



New types of plant breeding endanger food supply



Since 2012, work has been in progress on CRISPR, a so-called genetic scissors that can make targeted changes to DNA in plant breeding. Already today it is being propagated that the gene scissors can be used to intervene in human genetic material for “healing purposes”. Will the genetic material of humans, animals and plants now become an object of the interests of profit of certain corporations? ...

Since 2012, work has been done on the molecular biology method CRISPR, a system that can make specific changes to DNA and, for example, carry out plant breeding much faster and more precisely than conventional breeding methods. CRISPR/Cas9 [Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats] can be used to cut the genetic material of plants and living organisms in a targeted manner. In this way, individual DNA building blocks can be inserted, removed or modified.

The inventors Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna, who came across the “gene scissors CRISPR” more or less by chance during their research, recently received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for it. In explaining the award, the committee wrote that the gene scissors were an “unexpected discovery with breathtaking potential, perhaps comparable to the nomination in 1944 by the Stockholm jury when Otto Hahn was honored for the discovery of nuclear fission.” Further cheers were given at the award ceremony: This splendid discovery is about the possibility to rewrite the “code of life”.

Now, it is not predominantly about the genetic material of plants and any living beings, but also about medical progress. Already today, it is propagated that genetic scissors can be used to intervene in human genetic material for “healing purposes”.

In any case, the two Nobel Prize winners and inventors of CRISPR warned early on about the possibility of misuse of their discovery. Biologist Christoph Then from the Testbiotech Association sees a similar risk: “The future of life on this planet depends very much on whether we manage to set clear limits to the applications of this new genetic engineering. We must prevent the genetic material of humans, animals and plants from becoming the plaything of profit interests and technical presumption arrogance and hubris.”

Ironically, almost simultaneously with the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for the CRISPR system, 117 European research institutions appealed to the European Court of Justice to “modernize” the Genetic Engineering Act in order to make the production of genetically engineered products more enforceable worldwide.

Corporations like Bayer –formerly Monsanto – and DuPont have long sought to capture the world's seed supply through ongoing development of genetically engineered crops.

What assessments or experience has already been made with the modification of genes in the plant world? According to the industry-independent research project 'Rages', there is “significant potential for unanticipated interactions, for disruption of the order of the genome

[genetic material], and for unintended biochemical alterations".." Another danger is that genetically modified food crops are cultivated in monocultures and thus supersede natural seed diversity. This could be seen in Ireland as early as 1845 to 1852: Over a million people starved to death because a third of the population depended on a genetically limited potato variety that was attacked by potato blight, a fungus.

A more recent example from our time showed the banana crisis. For example, on T-Online (a German online newspaper) on Sept. 3rd, 2019, it said, "Fungal disease leads to global banana crisis." Numerous plantations in Latin America and Colombia were infected with the fungal disease Tropical Race 4 (TR4). In this context, it is interesting to note the assessment of Agustin Molina of Bioversity International, a global agricultural research organization. He says, "A lot has been promised on the part of genetic engineers since the 1990s." But developing disease-resistant bananas is apparently not easy, even with the help of genetic engineering ... In order to make banana cultivation sustainable and less vulnerable, cultivation methods must change in the long term. Instead of growing genetically identical bananas in monoculture, the focus must be on species diversity and genetic variability. Small farmers have already been taking heed to it. They're planting different varieties of bananas and grains, and they're not affected as much by TR4."

So it doesn't look like gene modification is the optimal solution for food supply in the plant world either. Now, if the applied, conventional practice suggests diversity in vegetables, fruits and grains, as some small farmers are already doing in an exemplary manner with the utmost effort to maintain, why shouldn't we go on supporting this proven method? Isn't there, as Shakespeare's Hamlet used to say, "something rotten in the state of Denmark"?

from [wou./avr](http://wou.avr).

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