Innovative breeding research project underpins the value of genetic reserves

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“Crop wild relative populations of Beta vulgaris allow direct mapping of agronomically important genes” is the title of a paper recently published in Nature Communications (Capistrano-Gossmann et al. 2017). The researchers used two CWR populations of Beta vulgaris subsp. maritima for fine mapping and rapid identification of a Rhizomania resistance gene. The resistance trait was detected in a genebank accession collected at the coast of the Kalundborg Fjord in Denmark (Lewellen et al. 1987; Scholten et al. 1996, 1999) where the species exists since 1952 at least (Lewellen et al. 1987). The trait was introgressed into the sugar beet and lines with improved resistance to Rhizomania, a disease caused by the Beet Necrotic Yellow Vein Virus (BNYVV), were released by the USDA/ARS in the 1990s (Lewellen et al. 1995).

The Kalundborg Fjord population proved to be a random mating population in Hardy-Weinberg-Equilibrium which allowed the researchers the application of an innovative concept. Instead of creating an artificial sugar beet mapping population, seeds of individual wild beet plants in the large population spread along the sea shore of the Kalundborg Fjord were harvested. This material was used to identify the resistance gene Rz2 with a modified version of mapping-by-sequencing. The results of this approach were confirmed in a second CWR population located in Brighton, France, greatly underpinning the importance of in situ conservation of crop wild relatives. These populations harbour further traits with great value for sugar beet breeding programmes.

The genetic reserve conservation technique has been developed to systematically implement the in situ conservation strategy in practice (Maxted et al. 1997) and was further elaborated and tested using CWR of cultivated beets (Kell et al. 2012). In the context of the AEGRO project, suitable locations for the establishment of genetic reserves for targeted crop wild relative taxa across Europe have been proposed in 2011. Inter alia, the Kalundborg Fjord area has been recommended as a site suited to maintain genetic variation of the economically important Rhizomania resistance trait. The findings of Capistrano-Gossmann and co-authors reinforce the recommendation. The population is distributed within the NATURA 2000 site N166, covering the area between the outer coastal areas of Rosnæs and the recommended genetic reserve site at Gisseløre, Houget (http://www.agrobiodiversity.org/aegro/). Since decades, the area harbours a stable population with economically important traits and evident scientific value. Even the legal framework would allow the integration of a genetic reserve as a discrete component into the protected area management plan as was argued by Kristiansen and Frese in 2011. What else is needed to establish a genetic reserve?

References

Capistrano-Gossmann G. et al. 2017. Crop wild relative populations of Beta vulgaris allow direct mapping of agronomically important genes. Nature Communications 8:15708 (DOI: 10.1038/ncomms15708).


