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## Rice and cold stress: methods for its evaluation and summary of cold tolerance-related quantitative trait loci

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## **Abstract**

Cold stress adversely affects rice (*Oryza sativa* L.) growth and productivity, and has so far determined its geographical distribution. Dissecting cold stress-mediated physiological changes and understanding their genetic causes will facilitate the breeding of rice for cold tolerance. Here, we review recent progress in research on cold stress-mediated physiological traits and metabolites, and indicate their roles in the cold-response network and cold-tolerance evaluation. We also discuss criteria for evaluating cold tolerance and evaluate the scope and shortcomings of each application. Moreover, we summarize research on quantitative trait loci (QTL) related to cold stress at the germination, seedling, and reproductive stages that should provide useful information to accelerate progress in breeding cold-tolerant rice.

Keywords: Cold tolerance; Physiological metabolites; Evaluation criteria; QTL; Oryza sativa

## Introduction

Crops are exposed to varied environmental conditions during their life cycle. Cold stress, which can be classified as chilling (0-15°C) and freezing (<0°C) stress, is a major environmental factor limiting the growth, productivity, and geographical distribution of crops (Zhu et al. 2007). Rice (Oryza sativa L.), one of the most world's most important staple crops, feeds more than 2.7 billion people worldwide and is extensively grown by more than half of the world's farmers (Fairhurst and Dobermann 2002; Shelton et al. 2002). Due to its origin in tropical and subtropical regions, rice is more sensitive to cold stress than other cereal crops such as wheat (Triticum aestivum L.) and barley (Hordeum vulgare L.). Therefore, in temperate areas, the production of rice is severely limited by cold stress (Xie et al. 2012). Low temperatures that occur at critical reproductive stages can adversely affect grain quality or cause yield reductions in high-latitude or high-altitude regions of China, Japan, Korea, and other parts of the world (Jena et al. 2012).

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Over the past 20 years, extensive efforts have been made to improve cold tolerance in rice, which is a very complex trait (Maruyama et al. 2014). Cold stress affects chlorophyll content and fluorescence, and thus interferes with photosynthesis in rice (Kanneganti and Gupta 2008; Kim et al. 2009). Moreover, increased contents of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and malondialdehyde (MDA) that accumulate during cold stress in rice can impair metabolism via cellular oxidative damage (Xie et al. 2009; Nakashima et al. 2007). On the other hand, rice also possesses strategies to cope with or adapt to cold stress. For example, cold-treated rice plants accumulate proline, an amino acid that stabilizes protein synthesis, and thereby maintains the optimal function of rice cells (Kandpal and Rao 1985). Under cold stress, contents of antioxidant species also increase to scavenge ROS and protect rice plants against oxidative damage (Sato et al. 2011). Such physiological changes that occur upon cold treatment of rice, whether mediators or symptoms of cold damage, can also be used as indicators to evaluate the cold tolerance of rice.

Due to diverse growing locations and climatic factors, rice cultivars face cold stress at specific growth stages (Saito et al. 2001). Researchers have established many growth-stage specific criteria to evaluate and select cold-



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