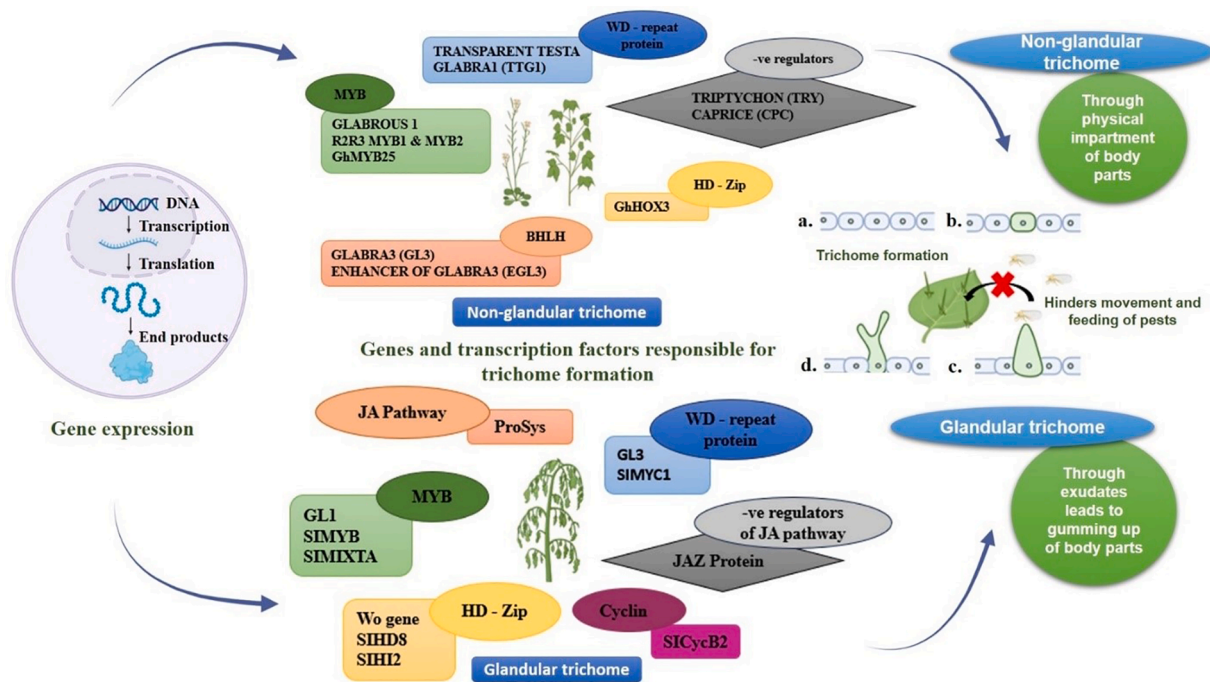


Fig. 3. Genes governing trichome development in plants.

The figure illustrates the transcription factors and corresponding genes that regulate glandular and non-glandular trichomes, which contribute to biophysical resistance against insect pests. Created with BioRender.com.

model species, particularly *Arabidopsis*. In crops, the direct contribution of trichome-related genes to insect resistance is often inferred rather than experimentally validated. These limitations highlight the need for crop-specific functional studies on trichomes and for the evaluation of ecological trade-offs under field conditions.

5.4. Glandular trichomes

MYB transcription factors regulate the initiation of most glandular trichomes (Fig. 3). Among the glandular trichomes, the capitate types were regulated by the interaction of cyclins (CYC) and homeodomain-leucine zipper (HD-ZIP) transcription factors. In contrast, the bHLH transcription factors controlled the peltate type (Feng et al., 2021). Studies on mutants in domesticated tomatoes have provided insights into trichome developmental regulation involving genes such as woolly (WO) (a homeodomain-leucine zipper IV (HD-ZIP IV) gene), and the hairless (HL) (a specifically *rac1*-associated (SRA1) gene) (Yang et al., 2011; Kang et al., 2016). A phenotype resembling the glabrous organs of some CWRs was produced through the tomato hairs absent (h) mutation. In *Solanum habrochaites* Knapp & Spooner glandular trichomes, biosynthetic genes involved in the production of the sesquiterpene (Sst2 locus located at chromosome 8) and methyl ketone and terpenes, *z-isoprenyl pyrophosphate synthases* (zFPS) and *santalene and bergamotene synthase* (SBS) were identified that significantly inhibited caterpillars and aphids (Sallaud et al., 2009). It allows the transfer of these biosynthetic pathway genes through wide breeding of CWRs with cultivated tomatoes and subsequent selection (Gasparini et al., 2023). The tomato hairless (HL) mutant expressed bending and swelling of type VI trichomes, which impaired terpene synthesis and decreased resistance against the tobacco hornworm *Manduca sexta* Linnaeus (Kang et al., 2016). Development of fewer glandular leaf trichomes and production of lower levels of terpene content occurred by the overexpression of tomato B-type cyclin gene, *SICYC2*, and its direct transcriptional activator *SIMYB75*, which significantly increased susceptibility against *Spodoptera litura* (Fabricius) and spider mites *Tetranychus* sp. (Gasparini et al., 2023; Gong et al., 2021).

The gossypol excreted by glandular trichomes is deposited in small and darkly pigmented lysigenous glands on the leaf canopy of *Gossypium* spp. A map-based cloning strategy was used in tetraploid cotton to clone the *Gossypium pigment gland formation* (*GoPGF*) gene, which is regulated by a bHLH transcription factor (Ma et al., 2016). Its role in regulating glandular trichomes was functionally validated using virus-induced gene silencing (VIGS), which demonstrated that silencing *GoPGF* resulted in the glandless phenotype. Further, the insufficient production of acyl sugars in tomato, due to the absence of type IV and other glandular trichomes, resulted in inadequate pest protection (Blanco-Sánchez et al., 2021). Furthermore, wild relatives of the tomato have been widely utilized as sources of resistance traits for introgression into cultivated varieties to manage pests and diseases. Notably, trichome-mediated resistance from *Solanum pimpinellifolium* Linnaeus accession TO-937 was introgressed into cultivated tomato. The resulting inbred line BC5S2 effectively resisted *Tomato yellow leaf curl virus* (TYLCV) because of the interruptions to virus transmission by its vector *B. tabaci* (Rodríguez-López et al., 2020). This was linked to the presence of type IV glandular trichomes on the leaves and secretion of acyl sugars in the glandular exudates. However, the density of type IV trichomes and production of acyl sugars were limited at the early growth stages of these tomato inbreds. The feeding by the zoo phytophagous predator *Nesidiocoris tenuis* Reuter on young BC5S2 tomato plants caused over 50% increase in type IV trichome density and increased acyl sugar production due to upregulated expression of the acyl sugar biosynthesis gene *dihydroliipoamide branched chain transacylase E2* (*BCKD-E2*) (Riahi et al., 2023). Therefore, pre-planting release of these predators and their feeding on tomato at the nursery stage may upregulate these genes, leading to trichome-rich plants.

5.5. Si-mediated physical defense

The genetics underlying Si accumulation in plants is intricate, which involves several critical genes and transporters (Fig. 4). Monocots, such as rice, sugarcane, maize, and other cereals, absorb Si in substantial amounts compared to dicots, facilitated by specific Si transporters (Ma

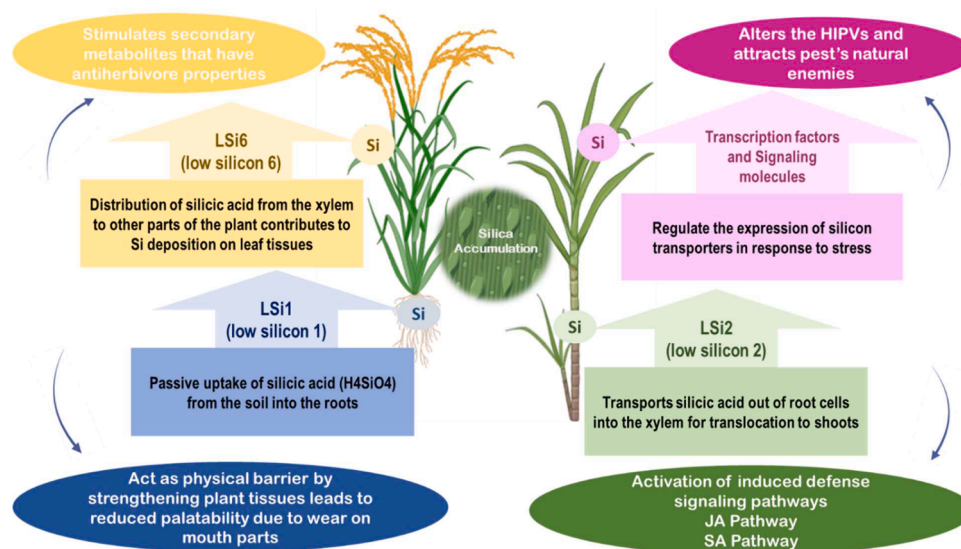


Fig. 4. Genes responsible for silica accumulation in plants.

The figure illustrates the genes involved in silica transport and accumulation in plants, which contribute to forming a physical barrier against insect pests. Created with BioRender.com.

et al., 2007). Key transporter genes first identified in rice include *low Si* (*LSi1* and *LSi2*), encoding aquaporin-like proteins, where *LSi1*, the initial *Si* influx transporter facilitates the uptake of ortho silicic acid ($\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$) into root cells, while *LSi2* acts as a *Si* efflux transporter (*SiET4*), moving *Si* from roots to the xylem for transport to shoots (Leroy et al., 2019).

Subsequently, homologs of *Si* influx and efflux transporters have been identified in barley (*HvLSi1*, *HvLSi6*, *HvLSi2*) (Chiba et al., 2009), wheat (*TaLSi1*) (Montpetit et al., 2012), maize (*ZmLSi1*, *ZmLSi6*, *ZmLSi2*), and pumpkin *Cucurbita pepo* Linnaeus (*CmLSi1*, *CmLSi2*) (Mitani et al., 2009). In rice, a *SiET4* gene that encodes for *Si* accumulation and deposition in leaves has been reported. Functional validation revealed that *SiET4* knockouts led to abnormal *Si* deposition (Mitani-Ueno et al., 2023). Additionally, the *drooping leaf* (*DR*) gene, which encodes a *gds1* esterase in rice, regulates *Si* deposition in leaves; mutations in *DR* result in reduced *Si* accumulation and a drooping leaf phenotype (Yu et al., 2020). *SiET* genes, such as *OsLSi3* in rice, are reported to be responsible for loading *Si* into the xylem. In horsetail millet *Equisetum arvense* Linnaeus, the *SiET* genes *EaLSi2-1* and *EaLSi2-2*, the highest *Si* accumulators, were reported (Dabravolski and Isayenkov, 2024). In sorghum, the gene *siliplant 1*, which encodes a protein that precipitates *Si* in leaf silica cells, was identified (Kumar et al., 2020a) and may be useful for developing insect resistance.

Varietal comparisons in rice revealed that higher expression levels of *LSi1* and *LSi2* correlated with greater *Si* accumulation in japonica varieties, such as Nipponbare, than in indica varieties, such as Kasalath (Ma et al., 2007). Marker assisted selection (MAS) can be used to select genotypes with enhanced ability to accumulate *Si* in their tissues. This process involves identifying genetic markers linked to QTLs or major genes that control *Si* uptake and deposition in plants. By combining these *Si*-related traits with existing pest resistance genes, we can develop varieties that leverage both the direct effects of *Si* and its defense-enhancing properties, to develop a more durable pest management strategy.

Although *Si*-related genes and transporters have been identified, the genetic regulation of *Si*-mediated insect resistance remains incompletely understood. *Si* accumulation is strongly influenced by soil availability, water status, and root uptake efficiency, which can limit the predictability of resistance under field conditions. Furthermore, most evidence for *Si*-based resistance is physiological rather than genetic, and the downstream molecular mechanisms linking *Si* deposition to insect deterrence require further investigation.

5.6. Surface/Epicuticular wax (EW) production

During stress due to plant-pathogen or insect interactions, several EW genes are upregulated (Fig. 5) (Xue et al., 2017). Concurrent upregulation of genes involved in synthesizing EW and defense products, such as cytochrome P450 (*CYP*), *WRKY*, *MYB* transcription factors and *CHS*, were identified. In *A. thaliana*, EWs synthesis-related *eceriferum* protein family enzymes (*CER4*, *CER6*, and *CER10*), fatty acyl-*acp* thioesterase *B* (*FATB*), and *glossy 8* (Bonaventure et al., 2003; Dietrich et al., 2005; Rowland et al., 2006; Zheng et al., 2005), wax transporters, *CER5* and *white-brown complex homolog 11* (*WBC11*) (Bird et al., 2007; Pighin et al., 2004), and transcription factors, *shine 1* (*SHN1*), *MYB30*, *MYB96*, and *wax production 1* (*WXP1*) (Broun et al., 2004; Raffaele et al., 2008; Seo et al., 2011) were documented. These homologous genes were also reported in other cultivated crops.

The interaction between rice and brown planthopper (BPH) *Nilaparvata lugens* Stal feeding is characterized by pronounced cell wall modifications, which serve as a key defensive strategy positioning the cell wall as a principal “battleground” in plant-insect interactions (Silva-Sanzana et al., 2020). The cell wall-modifying enzymes (CWMEs) present in salivary secretions of *N. lugens* help them to penetrate the extracellular matrix of epidermal cells using their stylet (Van Bel and Will, 2016). To defend against *N. lugens* feeding, rice plants used an alternative array of CWMEs to strengthen their cell walls. Numerous signaling mechanisms regulating this resistance have been identified, including salicylic acid (SA) and jasmonic acid (JA). In *N. lugens* infested rice sheaths, regulation of lipid metabolism, particularly lipid-mediated signaling and wax production, was also observed (Liu et al., 2021). In response to environmental stress, phospholipase enzymes hydrolyze membrane phospholipids, producing signaling molecules such as phosphatidic acid, diacylglycerol, phosphoinositides, and inositol polyphosphates (Singh et al., 2012), which trigger the synthesis of resistance building biomolecules via downstream pathways.

The fatty acid elongase complex in the endoplasmic reticulum facilitates the elongation of fatty acids into very long-chain fatty acids (VLCFAs) (Wang et al., 2017), which are transformed into cuticular wax and delivered to the cuticle (Xue et al., 2017). The cuticle acts as the outermost hydrophobic layer of aerial organs, protecting plants from abiotic and biotic stresses. In the rice variety Qingliu, resistance against *C. medinalis* and *N. lugens* was associated with increased expression of genes related to lipid signaling. Phospholipase C (*Os02g0588500*), two

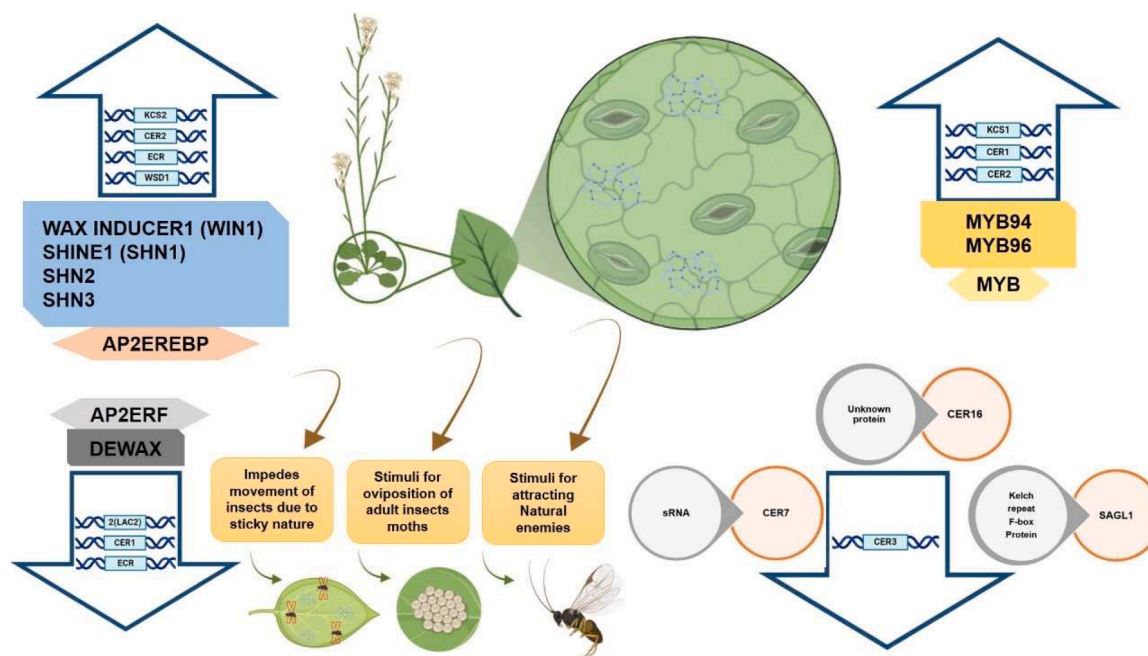


Fig. 5. Molecular biogenetic pathway of epidermal wax production in plants.

The figure illustrates the genetic pathways and regulatory mechanisms involved in the production of epidermal wax on the plant surface, where upward arrows represent upregulation and downward arrows represent downregulation of genes contributing to increased/decreased EWs, highlighting their varied roles in influencing insect-plant interactions. Created with BioRender.com.

phospholipase D enzymes (*Os08g0401800*, *Os02g0120200*), as well as five genes encoding lipid transfer proteins (*Os03g0718800*, *Os12g0114500*, *Os06g0643500*, *Os07g0175600*, *Os10g0505500*) were expressed in Quingliu (Li et al., 2022).

In sorghum, several resistant ‘R’ genes and transcription factors associated with EW biosynthesis have been documented in a genome-wide association (GWA) study. This study also found 37 putative genes related to sorghum EW biosynthesis and transport, including those involved in fatty acid synthesis (*3-oxoacyl-[acyl-carrier-protein (ACP)] synthase III*), wax regulation (*ankyrin repeat protein*, *bHLH-MYC*, and *R2R3-MYB* transcription factors), and wax transport (*ABC transporter*, *lipid exporter ABCA1*, *multidrug resistance protein*, *inositol 1,3,4-trisphosphate 5/6-kinase*, and *CYP*) (Elango et al., 2020). These identified candidate genes could be used as molecular markers in breeding programs to manipulate EW in sorghum.

Cuticular lipids and wax crystal structures on maize leaves influenced host-plant selection behavior and resistance against insects, such as FAW. The density and structure of wax crystals differed between the upper and lower maize leaves, affecting FAW larval movement. Larvae moved farther on the smooth upper leaves than the lower ones with dense wax crystals (Xavier Chiriboga et al., 2021). The *glossy 6* gene in maize is crucial for the intracellular transport of cuticular waxes from their site of biosynthesis to the plant surface. A mutation in the *glossy 6* gene resulted in reduced EW accumulation, increased cuticle permeability, and decreased drought tolerance, indicating that *glossy 6* is important for wax deposition on the leaf surface (Li et al., 2019).

Recent transcriptomic studies have shown that in Arabidopsis, the accumulation of wax and cutin monomers is positively regulated by wounding through the JA signaling pathway. This regulation involved JA-responsive genes (*CYP96A4*) that interacted with *CER1* and *CER2*, the core enzymes in wax biosynthesis, and also modulated *CER3* activity to influence aldehyde synthesis in wax accumulation (Huang et al., 2024).

Generally, the EW and cutin monomers act as physical barriers against various biotic and abiotic factors, preventing excess water loss during drought and insect feeding. In some cases, the chemical composition of these surface waxes directly affects insects and

pathogens. Anticipating this trait of cutin monomers, the genes responsible for their synthesis can be directly activated in the plant system, allowing plants to directly resist biotic attacks and achieve combined resistance involving both physical and chemical traits.

Beyond considering the minor variations in foliage color among plant species, the relative differences in the Degree of Linear Polarization (DoLP) are also a more useful plant cue than plant shape, foliage color, or intensity. It was shown that a decreased DoLP, resulting from significant epidermal wax, led to a matte appearance that encouraged pests to lay eggs. Female *P. rapae* laid their eggs on the cabbage and rutabaga form of *B. napus*, which had an EW layer that gave their leaves a matte finish. In order to make plants less susceptible to specific insect herbivores, breeding for the development of plant genotypes with leaves containing higher/reduced wax content is essential, as this can change foliar surface traits and the polarization of their reflections (Blake et al., 2019).

Genes involved in pigmentation and secondary metabolite biosynthesis have been widely associated with insect resistance; however, their effects are frequently reflected through direct and indirect strategies of plant defense. In many cases, changes in pigmentation correlate with altered insect behavior rather than direct toxicity, making causal relationships difficult to establish. Additionally, pigmentation traits are strongly influenced by plant developmental stage and environmental conditions, and their stability across environments remains insufficiently explored. Further studies are required to clarify the consistency and functional relevance of pigmentation-mediated resistance in crops.

6. Epigenetic regulation of defense structures

Epigenetic mechanisms, such as DNA methylation, histone modification, and small RNA-mediated regulation, play an important role in modulating plant biophysical traits associated with insect resistance (Kooke et al., 2015). Such regulations are largely mediated by conserved gene networks that control various defense-related biophysical structures (Alonso et al., 2019), which are discussed in the following sections.

6.1. Trichome development

Epigenetic regulation, particularly miRNA-mediated control of transcription factors, plays a central role in trichome initiation, density, and patterning. In *A. thaliana*, miR319 regulates trichome branching and development by targeting *teosinte branched cycloidea proliferating cell factor 4 (TCP4)*, which positively regulates *glabrous inflorescence stems (GIS)*, a key activator of trichome formation (Vadde et al., 2018). Similarly, the microRNA156 (miR156)-*squamosa promoter binding protein-like (SPL)* module governs trichome distribution during vegetative and reproductive transitions. miR156 suppresses multiple *SPL* genes, particularly *SPL9*, which directly activates the trichome repressors *trichomeless1 (TCL1)* and *triptychon (TRY)*, thereby negatively regulating trichome initiation independent of the canonical GL1 pathway (Yu et al., 2010).

Although *A. thaliana* provides the most detailed mechanistic insights into epigenetic control of trichome development, increasing evidence indicates that miRNA-mediated and epigenetic regulation of trichome traits is conserved across crops. In cotton (*Gossypium* spp.), miR828 and miR858 target MYB transcription factors regulating fiber (specialized trichome) initiation and elongation, with additional chromatin-level regulation influencing trichome-associated defensive traits (Guan et al., 2014). In tomato (*S. lycopersicum*), epigenetic mechanisms regulate the expression of the HD-ZIP IV gene *woolly*. This regulation controls downstream TCP transcription factors such as miR319-TCP, thereby determining trichome type and density, which are linked to insect resistance (Yang et al., 2011).

In cucumber (*C. sativus*), expression of trichome regulators *CsGGL1*, *CsGGL3*, and *CsTTG1* is influenced by epigenetic mechanisms (Chen et al., 2014), while in rice (*Oryza sativa*), miRNA-associated and epigenetic regulation of epidermal cell-fate genes such as *OsGGL1* and *WOX* family members control hair-like structures affecting insect feeding behavior (Li et al., 2022). Together, these studies demonstrate that epigenetic and miRNA-mediated regulation of trichomes and trichome-like structures extends beyond model plants. However, functional validation of specific miRNA-gene modules in crops remains limited compared with *Arabidopsis*. Also, direct evidence linking DNA methylation and histone modifications of trichome regulatory genes to insect resistance in crops remains scarce and represents an important area for future research.

6.2. Epicuticular waxes (EWs) and cuticle-based resistance

EWs and cuticular lipids form the first physical interface between plants and insects, which influences insect adhesion, feeding behavior, and host recognition. The biosynthesis and deposition of waxes are controlled by complex gene networks that are increasingly recognized to be epigenetically regulated. Core wax biosynthetic genes such as *CER1*, *CER3*, *KCS*, *FAR*, and *WSD1*, which regulate very-long-chain fatty acid elongation and alkane formation, are under transcriptional and chromatin-level regulation, including histone modifications mediated by *AP2/ERF* transcription factors such as *DEWAX* (Go et al., 2014). However, more research is needed to better understand the regulatory mechanisms underlying EWs and cuticular lipid production and deposition. This will facilitate the design of our approach to selecting breeding and molecular strategies to incorporate the resistant trait into cultivable genotypes successfully.

7. Improvement of biophysical traits in plants through new breeding techniques (NBTs) against insect pests

Recent advances in genetic engineering and plant biotechnology have opened new avenues for strengthening HPR against insect pests (Tyagi et al., 2020). Wild relatives of crops harbor significantly greater insect-resistant traits than domesticated varieties, with the different levels of gene pool serving as the richest source of resistance genes/alleles. Conventional backcrossing approaches often faced limitations,

yet they contributed to the breeding of insect resistance. More recently, marker-assisted backcrossing (MAB) has facilitated the targeted introgression of desirable resistance genes from wild species into cultivated crops, improving the efficiency and precision of resistance breeding. Genome-based tools now allow the identification of insect-resistant QTLs, while biotechnological approaches, such as genome editing, can directly manipulate genes underlying biophysical traits that influence insect-plant interactions. These methods collectively accelerate the development of insect-resistant cultivars with enhanced durability and specificity.

Biotechnological innovations such as CRISPR-Cas9 offer opportunities to precisely modify resistance-associated loci with minimal off-target effects (Padmavathi and Padmaja, 2022). While genome editing has been extensively used to enhance tolerance to bacterial, viral, and fungal pathogens (Vats et al., 2019), its applications in insect resistance are still emerging. Insects rely on external morphological cues, including leaf color, to recognize and select suitable host plants. Accordingly, changes in plant pigmentation have been shown to influence host preference and feeding behavior (Komal et al., 2023). For example, pigmentation-based resistance has been demonstrated in red-leaf tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum* Linnaeus), where modification of the anthocyanin pathway led to the accumulation of red leaf color, deterring herbivores such as *H. armigera* and *S. litura* (Malone et al., 2009). In addition, some studies have demonstrated that color pigmentation can be effectively altered using the CRISPR-Cas9 genome editing system. Phytoene dehydrogenase (PDS) genes encode key enzymes in the carotenoid biosynthesis pathway and are essential for leaf pigmentation, photoprotection, and plant responses to both biotic and abiotic stresses. In *Populus tomentosa* Carriere, the application of CRISPR-Cas9 system enabled the successful generation of targeted endogenous mutations by the simultaneous disruption of two PDS genes, *PtoPDS1* and *PtoPDS2* (Fan et al., 2015), which facilitated the enhancement of endogenous defense mechanisms and contributed to improved insect resistance in *Populus*.

In addition to color-related traits, several other host resistance mechanisms have been successfully enhanced through targeted genome editing of key defense-related genes. For example, in the barley cultivar Golden Promise, CRISPR-Cas9-mediated editing of β -1,3-glucanase genes reduced callose degradation in sieve tubes, leading to an increased callose deposition. As a consequence, the growth of aphids *R. padi*, was significantly impaired due to restricted uptake of phloem sap (Moon et al., 2022). Similarly, trichome-based resistance from pigeonpea CWR *C. scarabaeoides* Thouars has been introgressed into cultivated backgrounds, producing lines with high densities of specific trichome types that confer moderate to strong resistance to *H. armigera* (Ngugi-Dawit et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2022; Volp et al., 2023; Dhanyakumar et al., 2025). Likewise, some barley lines with resistance genes derived from *Hordeum vulgare* ssp. *spontaneum* Thellung, which enhanced aphid resistance (Ahman and Bengtsson, 2019), and cabbage genotypes with cuticular wax-related genes (e.g., *BoI013612*, *CGL2*) that influence insect oviposition and feeding behavior (Huo et al., 2022) were developed. Together, these highlights demonstrate that modifications in biophysical traits such as trichome density, pigmentation, and cuticular wax deposition offer practical avenues for insect pest management.

Beyond these structural traits, cell wall modifications involving secondary cell wall components, such as lignin, which serve as mechanical barriers against herbivory (Santiago et al., 2013), need to be improved to increase resistance. Interestingly, the tryptamine-to-serotonin pathway contributes to plant resistance by strengthening cell walls and related biophysical traits that deter insect feeding. In rice, CRISPR-Cas9-mediated deletion of the *CYP71A1* gene, which encodes tryptamine 5-hydroxylase, enhanced tryptamine-to-serotonin conversion and conferred increased resistance to striped stem borer *C. suppressalis* and *N. lugens* (Lu et al., 2018). In sweet potato *Ipomoea batatas* (Linnaeus) Lamarck, wound-induced small RNAs (miR828 and sRNA8105) suppressed negative regulators of the

phenylpropanoid pathway, resulting in upregulated lignin biosynthesis and enhanced defense against insect damage (Chen et al., 2023). Similarly, in apple, overexpression or silencing of the *MdDEWAX* gene altered cuticular wax accumulation, affecting stress tolerance and potentially influencing pest resistance (Man et al., 2024). These findings emphasize that a deeper understanding of the molecular basis of biophysical traits, coupled with targeted manipulation of candidate genes and QTLs, can guide breeding programs toward the development of insect-resistant cultivars. Thus, an integration of conventional breeding with wild relative introgression and the use of precise genome editing tools provides a powerful framework for exploiting morphological traits in sustainable pest management.

8. Challenges in adopting NBTs in the improvement of biophysical traits in plants against insect pests

Breeding for insect resistance in crops is crucial for sustainable crop production, but it has several challenges. Developing resistant cultivars with enhanced morphological traits is a complex and time-consuming process that requires identifying and introducing effective resistance genes or traits from diverse genetic resources, including CWRs. In this context, the application of NBTs to biophysical trait-mediated insect resistance presents both opportunities and constraints. NBTs such as CRISPR/Cas systems enable precise modification of genes regulating trichomes, wax biosynthesis, pigmentation, and silicon uptake; however, many of these traits are polygenic and quantitatively inherited, limiting the effectiveness of single-gene interventions (Chen et al., 2019; Kumari et al., 2022). One key difficulty is the limited availability of known genes governing those resistant traits and the need to continuously search for new sources of resistance, as pests can evolve to overcome existing resistance. Methodological challenges include target gene selection, unintended pleiotropic effects, and the need for reliable phenotyping under field conditions (Mitchell et al., 2016). Even with advances in genomics and molecular breeding tools, the identification and pyramiding of multiple resistance genes remains challenging, especially in minor crop species, due to limited whole-genome data. Looking ahead, continued exploration of genetic resources, including wild relatives, will be necessary to identify novel resistance genes and traits. Considering pleiotropic effects, such as editing genes associated with biophysical mechanisms of resistance, which may unintentionally affect growth, yield, or other plant functions, leading to trade-offs between defense and productivity. On the other hand, assessing the success of genome-edited biophysical traits requires extensive phenotyping under field conditions, which is time-consuming and labor-intensive.

In addition, ecological considerations such as trait stability across environments and interactions with non-target organisms are of major concern, where genome-edited modification of structural traits such as trichomes, wax layers, or *Si* accumulation may influence multitrophic interactions by altering herbivore behavior as well as the efficiency of natural enemies. Changes in surface traits can affect predator movement, parasitoid host-searching efficiency, and non-target insect interactions, highlighting the need for ecological risk assessment beyond target pest suppression. Also, the expression of many biophysical traits is environmentally sensitive, and edited phenotypes may exhibit variable performance across agroecological zones, seasons, or stress conditions, potentially affecting the durability of resistance.

On the other hand, regulatory frameworks governing genome-edited crops (Kumar et al., 2020b) influence the practical deployment of these approaches. India has adopted a case-by-case framework for genome-edited crops (Buchholzer and Frommer, 2023). Since improvements in biophysical traits can be achieved through Site-Directed Nuclease (SDN-1 and SDN-2) genome-editing approaches without the introduction of foreign DNA (Kumar et al., 2020b), these modifications are subject to regulatory relaxation. According to guidelines emulated by the Department of Biotechnology, Government of India, New Delhi, SDN-1 and SDN-2 genome-edited plants lacking foreign DNA are exempt

from genetically modified organisms (GMO) regulations. However, they require institutional oversight, biosafety assessment, and environmental evaluation prior to confined field trials and release. These regulatory requirements underscore the importance of integrating ecological validation with molecular precision to ensure the safe and responsible deployment of NBT-derived biophysical traits in agriculture. Most importantly, genome-edited crops face public concerns, impacting their acceptance and commercialization, especially in certain countries. Therefore, NBTs should be viewed as complementary tools that integrate molecular insights with ecological validation and conventional breeding, rather than as standalone solutions.

9. Conclusion and future prospects

The deployment of plant biophysical trait-based resistance is essential for improving cultivated crops to meet the growing demand for food production while minimizing yield losses caused by insect pests. Identification of crop and insect-specific biophysical traits, along with their associated candidate genes, provides valuable opportunities to enhance resistance in elite cultivars and supports sustainable pest management strategies. Marker assisted selection (MAS) can facilitate the identification and introgression of such genes into breeding programs. At the same time, the integration of multiomics approaches, including genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics, will deepen our understanding of plant-insect interactions and enable more targeted interventions.

Recent advances in genome editing technologies, such as CRISPR/Cas9, base editing, and prime editing, further expand the potential to fine-tune biophysical traits associated with insect resistance with high precision and reduced off-target effects. However, the successful application of these approaches requires addressing key challenges, including the polygenic nature of many biophysical traits, potential pleiotropic effects, adaptive responses of insect pests, and regulatory and public acceptance constraints. Emphasis on field level validation, biosafety assessment, and the integration of precision genome editing with advanced breeding strategies and ecological principles will be critical for the development and deployment of durable insect resistant crop varieties, ultimately contributing to global food security and sustainable agricultural systems under changing pest dynamics. Overall, this review integrates current knowledge while recognizing existing limitations, and provides a realistic framework to guide future research and breeding efforts aimed at exploiting biophysical traits for sustainable insect resistance.

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Supplementary materials

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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