

## ***In vitro* evaluation of efficacy of *Trichoderma harzianum* on the radial growth of *Alternaria alternata***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Stevia rebaudiana* Bertoni, a herbaceous perennial known for its natural sweetness, has garnered global recognition and is found in various regions of India. A study was carried out to investigate the leaf spot disease in Stevia, caused by *Alternaria alternata* (FR.) Keissler to find out the most suitable design of dual culture technique. Since the leaves are the primary site for synthesizing sweet glycosides, in Stevia this disease leads to significant losses and ultimately reduces the yield which leads to a serious concern. Due to the harmful effects of chemical fungicides, finding a safer alternative to control the pathogen became a priority. This prompted experiments with bioagents for pathogen control. Bio fungicides derived from *Trichoderma* are increasingly being recognized as successful agricultural applications, with over 50 registered products available worldwide. The present study was conducted in the Laboratory, Department of Plant Pathology, Naini Agricultural Institute, Sam Higginbottom University of Agriculture, Technology and Sciences, Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh). The dual culture technique was carried out on Completely Randomized Design (CRD) with three replications and six treatments. Examination of fungal colony characteristics was done through microscopic examination. At 7 DAI, maximum mycelial inhibition of 96.70% was recorded in the treatment T<sub>6</sub> (six discs of *Trichoderma harzianum* against one disc of *Alternaria alternata*).

**Keywords:** *Alternaria alternata*, bioagent, dual culture, fungal colony, Stevia, *Trichoderma harzianum*,

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

*Stevia (Stevia rebaudiana* Bertoni) is a member of the Asteraceae family and is recognized as one of the most significant natural sweetener plants with low-calorie content. India is known as the “Diabetes Capital” for its increasing number of diabetes cases. Stevia emerged as the realm of sweetness to all the diabetic individuals. The sweetness of stevia is due to stevioloside and rebaudioside. Maximum stevioloside content is present in the leaves of stevia, emerging it as the main economic part. The global stevia market expanded significantly, increasing from ₹ 61.65 billion in 2022 to ₹ 67.40 billion in 2023, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of 9.9%. The increasing demand for natural sweeteners has encouraged Indian farmers to cultivate stevia on a large scale (Dhange *et al.*, 2023). Currently, the nation produces roughly 900 tonnes of dry leaf annually. A major concern is leaf spot disease caused by the infestation of *Alternaria alternata* (FR.) Keissler. Since the leaves are the primary site for synthesizing sweet glycosides, this disease leads to significant losses and ultimately reduces the yield (Nayak *et al.*, 2023). The news survey conducted over the past five years indicates that *Alternaria* leaf disease has been prevalent in medicinal plants cultivated in various districts of West Bengal, India (Chirutala and Simon, 2021). *Alternaria* diseases primarily impact the leaves, stems, flowers, and fruits of annual plants, particularly vegetables and ornamentals. The pathogenic fungus *Alternaria alternata* can produce endo-polygalacturonase (endo-PG) and pectate lyase (PL) enzymes. These enzymes are responsible for breaking down pectic components of the plant cell wall. Depending on the interaction between the plant species and the microorganism (compatible or incompatible), these pectinases may function as part of the fungal infection mechanism or trigger a hypersensitive response by releasing oligosaccharides

that act as elicitors of the plant response (Roco *et al.*, 2001). Biological control, which involves using living organisms (antagonists) to reduce pathogen activities, is a highly promising approach for managing plant diseases. Unlike chemical fungicides, biological control does not lead to the development of resistance in pathogens, nor does it contaminate the environment. Additionally, it meets the requirements of profitable markets. Among 25 fungal antagonists studied, the genus *Trichoderma* was identified as having the greatest biocontrol potential (Ferreira and Musumeci, 2021). *Trichoderma* is a prominent and widely distributed filamentous fungus found in soil, where it plays a role in decomposing vegetative materials, plant matter, and wood. *Trichoderma* is considered an exceptional biocontrol agent because of its distinctive traits, including its rapid multiplication, wide distribution, and ease of isolation and cultivation. The control mechanisms exhibited by *Trichoderma* spp. vary depending on the fungal species and environmental conditions. *Trichoderma* spp. utilize direct biocontrol mechanisms, including mycoparasitism, competition for space and nutrients, production of antimicrobial compounds (antibiosis) and lytic enzymes. They also employ indirect mechanisms, such as induction of systemic resistance, growth promotion, and rhizosphere competence. Various studies have been conducted both *in vitro* and *in vivo* using *Trichoderma harzianum* against *Alternaria alternata*. This study is conducted to know the most suitable design in dual culture technique using *Trichoderma harzianum* against *Alternaria alternata* for maximum mycelial inhibition of the pathogen.

## 2.1 MATERIAL AND METHODS

### 2.1.1 Experimental Site

The experiment was conducted in the Laboratory, Department of Plant Pathology at Naini Agricultural Institute, Sam Higginbottom University of Agriculture, Technology and Sciences, Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh). The dual culture technique was carried out on Completely Randomized Design (CRD) with three replications and six treatments.

### 2.1.2 Isolation of Pathogen

For isolating and culturing of pathogen, Potato Dextrose Agar (PDA) medium was used. Diseased portion of the leaf was cut under aseptic conditions into small bits into a sterile dish with the aid of scissors which was flamed over a spirit lamp flame and surface sterilized in 0.1 % sodium hypochlorite. The cut diseased and surface sterilized bits with 70% ethanol was placed on Petri dishes spoured with solidified potato dextrose agar (PDA). The inoculated plates were incubated at room temperature until visible growths are seen on the plates. The fungal colonies growing in the incubated plates were sub-cultured into fresh medium until pure cultures are obtained (Rahman *et al.*, 2020). Sub-culturing was done at regular intervals, by using single spore method purification of the culture was made (Toussoun and Nelson, 1976). The pure culture was maintained in slants and stored at 4°C temperature in the refrigerator.

### 2.1.2 Identification

Examination of the fungal colony characteristics was done through microscopic examination. Using a sterile needle, a small portion of the culture was taken and placed on a sterile glass slide. It was stained using lactophenol and cotton blue and were identified using the key of Barnett and Hunter.

### 2.1.3 Morphological Characteristics

Conidiophores were simple, light brown, variable in length ranging from 17.10 to 61.56  $\mu\text{m}$  and mostly 2-3 septate rarely 4-5 septate. Conidia were found light to dark brown in colour, uniform with 0-2 longitudinal septa and 1-6 transverse septa, and variable in shape and size, mostly oval shape with rudimentary beak and in size measuring about 10.26-77.52 x 4.56-14.82  $\mu\text{m}$ . Based on the morphological characters, the organism was identified as *Alternaria alternata* (Keissler, 1912; Barnett and Hunter, 1973) (Plate 1).



Plate 1. Conidia of *Alternaria alternata* (45X)

### 2.1.4 Biocontrol Agent *Trichoderma harzianum*

The biocontrol agent *Trichoderma harzianum* was obtained from Laboratory, Department of Plant Pathology, Naini Agricultural Institute, Sam Higginbottom University of Agriculture, Technology and Sciences, Prayagraj, U.P. *Trichoderma harzianum* was sub-cultured in *in vitro* for antagonism test against *Alternaria alternata* (Plate 2).

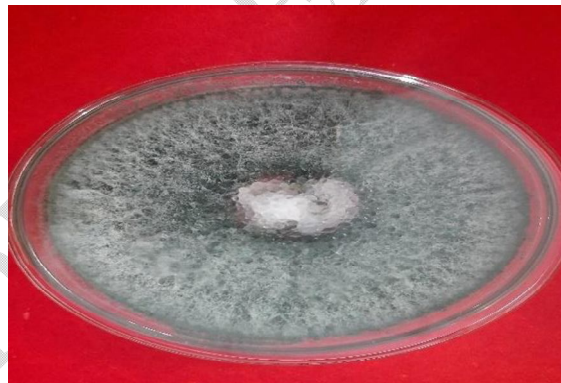


Plate 2. Pure Culture of *Trichoderma harzianum*

## 2.2 Methods

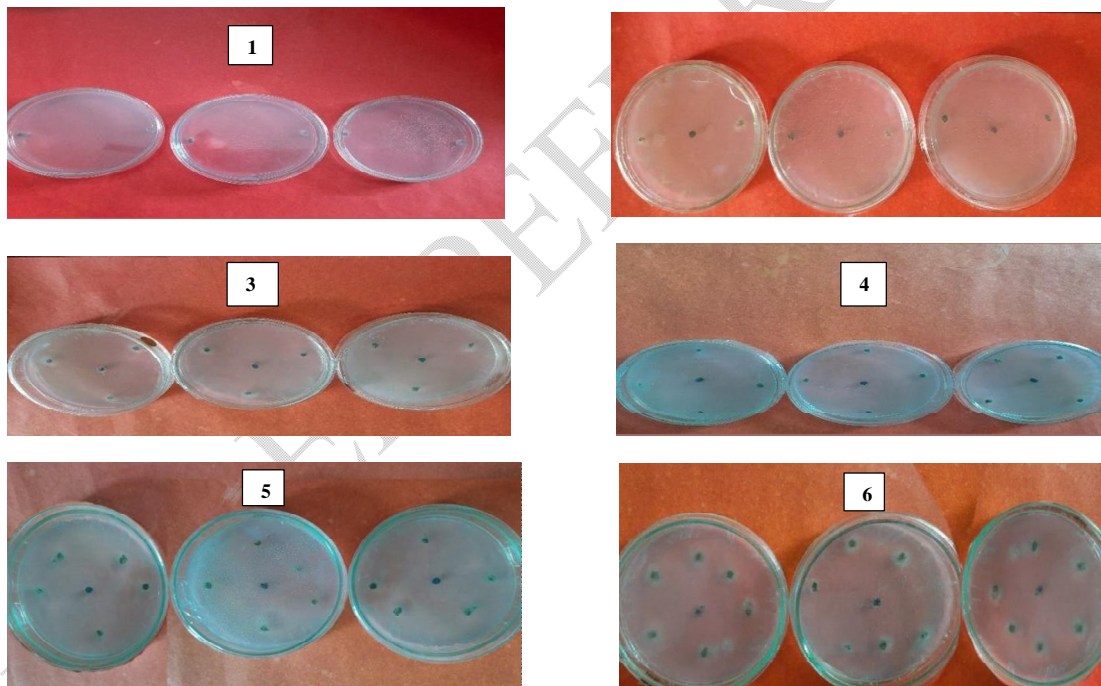
Dual culture was performed to check the antagonism ability of *Trichoderma harzianum* against *Alternaria alternata* for mycelial inhibition and overgrowth. This was done following six different designs of dual culture technique to observe the efficiency of *T. harzianum* against *A. alternata* and control plates were also set. *T. harzianum* and *A. alternata* was subcultured onto PDA for 7 days. The margin of the colony was cut with sterile cork borer and was placed in 90 mm diameter Petri plate containing PDA in different designs (Nafiza *et al.*, 2021).

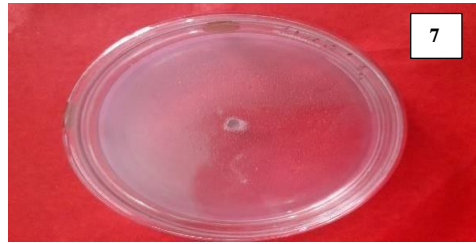
### 2.2.1 Design of Dual Culture Plates

In first design, one disc of *A. alternata* was set against one disc of *T. harzianum*. In second design, two discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery of both sides of the Petri dish and one disc of *A. alternata* was set at the centre of the Petri dish. In third design, three discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery of the Petri dish surrounding one disc of *A. alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish. In fourth design, four discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery of the Petri dish surrounding one disc of *A. alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish. In fifth design, five discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery of the Petri dish surrounding one disc of *A. alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish. In sixth design, six discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery of Petri dish surrounding one disc of *A. alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish. In control plate, only one disc of *A. alternata* was set on the centre of the Petri dish (Plate 3).

Each design of dual culture technique was replicated three times. All the plates are incubated at  $28 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$  and antagonistic activity was tested 7 days after incubation by measuring the radius of the *A. alternata* colony ( $R_2$ ) in the treatment plates and the radius of the *A. alternata* colony in the control plate ( $R_1$ ) at regular intervals. The ability of *T. harzianum* to overgrow the colony of *A. alternata* was observed and compared with the control treatment.

The inhibition levels were calculated using the formula  $[(R_1 - R_2)/R_1] \times 100$ .





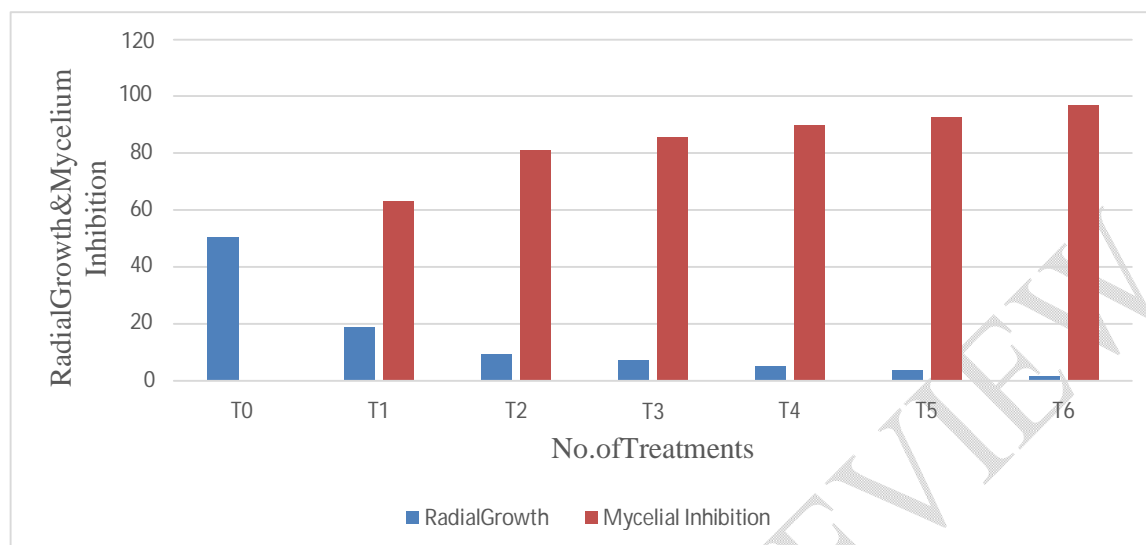
**Plate 3.** Different designs of dual culture plates containing *Trichoderma harzianum* and *Alternaria alternata* in PDA; 1- one disc of *A. alternata* was set against one disc of *T. harzianum*, 2- two discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery surrounding one disc of *A. alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish, 3- three discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery surrounding one disc of *A. alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish, 4- four discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery surrounding one disc of *A. alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish, 5- five discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery surrounding one disc of *A. alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish, 6- six discs of *T. harzianum* were set on the periphery surrounding one disc of *A. alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish, 7- control plates of *A. alternata*.

### 3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

**Table 1. Radial growth and mycelial inhibition in dual culture technique using *Trichoderma harzianum* against *Alternaria alternata***

Treatment Notation	Treatment details	Radial growth (mm)	Mycelial inhibition (%)
<b>7 DAI</b>			
<b>T<sub>0</sub></b>	Only one disc of <i>A. alternata</i>	50.33 <sup>a</sup>	-
<b>T<sub>1</sub></b>	One disc of <i>T. harzianum</i> against one disc of <i>A. alternata</i>	18.50 <sup>b</sup>	63.24
<b>T<sub>2</sub></b>	Two disc of <i>T. harzianum</i> against one disc of <i>A. alternata</i>	9.50 <sup>c</sup>	81.12
<b>T<sub>3</sub></b>	Three disc of <i>T. harzianum</i> against one disc of <i>A. alternata</i>	7.25 <sup>d</sup>	85.59
<b>T<sub>4</sub></b>	Four disc of <i>T. harzianum</i> against one disc of <i>A. alternata</i>	5.00 <sup>e</sup>	90.06
<b>T<sub>5</sub></b>	Five disc of <i>T. harzianum</i> against one disc of <i>A. alternata</i>	3.67 <sup>e</sup>	92.70
<b>T<sub>6</sub></b>	Six disc of <i>T. harzianum</i> against one disc of <i>A. alternata</i>	1.66 <sup>f</sup>	96.70
<b>CD<sub>0.05</sub></b>		<b>1.43</b>	

**Figure 1. Graphical representation of efficacy of *Trichoderma harzianum* against *Alternaria alternata* in dual culture technique at 7 DAI**



**Plate 4.** Plates after 7 DAI (1- one disc of Aa with Th, 2- one disc of Aa with two discs of Th, 3- one disc of Aa with three discs of Th, 4- one disc of Aa with four discs of Th, 5- one disc of Aa with five discs of Th and 6- one disc of Aa with six discs of Th.

**\*Th-*Trichoderma harzianum*, Aa-*Alternaria alternata***

All six designs have shown reduced growth of *Alternaria alternata* in the dual culture plates when compared with the control plate. Among the six designs of our experiment, the sixth design where six discs of *Trichoderma harzianum* was set on the periphery of the Petri dish surrounding *Alternaria alternata* on the centre have shown maximum mycelial inhibition of 96.70%, where the radial growth of *Alternaria alternata* was 1.66mm followed by fifth design where five discs of *Trichoderma harzianum* were set on the periphery of the Petri dish.

surrounding one disc of *Alternaria alternata* on the centre of the Petridish where the radial growth of *Alternaria alternata* was 3.67 mm, fourth design where four discs of *Trichoderma harzianum* were set on the periphery of the Petri dish surrounding one disc of *Alternaria alternata* on the centre of the Petri dish where the radial growth of *Alternaria alternata* was 5mm. The first, second and third design recorded radial growth of *Alternaria alternata* of 7.25 mm, 9.50 mm, 18.50 mm respectively. In control condition, radial growth of *Alternaria alternata* was 50.33 mm after 7 days of incubation (Table 1). Mycelial overgrowth of *Trichoderma harzianum* was also observed in the dual culture plates after 7 days of incubation (Plate 4).

The probable reasons for such findings may be due to the secretion of extracellular cell degrading enzymes and production of secondary metabolites by *Trichoderma harzianum* which inhibited the growth of the *Alternaria alternata* Zade *et al.* (2018). The results of the present findings agree with Nafiza *et al.* (2021) who carried out dual culture with different number of discs of *Trichoderma harzianum* against *Magnaporthe oryzae* and recorded maximum inhibition of pathogen in the plate with maximum number of discs of *T. harzianum* set against the pathogen. Similar findings were also recorded by Khalique *et al.* (2016) who also observed maximum inhibition of *A. alternata* when *T. harzianum* was applied from four sides keeping one disc of pathogen at the centre.

## 5. Conclusion

Six different designs of dual culture technique with *Trichoderma harzianum* against *Alternaria alternata* was used. *In vitro* analysis revealed that the sixth design where six discs of *Trichoderma harzianum* was set on the periphery of the Petri dish surrounding *Alternaria alternata* on the centre have shown maximum mycelial inhibition of 96.70%. All the designs of dual culture technique were found effective *in vitro* test against *Alternaria alternata*.

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