

Comparative transcriptomics reveals commonalities and differences in the genetic underpinnings of a floral dimorphism

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Abstract

Distyly is a floral dimorphism associated with a heteromorphic self-incompatibility mechanism that prevents inbreeding and promotes outcrossing in 28 angiosperm families. Distyly is controlled by a cluster of genes, i.e. the S-locus supergene, that evolved independently in all distylous species studied to date. Here we present a transcriptome atlas for *Primula veris*, the main model for studying distyly since Darwin, which helped to elucidate the mechanism through which the S-locus gene *CYP^T* acquired its role in controlling style elongation. We also identified genes that are differentially expressed between the two floral morphs of *P. veris* and *Fagopyrum esculentum*, revealing the main molecular mechanisms and hormones underlying the expression of distyly in these two species. Further, we discovered shared homologous genes that likely control distyly in *P. veris*, *F. esculentum* and *Turnera subulata*, suggesting that the convergent evolution of distyly at the phenotypic level is coupled, to some extent, also at the molecular level. Additionally, we provided statistical support to the hypothesis that distyly supergenes of different species evolved by the recruitment of genes related to the phytochrome-interacting factor (PIF) signaling network. Overall, this is the first study to identify homologous genes that underlie the control of distyly in distantly-related taxa.

Introduction

Among living organisms, angiosperms (flowering plants) display the highest variability in reproductive organs and mating systems¹. Distyly is one of the best studied plant mating systems and consists of a floral dimorphism in which male and female sexual organs are reciprocally positioned. Distylous species possess two floral morphs: L-morph (pin) flowers have long style and low anthers, while S-morph (thrum) flowers have short style and high anthers². This main morphological feature is often accompanied by a heteromorphic self-incompatibility mechanism that prevents fertilization between flowers of the same morph^{2,3}. Additional ancillary features may further differentiate the two floral morphs⁴, for example number and size of pollen grains^{2,5,6}, length and shape of stigma papillae^{5,7}, number and shape of cells in the upper corolla tube (i.e. above the anthers' attachment point), and width of the corolla tube mouth⁸.

Having evolved independently in angiosperms at least 13 times⁹, distyly represents an ideal case to study convergent evolution¹⁰. Research on distyly has mainly focused on *Primula* (Primulaceae), *Fagopyrum* (Polygonaceae), and *Turnera* (Passifloraceae), reviewed below, and, to a lesser extent, *Linum* (Linaceae) and *Lithospermum* (Boraginaceae)¹¹. Phenotypic convergence in floral morphology appears to be mirrored by convergence in the genetic architecture of the locus controlling distyly. Specifically, in all studied species, distyly is controlled by a set of genes clustered together in the same genomic region, forming the so-called S-locus supergene, known to be hemizygous in S-morphs and absent from L-morphs in *Primula*, *Fagopyrum* and *Turnera*^{12–15}.

One of the most popular ornamental plants in Europe¹⁶, *Primula* (primrose) has served as the canonical model to study distyly since Darwin². Extensive genomic resources are available for this genus, including

a chromosome-scale genome assembly for *Primula veris*, in which the S locus is a ~ 260 kb region containing five genes (*CCM^T*, *GLO^T*, *CYP^T*, *PUM^T*, *KFB^T*)^{12,13}. Two S-locus genes have been functionally characterized in *Primula*: *GLO^T*, homologous to the highly-conserved B-class floral homeotic gene *GLOBOSA*, determines high anther position in S-morphs¹⁷ and *CYP^T*, a member of the cytochrome P450 CYP734A family which degrades brassinosteroids¹⁸, determines short styles¹⁹ and female incompatibility in S-morphs²⁰. The functions of the other three S-locus genes (*CCM^T*, *PUM^T*, *KFB^T*) remain unknown. Four S-locus genes originated via gene duplication, and their closest paralogs have been identified (*CCM1*, *GLO1*, *CYP734A51*, *KFB1*)^{12,13,19}. A key open question on the evolution of distyly is how the S-locus genes acquired their role in controlling distyly. This might have occurred through a change in protein function, temporal and/or spatial gene expression, or a combination thereof, of the S-locus genes compared to their respective paralogs¹⁷. The lack of comparative expression profiles of the S-locus genes and their paralogs has so far precluded our understanding of how S-locus genes acquired their new functions.

With more than 1.8 million tons produced per year, buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*) is the most economically important distylous species (www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QCL). Thus, knowledge on the genetic control of distyly for this species is of general interest, as it could help improve breeding strategies and artificial selection²¹. Despite its economic importance, little is known on the genetic underpinnings of distyly in *F. esculentum*, except that the S locus is approximately 5.4 Mb long and contains 32 genes¹⁴, among which is S-ELF3, likely controlling style length²².

Turnera is another genus whose distylous species have been studied for more than a century²³. In recent years, three S-locus genes (hemizygous in S-morphs and absent in L-morphs) have been identified: TsSPH1, likely involved in filament elongation; TsYUC6, a member of the YUCCA gene family which is involved in auxin biosynthesis and likely controls pollen development; and TsBAHD, which inactivates brassinosteroids and controls both female incompatibility and style length, similarly to *CYP^T* in *Primula*^{15,24,25}. Differentially-expressed genes (DEGs) between L- and S-morphs of *Turnera subulata* flowers have been characterized in a recent study²⁶. Among these DEGs were several genes related to the phytochrome interacting factor (PIF) signaling network, a large and highly interconnected network which mediates several plant morphogenetics processes, whose key regulators are the PIF transcription factors²⁷. This observation, together with the fact that phytochrome-associated pathways can modulate the morphology of sexual organs in *Brassica rapa* when exposed to different red:far-red ratios²⁸, led the authors to propose that the recruitment of genes from the PIF network might represent a commonality among S-loci controlling distyly in different species²⁶. However, this hypothesis has never been tested.

Our study is aimed at better linking the genotypic underpinnings of distyly to its phenotypic expression by investigating the transcriptomes of three distylous species: *P. veris*, *F. esculentum* and *T. subulata*. First, we generated the *P. veris* transcriptome atlas, which allowed us to identify a) the expression patterns of S-locus genes and their paralogs and b) genes that show constitutive expression across samples, tissues and developmental stages. Second, we identified genes that are differentially expressed between L- and

S-morph flowers, thus likely regulated by the S locus, in *P. veris* and *F. esculentum*. Third, a comparative transcriptomic analysis among *P. veris*, *F. esculentum* and *T. subulata* revealed for the first time homologous genes that are differentially expressed between L- and S-morphs, thus potentially involved in controlling distily, in all three species. Last, we tested the previously proposed hypothesis that S-loci evolved by recruiting genes from the phytochrome-interacting factor (PIF) signaling network²⁶. The results presented here address fundamental questions on the function and evolution of distily, by identifying genes involved in the expression of distily in *Primula* and *F. esculentum*, and revealing commonalities that might explain the convergent evolution of distily in these two species and *T. subulata*.

Results And Discussion

Primula veris transcriptome atlas

Twenty RNA-seq samples were used to analyze the transcriptomes of seven tissues (root, seed, seedling, leaf, inflorescence stem, floral bud, and flower) of *P. veris*. A total of 2.27 billion paired-end reads (342.77 Gb; Suppl. Table S1) were used to quantify gene expression of the 34,441 *P. veris* genes (Suppl. Table S2)¹³. Plotting the normalized RNA-seq counts for the genes in each tissue showed, as expected, a bimodal distribution, in which only the peak at higher expression levels comprises the active, functional transcriptome²⁹ (Suppl. Fig. S1). Using this distribution and a previously-developed method³⁰, we classified a gene as expressed in a tissue if the average number of normalized RNA-seq reads for the replicates of that tissue was ≥ 4 . A total of 26,338 genes (76.47 %) were expressed in at least one tissue (Fig. 1c). Transcriptional activity did not vary much among tissues, with the number of expressed genes ranging from 21,731 (63.1%) in the seedling to 23,348 (67.8 %) in the flower (Fig. 1a). A total of 18,441 genes (53.5 %) were expressed across all tissues (Suppl. Fig. S2).

RNA-seq data have proven to be important for the identification of constitutively expressed genes, i.e. genes whose expression does not considerably vary across tissues, developmental stages, environmental conditions and experimental factors³¹. Constitutively expressed genes are especially important in real-time qPCR experiments, where they are used as internal controls for normalizing gene expression among samples³¹. Here, 53 constitutively expressed genes, defined as having a coefficient of variation (CV = standard deviation/mean of normalized counts) ≤ 0.15 , were identified (Fig.2a). The degree of tissue specificity was calculated for each gene using the tau (τ) index³² (Suppl Fig S3): the low (< 0.3) tau values found in the constitutively expressed genes further supported their constitutive expression across tissues (Fig. 2a). Housekeeping genes (HKGs) are often used as normalizing factors in qPCR experiments, but such an approach can introduce bias in the quantification of gene expression, as many HKGs have been shown not to be constitutively expressed across tissues and developmental stages³³. We noticed that none of the eight HKGs commonly used as reference in qPCR experiments³¹ was found to be constitutively expressed in *P. veris* (all having CV > 0.15), demonstrating once again the importance of identifying species-specific constitutively expressed genes through RNA-seq³¹ (Fig. 2b).

The set of *P. veris* constitutively expressed genes identified here represents a useful resource for normalizing gene expression in *Primula* qPCR analyses.

The expression patterns of the 20 *P. veris* samples matched the biological nature of the respective tissues, as shown by their hierarchical clustering (Fig. 1b). The highest Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were found between samples of the same tissue; between tissues, floral bud and flower samples shared the highest Spearman's coefficients ($\rho = 0.95$), as expected since they represent two developmental stages of the same organ (Suppl. Fig. S4). Samples from the same tissue clustered together also in a PCA plot, which additionally showed a clear distinction between samples of floral (floral buds, flowers) and non-floral tissues (roots, seeds, seedlings, leaves, and inflorescence stems) on the first principal component (Fig. 1d).

Expression profiles of S-locus genes and their paralogs in *P. veris*

With the exception of *CYP^T* and *GLO^T*, known to be expressed exclusively in style and corolla tube, respectively^{17,19}, the expression profiles of the *P. veris* S-locus genes were previously unknown. Given this lack of knowledge, elucidating how the S-locus genes acquired their role in controlling distyly after their origin via duplication has so far been impossible. To better characterize the expression profiles of all S-locus genes and their paralogs, we performed differential gene expression analyses between samples of floral and non-floral tissues. This allowed us to test if the duplicate S-locus genes diversified their expression profiles compared to their respective paralogs, which might have resulted in them gaining their functions in controlling distyly.

Of the five S-locus genes, *GLO^T* and *CYP^T* were significantly more expressed in floral than non-floral tissues, confirming previous results^{17,19} (adjusted p-value < 0.01); *PUM^T* and *CCM^T* were expressed at roughly the same level in floral and non-floral tissues; *KFB^T* appeared not to be expressed in any tissue (normalized counts < 4) (Fig. 3a). Since *KFB^T* was reported to be expressed in *P. vulgaris* flower (see ref. ¹² and below), we believe that we did not detect *KFB^T* expression in *P. veris* because it was not expressed at the time when the floral tissues were harvested, rather than not being expressed at all. This observation may also be indicative of *KFB^T* being expressed only for a short temporal window. Furthermore, the lack of flower-specific expression for *CCM^T* and *PUM^T*, together with the fact that their functions are still unknown, leaves open the question of whether these genes play a role in distyly. Functional studies on *CCM^T* and *PUM^T* will be necessary to address this question.

Among the four S-locus gene paralogs, only *GLO1* was significantly more expressed in floral than non-floral tissues (as expected, as it is a B-class floral homeotic gene¹⁷), while no significant differences between tissue types were found for *CCM1* and *CYP734A51*, and *KFB1* was significantly more expressed in non-floral than floral tissues (Fig. 3b). Thus, the flower-confined expression of *CYP^T* is not shared with its closest paralog (*CYP734A51*). This suggests that *CYP^T* acquired its role in controlling distyly via a change in the expression profile compared to its paralog; whether this was accompanied by a change in

its protein function remains to be tested. This observation marks a difference on how the two S-locus genes with a known function (*GLO^T* and *CYP^T*) acquired their involvement in controlling distyly, i.e. *GLO^T* through mutations that changed the activity of its encoded protein¹⁷ but no changes in its expression profile, while *CYP^T* through changes in its expression profile that limited its expression to the style but potentially no changes in its protein function.

Differential expression analysis between L- and S-morph flowers

To better link the genotypic underpinnings of heterostyly to its phenotypic expression, we identified differentially expressed genes (DEGs) between L- and S-morph flowers using RNA-seq data from different samples of *P. veris* (style and corolla tube), *P. vulgaris* (whole flower) (Suppl. Table S3), and *F. esculentum* (stamen filament and corolla tube; Suppl. Table S4). As the S locus is the only region consistently differing between L- and S-morph genomes, we hereinafter refer to any gene up-regulated in S- compared to L-morphs as 'up-regulated' and any gene down-regulated in S- compared to L-morphs as 'down-regulated', implying that these genes are up- or down-regulated by the S locus.

Differential expression analysis in Primula

In the *P. veris* style, 245 DEGs (78 up- and 167 down-regulated) were identified (Suppl. Table S5). Of the S-locus genes, *GLO^T*, *CYP^T* and *PUM^T* (but not *CCM^T* and *KFB^T*) were found in the up-regulated gene set. Eight DEGs were involved in cell wall modifications, among which was the up-regulated pveT_jg12120, homologous to *A. thaliana* IBL1, a IBH1-like transcription factor known to negatively regulate cell elongation in response to brassinosteroid signaling³⁴. A GO analysis on the down-regulated genes revealed an enrichment of terms related to two main categories: DNA replication and sugar transport (Fig. 4a,b; Suppl. Table S6). Among the genes associated to "DNA replication" (GO:0006260), "DNA replication initiation" (GO:0006270) and "DNA-dependent DNA replication" (GO:0006261) were key regulators of the cell cycle, such as: pveT_jg12216, homologous to *A. thaliana* Cell Division Cycle 6 (*CDC6*; AT1G07270), which confers cells the ability to initiate DNA replication³⁵; pveT_jg13060, homologous to an *A. thaliana* transcription factor (AT3G02820), member of the zinc knuckle (CCHC-type) protein family, which is required for cell cycle progression and DNA replication upon regulation by E2F transcription factors³⁶; pveT_jg18344, pveT_jg26277, pveT_jg29014, pveT_jg30321, and pveT_jg16023, all putative members of the Minichromosome Maintenance (MCM) protein family, which is pivotal in the initiation of DNA replication³⁷. GO terms related to sugar transport were "carbohydrate transport" (GO:0008643), "sugar transmembrane transporter activity" (GO:0051119), and "monosaccharide transport" (GO:0015749) and comprised, among others, pveT_jg31090, homologous to *A. thaliana* Sugar Transporter 1 (*STP1*; AT1G11260).

Of the 143 DEGs identified in the *P. veris* corolla tube, 74 were up-regulated, which included all S-locus genes except *KFB^T*, and 69 down-regulated (Suppl. Table S7). A GO enrichment analysis on this gene set did not provide useful information, as the enriched GO terms were not related to developmental processes

that could be associated to the floral dimorphism (Suppl. Table S8). Among the up-regulated genes was pveT_jg5930, homologous to a WALLS ARE THIN1 (WAT1)-related protein. WAT1 encodes for an auxin transporter which regulates secondary cell wall thickness and auxin transport in *A. thaliana*³⁸.

In the *P. vulgaris* whole flower, 268 DEGs were identified, 198 being up- and 70 down-regulated (Suppl. Table S9). The up-regulated gene set, which contained all S-locus genes except *CCM^T*, showed an enrichment in GO terms related to cell-wall modifications, such as “plant-type secondary cell wall biogenesis” (GO:0009834), “polysaccharide metabolic process” (GO:0044264), and “cell wall biogenesis” (GO:0042546) (Fig. 4c,d; Suppl. Table S10). The down-regulated gene set showed an enrichment in genes associated to “carbohydrates transport” (GO:0008643), driven by three genes annotated as members of the TC 2.A.1.1 sugar transporter family (pveT_jg2967, pveT_jg2968, pveT_jg2971) and by a UDP-galactose UDP-glucose transporter (pveT_jg9592).

Research on the mechanisms underlying style length dimorphism in *Primula* has shown a predominant role of cell elongation. The S-locus gene *CYP^T*, which is expressed exclusively in the style, degrades brassinosteroids, thus limiting cell elongation and ultimately resulting in a shorter style in S-morphs than in L-morphs^{5,19}. However, it has previously been proposed that differential cell division might also affect differential style length between morphs⁸, following the observation that L-morph styles are usually twice the length of S-morph styles but L-morph style cells are not twice as long as S-morph style cells⁵. The down-regulation of genes involved in DNA replication observed in the S-morph style suggests that this tissue is undergoing reduced cell division, thus supporting the hypothesis that cell division also contributes to style-length dimorphism. Furthermore, the decrease in sugar transport may also be responsible for the style-length dimorphism, as carbohydrates play a key role in both cell expansion and division³⁹.

Differential expression analysis in *F. esculentum*

Two S-locus genes have so far been identified in *F. esculentum*, namely S-ELF3 and SSG2^{14,22}, while a third gene (PG1) has been shown to be expressed exclusively in S-morph styles, despite not being physically linked to the S locus⁴⁰. We identified both S-ELF3 and PG1 (but no SSG2) in the *F. esculentum* gene set⁴¹, as tr_15748 and tr_3984, respectively (see Methods). PG1 was expressed only in S-morph carpel samples, while S-ELF3 was expressed also in the filament, albeit at lower level (Fig. 5g).

In the filament, 1,316 genes were differentially expressed between the two morphs (553 up- and 763 down-regulated; Suppl. Table S11). A GO enrichment analysis revealed a set of 12 down-regulated genes (tr_4884, tr_7943, tr_8778, tr_8786, tr_8787, tr_8800, tr_8807, tr_8810, tr_8811, tr_8812, tr_8814, tr_8815) associated to GO terms that indicate a negative role of these genes in stamen filament development, mediated by auxin: “negative regulation of organ growth” (GO:0046621), “auxin transport” (GO:0060918), and “stamen filament development” (GO:0080086) (Fig. 5a,b; Suppl. Table S12).

In the young carpel, 825 DEGs (299 up- and 526 down-regulated) were identified (Suppl. Table S13). The GO categories “pectinesterase activity” (GO:0030599) and “cell wall organization” (GO:0071555) were significantly enriched among down-regulated genes (Suppl. Table S14). Of the 955 DEGs identified in the mature carpel (402 up- and 553 down-regulated; Suppl. Table S15), a group of eleven down-regulated genes (tr_14602, tr_14604, tr_22182, tr_23371, tr_28613, tr_29408, tr_4884, tr_8800, tr_8805, tr_8809, tr_8812) was associated to GO terms suggesting their role in auxin-mediated organ growth, such as “regulation of organ growth” (GO:0046620) and “auxin transport” (GO:0060918) (Fig. 5c,d; Suppl. Table S16).

Noting the overlap between filament and carpel down-regulated genes, we further investigated these genes by identifying their homologous genes in eleven additional angiosperms via an OrthoFinder analysis. All the auxin- and growth-related genes that were down-regulated in the filament (except tr_8787) and in the mature carpel (except tr_22182 and tr_29408) were in the OG0000060 orthogroup, which also contained the *A. thaliana* SMALL AUXIN UP RNA (SAUR)63 subfamily (i.e. SAUR61-68 and SAUR75) members AT1G29420, AT1G29430, AT1G29440, AT1G29450, AT1G29460, AT1G29500, AT1G29510, AT1G29490, and AT5G27780. Members of the SAUR63 subfamily are known to play a role in hypocotyl and stamen filament elongation by activating plasma membrane H⁺-ATPases in response to auxin, thus promoting cell elongation^{42,43}. We found that the two *Fagopyrum* species (*F. esculentum* and *F. tataricum*) displayed the highest number of SAUR63 members (49 and 30, respectively; Fig. 5f) among all the angiosperms included in our gene orthology analysis. To better characterize the relationships among SAURs, we generated a phylogeny for the OG0000060 orthogroup, which showed that the SAUR63 expansion observed in *Fagopyrum* is independent from the one observed in *Arabidopsis* (Fig. 5e).

The results above imply that auxin is likely the main hormone controlling the differential elongation of stamen and pistil in *F. esculentum*, potentially favored by a *Fagopyrum*-specific expansion of the SAUR63 subfamily, whereas brassinosteroids were shown to be the main mediator of differential style elongation in *Primula*¹⁹.

Comparative transcriptomics among distylous species

Distyly evolved independently at least 13 times⁹, representing a classic example of evolutionary convergence¹⁰. In the present study we identified DEGs between L- and S-morph pistils and stamens of *P. veris* and *F. esculentum*. The availability of DEGs between L- and S-morph flowers of *Turnera subulata*²⁶ (Table 1) allowed us to perform a three-way comparative transcriptomics analysis aimed at discovering whether some genes are potentially involved in the control of distyly in all three species. Since it is difficult to identify one-to-one orthologs among distantly-related species, we performed an OrthoFinder analysis including the proteomes of 12 angiosperms (see Methods for details) and searched for any orthogroup containing genes that were differentially expressed in all three species (Suppl. Table S17). This search was performed separately for up-regulated genes in female organs (Fig. 6a), down-regulated genes in female organs (Fig. 6b), up-regulated genes in male organs (Fig. 6c), and down-

regulated genes in male organs (Fig. 6d). Of these, only the set of genes down-regulated in male organs did not have any shared orthogroup (Fig. 6d).

One orthogroup (OG0000315) was found to contain four genes that were up-regulated in the male organs of the three species (pveT_jg17457, tr_6752, Tsub_00026904-RA, and Tsub_00006450-RA; Fig. 6c). All OG0000315 genes were functionally annotated as flavin-containing monooxygenases (FMOs). FMOs belong to a large and highly-conserved protein family whose function is to incorporate an oxygen atom from molecular oxygen into small nucleophilic or electrophilic molecules⁴⁴. This finding is of particular interest for two reasons. First, FMOs overlap in function with cytochrome P450 monooxygenases, a superfamily of enzymes that also includes the protein encoded by *CYP7*, the S-locus gene that controls style length and female incompatibility in *P. veris*^{19,20}. Second, the *T. subulata* S-locus genes YUC6 is a FMO, specifically a member of the YUCCA gene family which catalyzes the second step in auxin synthesis from L- tryptophan^{15,45}. To better characterize the putative function of these differentially expressed FMOs, we generated a phylogeny that included the sequences of OG0000315 genes as well as those of *A. thaliana* and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) FMOs⁴⁶ (Fig. 6e). The OG0000315 genes fall in the FMO Clade I, whose genes are supposedly involved in pathogen defense⁴⁷. Whether pveT_jg17457, tr_6752, Tsub_00026904-RA, and Tsub_00006450-RA play a role in controlling distyly thus remains unclear, and functional investigations would be required to clarify this point.

One orthogroup (OG0000318) included three genes up-regulated in the female organs of the three species (pveT_jg29738, tr_14668, Tsub_00016967-RA; Fig. 6a), all annotated as members of the Serine/Threonine protein kinases family. Specifically, these genes are homologous to *A. thaliana* HAESA-LIKE 3 (HSL3; AT5G25930), a highly-conserved leucine-rich repeat receptor kinase (LRR-RK) which forms a complex with BRASSINOSTEROID INSENSITIVE 1-ASSOCIATED KINASE 1 (BAK1) upon induction by a class of small signaling peptides named CTNIPs⁴⁸. The CTNIP-HSL3 signaling pathway seems to be involved in stress response but also affects plant growth⁴⁸. This observation, together with the fact that BAK1 plays a pivotal role in regulating brassinosteroid-dependent growth^{49,50}, suggests the involvement of brassinosteroids in causing the style length dimorphism not only in *Primula* and *T. subulata*^{19,24} but also in *F. esculentum*.

Finally, one orthogroup (OG0000198) contained genes down-regulated in the female organs of the three species (pveT_jg28601, tr_16287, Tsub_00008119-RA, and Tsub_00000118-RA; Fig. 6b). All OG0000198 genes were annotated as aquaporins and, more specifically, the eight *A. thaliana* genes in this orthogroup were annotated as plasma membrane intrinsic proteins (PIPs). Aquaporins are integral membrane proteins that function as water channels but also mediate the transport of other important substrates and play a key role in plant growth and development by regulating cell turgor, thus cell expansion^{51–53}. Indeed, the expression of PIP aquaporins has been shown to strongly correlate with cell expansion and tissue growth in several plant species^{54–56}. Thus, the decreased expression of PIP aquaporins in S-morph pistils is compatible with the shortening of the style in this floral morph, due to reduced cell expansion.

Our results show that, even though the three species tested here are distantly related and evolved distyly independently⁹, some genes are differentially expressed in the same organs between L- and S-morph flowers, hence some shared biological pathways might underlie the expression of distyly in these three species. Thus, the convergent evolution of distyly at the phenotypic level is mirrored by some convergence also at the molecular level, representing one of the first studied cases of convergent evolution of complex traits^{57,58}.

Enrichment analysis of PIF-regulated genes among DEGs

We tested the previously proposed hypothesis that the recruitment of genes intersecting with the PIF signaling network is a common motif in the evolution of distyly supergenes²⁶ by verifying whether the DEGs identified between L- and S-morphs of *Primula*, *F. esculentum* and *T. subulata* were enriched in genes known to be PIF-regulated. If S-locus genes are indeed related to PIF network hubs, we expect an enrichment of PIF-regulated genes among DEGs.

Of the ten floral tissues analyzed, six showed a significant enrichment in PIF-regulated genes among DEGs compared to the genome background (Fisher's exact test; p-value < 0.05; Table 2). In *T. subulata* we found an enrichment of PIF-regulated genes in female organs (young and mature pistil), but not in male organs (young and mature stamen). In *Primula*, both style and corolla tube (but not whole flower) DEGs were enriched in PIF-regulated genes. In *F. esculentum*, DEGs identified in the mature carpel and in the filament (but not those identified in the young carpel) showed an enrichment in PIF-regulated genes. Of particular interest in this regard was the identification of the SAUR63 subfamily as a putative modulator of stamen filament and pistil elongation in *F. esculentum* (see above), as SAURs can induce organ growth by promoting cell elongation⁵⁹ and can be up-regulated by auxin, brassinosteroids (the two key hormones in the floral dimorphism), and PIFs⁵⁹.

These results demonstrate that genes known to be part of the PIF signaling network are enriched among DEGs between S- and L-morph flowers of three species that evolved distyly independently. Thus, S-loci might indeed evolve via the recruitment of PIF-related genes, as previously proposed²⁶.

Conclusions

We generated a transcriptome atlas for the distylous *P. veris*, which allowed us to identify a set of 53 genes that are constitutively expressed across tissues, representing a useful resource for normalizing gene expression in qPCR experiments (Fig. 2). Thanks to extensive transcriptomic data from multiple floral and non-floral tissues of *P. veris*, we could also determine that the S-locus gene *CYP^T* likely acquired its role in distyly via a change in expression profile, compared to its closest paralog (Fig. 3).

A differential gene expression analysis between L- and S-morph flowers confirmed that in *Primula* the differential style elongation between the two morphs is caused by a difference in style cell expansion (up-

regulation of genes involved in cell-wall modification in the *P. vulgaris* flower; Fig. 4c,d), but also revealed a potential role of cell division, as implied by the down-regulation of genes associated to DNA replication and sugar transport in the S-morph style (Fig. 4a,b). In *F. esculentum*, a set of 17 SAURs was linked to the differential elongation of both stamen filament and pistil, indicating auxin, rather than brassinosteroids, as the main growth-inducing hormone determining the floral dimorphism in this species (Fig. 5).

In conclusion, this is the first study that identifies the main differences and commonalities in the genetic underpinnings of distyly among distantly related taxa (here, *P. veris*, *F. esculentum* and *T. subulata*; Table 1, Fig. 6). The main difference concerns the hormones involved in the control of style elongation, which appear to be mediated mainly by brassinosteroids in *Primula* and *Turnera*, and auxin in *Fagopyrum*. On the other hand, two main commonalities emerged. First, we identified three groups of homologous genes that were differentially expressed between L- and S-morphs in the three species studied here, all potentially involved in the phenotypic expression of distyly. Second, DEGs identified in the three species mentioned above are enriched in genes intersecting with the PIF signaling network, thus supporting the hypothesis that distyly supergenes evolved by the recruitment of PIF-related genes (Table 2).

This is the first time that specific genes have been identified as common players in the expression of distyly in distantly-related taxa; the increasing availability of genomic resources for distylous species will clarify whether the common patterns observed in the three species studied here are shared among all distylous species or not.

Methods

Data retrieval

All transcriptomic data used in this study was downloaded from NCBI GenBank. All *Primula* RNA-seq samples comprised paired-end illumina reads. The RNA-seq data used for generating the *P. veris* transcriptome atlas consisted in 20 samples belonging to seven tissues (three replicates per all tissues, except floral buds, which had only two replicates), previously made available under the BioProject PRJEB44353 (33.5–84.2 M reads per sample). For *Primula*, differential expression analyses between L- and S-morphs were performed on three tissues: *P. veris* style (three L- and three S-morph samples), *P. veris* corolla tube (three L- and three S-morph samples), and *P. vulgaris* whole flower (four L- and four S-morph samples); *P. veris* and *P. vulgaris* RNA-seq samples were available under BioProject PRJNA317964 (22.2–39.0 M reads per sample) and PRJEB9683 (15.6–25.5 M reads per sample), respectively. The *F. esculentum* RNA-seq data consisted of single-end illumina reads, available under BioProject PRJNA487842, and generated from three tissues: stamen filament of mature (10-weeks old) flower, carpel of mature (10-weeks old) flower, carpel of young (8-weeks old) flower; two L- and two S-morph samples were available for each tissue. Accession numbers of each sample used in this study can be found in Supplementary Tables S1, S3 and S4.

Quantification of gene expression

Reads of each RNA-seq sample files were trimmed using Trimmomatic⁶⁰ v0.38, with the following parameters: ILLUMINACLIP:2:30:10 SLIDINGWINDOW:4:5 LEADING:5 TRAILING:5 MINLEN:25. Trimmed reads were then used to run Salmon⁶¹ v1.4.0 'quant' (mapping-based mode) to quantify gene expression (`-gcBias -validateMappings`). *P. veris* and *P. vulgaris* RNA-seq reads were mapped against the *P. veris* coding sequences¹³, while *F. esculentum* RNA-seq reads were mapped against the *F. esculentum* coding sequences from ref. ⁴¹.

To build the *P. veris* transcriptome atlas, first the Salmon output (i.e. read counts in the 20 *P. veris* RNA-seq samples for each of the 34,441 gene) was imported into R v3.6.3 (<https://www.R-project.org/>) using `tximport`^{62,63} and a `DESeqDataSet` was created with the `DESeqDataSetFromTximport` function of `DESeq2`⁶⁴ (R/Bioconductor⁶⁵ package). Genes showing zero counts in all samples were removed, leaving with a total of 31,112 genes whose counts were then normalized using the default median of ratios method⁶⁴. An "expression per tissue" matrix was created by calculating the average among the normalized per-gene counts of the two/three samples for each tissue. The normalized counts per sample were $\log_2$ transformed and their distribution plotted (Suppl. Fig. S1); the resulting plot showed a main distribution centered at a value of $\sim 10 \log_2$ counts ($\sim 1,024$ counts) with a shoulder at the left of this distribution. Such a bimodal distribution of gene expression is often observed⁶⁶ and can be used to discriminate transcriptionally active genes (main distribution) from low-expression genes (left shoulder of the distribution)⁶⁶. Based on this distribution we selected a threshold of 2 $\log_2$ counts (~ 4 counts) to classify a gene as transcriptionally active (≥ 4 counts) or as not expressed (< 4 counts).

Differential gene expression analysis between floral and non-floral tissues

The 20 *P. veris* RNA-seq samples from BioProject PRJEB44353 were used also to compare the expression of S-locus genes and their paralogs between floral tissues (floral buds, flower) and non-floral tissues (root, seed, seedling, leaf, inflorescence stem). In brief, each RNA-seq sample was defined as "floral" or "non-floral" depending of its tissue of origin and imported into `DESeq2` as described above. Then the `DESeq` function of `DESeq2` was run with default parameters (false discovery rate controlled using the Benjamini-Hochberg method) to identify DEGs between floral and non-floral tissues.

Differential gene expression analysis between L- and S-morphs

Differential gene expression analysis between L- and S-morphs was performed for two *P. veris* samples (style and corolla tube), one *P. vulgaris* samples (whole flower) and three *F. esculentum* samples (stamen filament, young carpel, mature carpel) using `DESeq2`. For all RNA-seq samples, reads were trimmed, gene expression quantified and counts imported into `DESeq2` as described above. The identification of DEGs was then carried out using the `DESeq` function of `DESeq2` with default parameters: false discovery rate was controlled using the Benjamini-Hochberg method and a filter was then applied to exclude genes showing $\log_2$ -fold between -1 and 1 , and adjusted p-value (`padj`) > 0.05 .

Identification of *F. esculentum* S-locus-related genes

Sequences for S-ELF3 (GenBank accession: AB642167), SSG2 (AB668598), and PG1 (Buckwheat Genome Data Base¹⁴ gene ID: Fes_sc0006922.1. g000006.a.1) were translated and searched against the translated CDS of *F. esculentum* (from ref. ⁴¹) using Proteinortho⁶⁷ v6.0.31 (-p = blastp -e = 1e-5 -sim = 1).

Functional annotation of *P. veris* and *F. esculentum* genes

The functional annotation of *P. veris* and *F. esculentum* genes was performed in two ways. First, 8,437 and 8,380 gene ontology (GO) terms were assigned to 23,673 and 23,516 genes of *P. veris* and *F. esculentum*, respectively, using TRAPID⁶⁸ v2.0 (http://bioinformatics.psb.ugent.be/trapid_02). Second, one-to-one *A. thaliana*⁶⁹ (TAIR10) orthologs were identified for 10,872 and 9,659 *P. veris* and *F. esculentum* genes, respectively using Proteinortho⁶⁷ v6.0.31 (-p = blastp -e = 1e-5 -sim = 1), to aid functional description of the genes. To perform GO enrichment analyses on the DEGs identified in *P. veris* and *F. esculentum*, we used the 'enricher' function of the clusterProfiler v3.14.3 package⁷⁰ (pvalueCutoff = 0.05, pAdjustMethod = BH, qvalueCutoff = 0.2).

Gene orthology and comparative transcriptomics analyses

DEGs were identified in the present study between L- and S-morphs in *Primula* and *F. esculentum* (see above). A list of DEGs between L- and S-morphs identified in four floral tissues of *T. subulata* (young pistil, mature pistil, young stamen, mature stamen) had already been generated in a previous study²⁶. We performed an analysis to identify orthologous and paralogous genes using OrthoFinder^{71,72} v2.3.11 (-l 1.7) on the proteomes of the three distylous species studied here (*P. veris*, *F. esculentum*, *T. subulata*) and nine other angiosperm species selected to be closely-related to the distylous species mentioned above (*Fagopyrum tataricum*, *Passiflora edulis*) or to have high-quality and well-annotated proteomes (*Antirrhinum majus*, *Arabidopsis thaliana*, *Daucus carota*, *Medicago truncatula*, *Prunus persica*, *Solanum lycopersicum*, *Vitis vinifera*). In summary, 359,400 genes (out of 408,413; 88%) were assigned to 32,436 orthogroups, (mean number of genes per orthogroup: 11.1). We then investigated whether any orthogroup contained DEGs identified in all the three species, analyzing separately male and female organs and S-locus up- and down- regulated genes (four analyses in total).

Phylogenetic reconstruction was conducted for OG0000060 orthogroup and for OG0000315 orthogroup plus other FMO sequences from *A. thaliana* and *H. vulgare*⁴⁶. Sequences were aligned with MAFFT⁷³ using global pairwise alignment (-globalpair) and a maximum of 1000 iterations (-maxiterate 1000). For the analysis of the OG0000060 orthogroup, seven sequences (DCAR_003205, FtPinG0505021700.01.T01, FtPinG0505025300.01.T01, FtPinG0505414500.01.T01, Solyc10g052570.1.1, tr_4883, tr_8798) were removed after being identified as having ambiguous or insufficient phylogenetic signal (complete phylogeny in Suppl. Fig. S5). Maximum Likelihood (ML) phylogenetic trees were constructed using IQ-TREE⁷⁴ v2.1.2. For each alignment, the best protein model was selected by ModelFinder⁷⁵ and compared

by Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). Branch support was assessed by 1,000 ultrafast bootstrap replicates⁷⁶.

PIF enrichment analysis

A total of 9,122 one-to-one *A. thaliana* orthologs were identified for *T. subulata* in the same way described for *P. veris* and *F. esculentum*. Each gene of the three distylous species with an *A. thaliana* ortholog was marked as “PIF-regulated” or “non-PIF-regulated” based on a list of 1,070 *A. thaliana* genes annotated as PIF-regulated obtained from a previous study²⁷. For each sample of each species a contingency table containing the number of PIF-regulated and non-PIF-regulated for both DEGs and non-DEGs was built and a Fisher’s exact test was applied.

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Declarations

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Author contributions

G.P., P.S., and. E.C. designed the study. P.S. and E.C. coordinated and contributed to all phases of the project. G.P. and R.L.S. analyzed the data. G.P., R.L.S, N.Y., D.D., W.P., P.S., and E.C. interpreted the data. G.P., P.S., and E.C. wrote the manuscript, with inputs from all authors.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Data availability

All data used in this study was retrieved from public repositories. The RNA-seq data used for generating the *P. veris* transcriptome was available under the BioProject PRJEB44353. The *P. veris* and *P. vulgaris* RNA-seq data sets used to identify differentially expressed genes were available under BioProject PRJNA317964 and PRJEB9683, respectively. The *F. esculentum* RNA-seq data was available under BioProject PRJNA487842. Accession numbers for each data set can be found in Suppl. Tables S1, S3, S4.

Tables

Species	Tissue	DEGs			Reference
		total	up-regulated	down-regulated	
<i>Primula veris</i>	Style	245	78	167	Present study
	Corolla tube	143	74	69	
<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	Whole flower	268	198	70	
<i>Fagopyrum esculentum</i>	Mature carpel	955	402	553	
	Young carpel	825	299	526	
	Stamen filament	1,316	553	763	
<i>Turnera subulata</i>	Young pistil	253	111	142	
	Young stamen	369	224	145	Henning et al., 2020
	Mature pistil	537	246	291	
	Mature stamen	338	147	191	

Table 1: Summary of differentially expressed genes (DEGs) in distylous species.

		DEGs			non-DEGs			
		Total	PIFs	non-PIFs	Total	PIFs	non-PIFs	p-value
<i>Primula veris</i>	Style	95	12	83	10775	513	10262	0.002
	Corolla tube	40	6	34	10832	520	10312	0.01178
<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	Whole flower	82	3	79	10785	523	10262	0.7657
<i>Fagopyrum esculentum</i>	Mature carpel	199	25	174	9459	418	9041	4.20E-06
	Young carpel	144	10	134	9516	434	9082	0.1263
	Filament	381	43	338	9275	401	8874	3.63E-08
<i>Turnera subulata</i>	Mature pistil	214	45	169	8908	417	8491	< 2.2e-16
	Mature stamen	108	9	99	9014	453	8561	0.09631
	Young pistil	78	14	64	9044	448	8596	3.10Ee-05
	Young stamen	112	9	103	9010	453	8557	0.1139

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Table 2: Enrichment analysis of PIF-regulated genes among DEGs in ten samples. Black circles at the end of the rows indicate samples in which DEGs are significantly enriched in PIF-regulated genes.

Figures

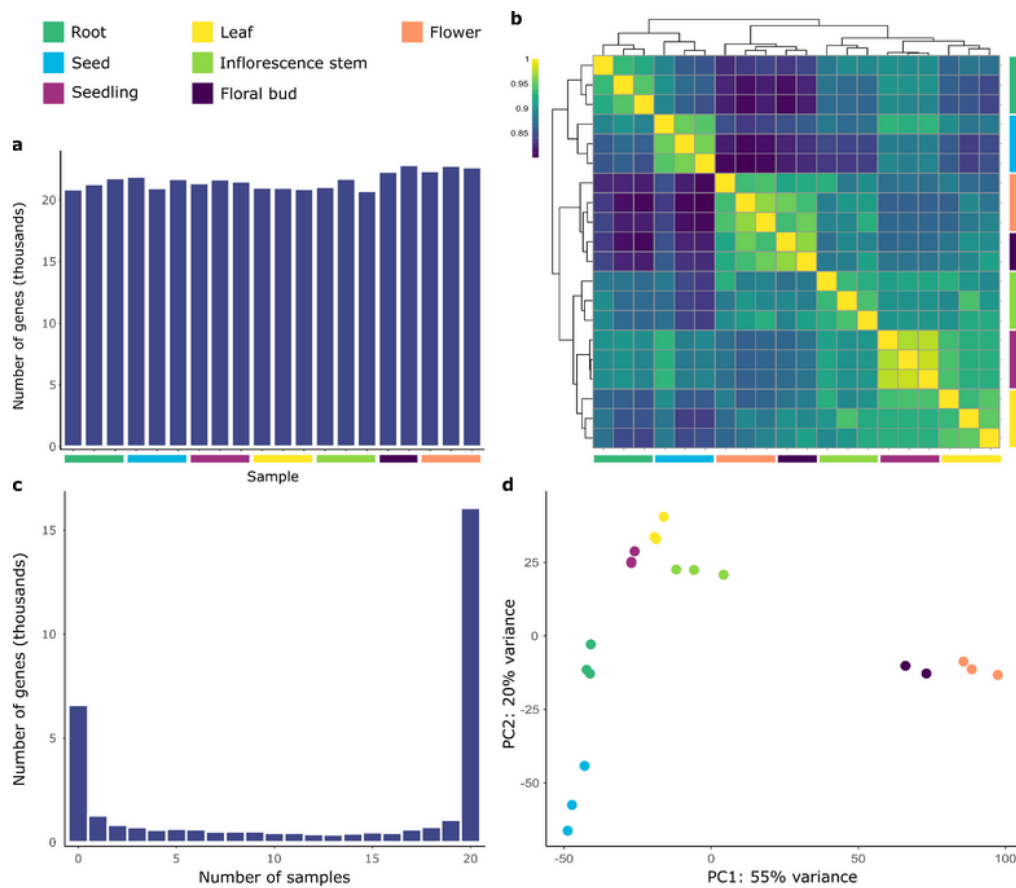


Figure 1

Overview of *P. veris* transcriptomic data. Samples of the same tissue are color coded, following the color scheme in the top-left corner of the figure. **a.** Number of transcriptionally active genes (i.e. genes with normalized counts ≥ 4) per sample. **b.** Heatmap of hierarchical clustering of the samples based on their pairwise similarity (estimated as Spearman's rank correlations) for all 20 samples, with color scale indicating the degree of correlation. **c.** Number of genes expressed in any given number of samples. **d.**

PCA plot for the 20 RNA-seq samples. Samples belonging to the same tissue cluster together. The first principal component (x-axis) separates samples of reproductive tissues (floral bud (purple) and flower (salmon)) from all remaining tissues.

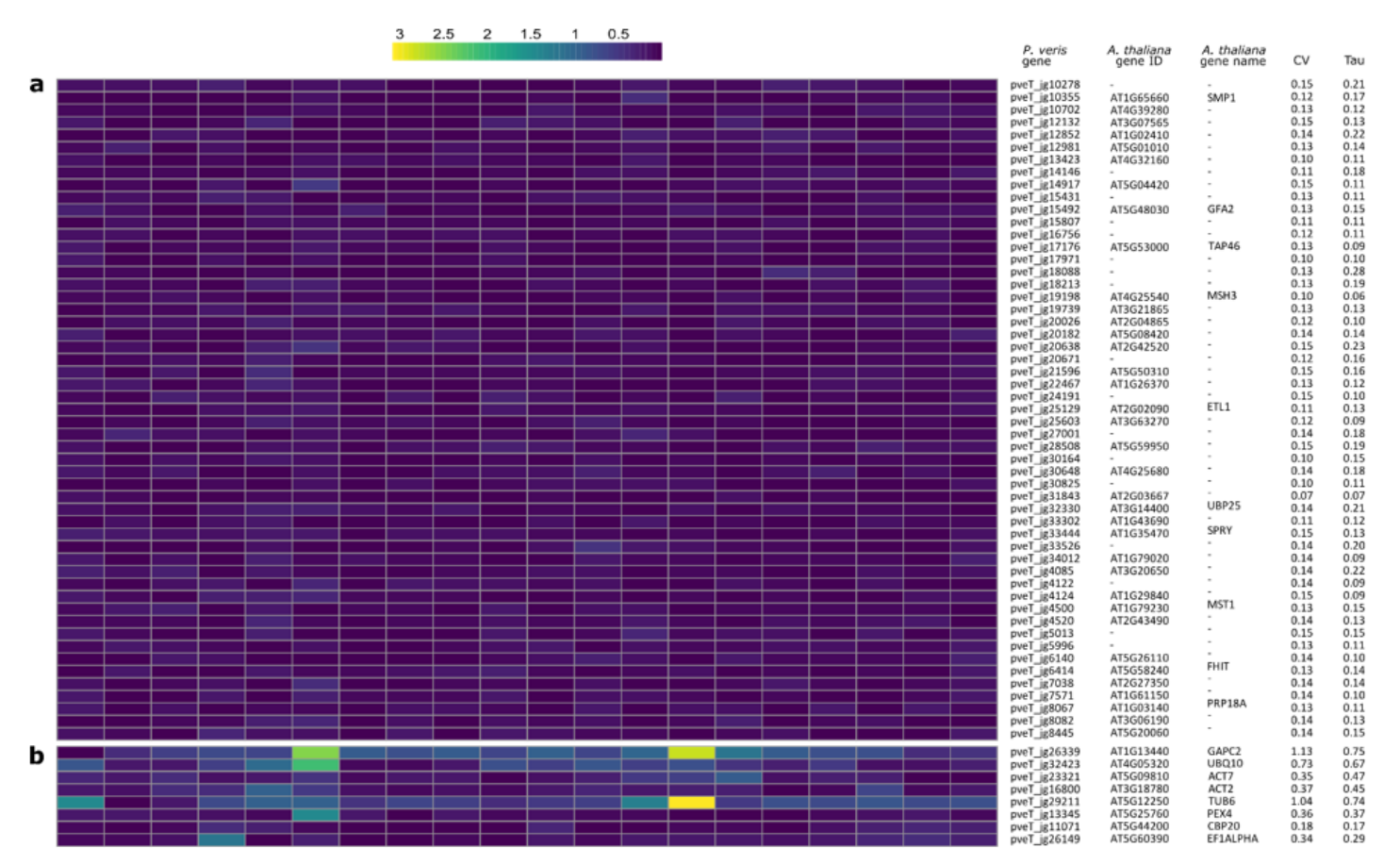


Figure 2

Constitutively expressed genes in *P. veris*. Heatmap showing the variability of expression for the 53 constitutively expressed genes of *P. veris* identified in the current study (a) and for eight HKGs commonly used as standards for normalizing qPCR experiments (b). Each cell in the heatmap represents the deviation from the mean expression (expressed in normalized read counts) for a gene (row) in a sample (column), normalized by the mean expression for that gene, calculated across all samples. The table on the right reports the *P. veris* gene IDs, the *A. thaliana* ortholog IDs and gene name (when available), the coefficient of variation (CV) and the tau tissue-specificity index.

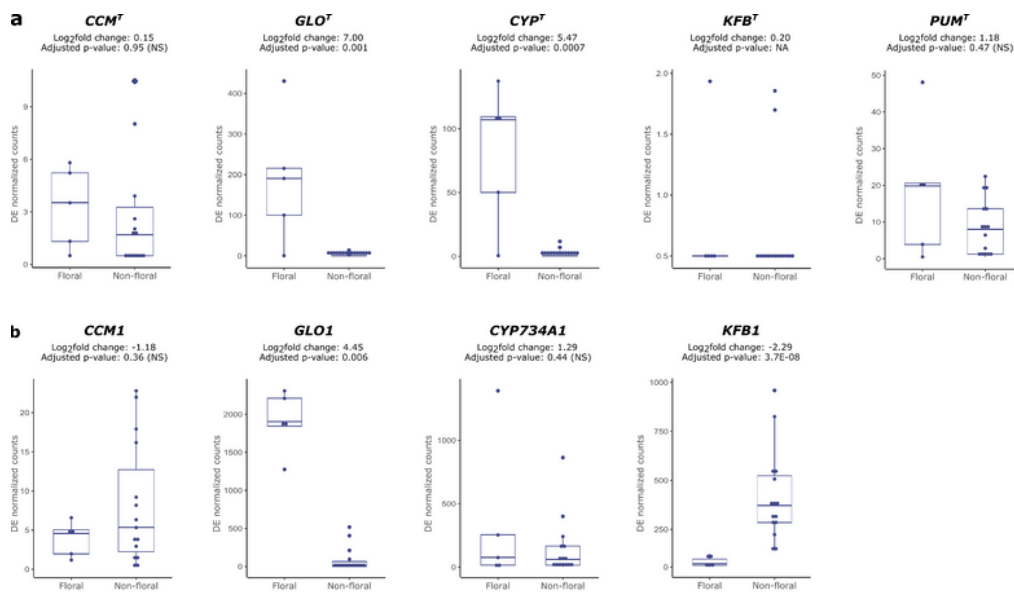


Figure 3

Expression profile of S-locus genes and their paralogs in *P. veris*. Box-plots showing the expression (as normalized counts) of S-locus genes (**a**) and their paralogs (**b**) in samples of floral (floral bud and flower; n=5) and non-floral (root, seed, seedling, leaf, inflorescence stem; n=15) tissues. For each gene, the log2fold change of expression between floral and non-floral tissues is reported together with the adjusted p-value, calculated by DESeq2. NA, not applicable; NS, not significant.

orthogroup (i.e. putatively coding for SAUR63 proteins) are boldfaced and highlighted by a black horizontal bar. **c,d.** Same as a and b, but for all significantly enriched GO terms among down-regulated genes in the mature carpel. **e.** Phylogeny of the OG0000060 orthogroup. Bootstrap values <75 are shown. To ease visualization, genes from *A. majus*, *S. lycopersicum*, *P. veris*, *F. tataricum*, *F. esculentum*, *V. vinifera*, *A. thaliana*, *M. truncatula*, *P. persica*, *P. edulis*, and *T. subulata* are indicated with the prefixes Ama, Sly, Pve, Fta, Fes, Vvi, Ath, Mtr, Ppe, Ped, Tsu, respectively (details on the nomenclature in Suppl. Table S18). **f.** Cladogram of the twelve angiosperm species (modified from Janssens et al. 2020) used in our OrthoFinder analysis with the number of putative SAUR63 subfamily members identified in each species (i.e. the number of genes in the OG0000060 orthogroup). **g.** Heatmap showing the normalized counts in three tissues (filament, mature carpel and young carpel) of two floral morph (S and L) for the S-locus genes S-ELF3 and PG1. For plotting, the normalization was performed for each gene independently. Maximum values correspond to 311.9 and 2,513.5 normalized counts for S-ELF3 and PG1, respectively; minimum value is zero for both genes.

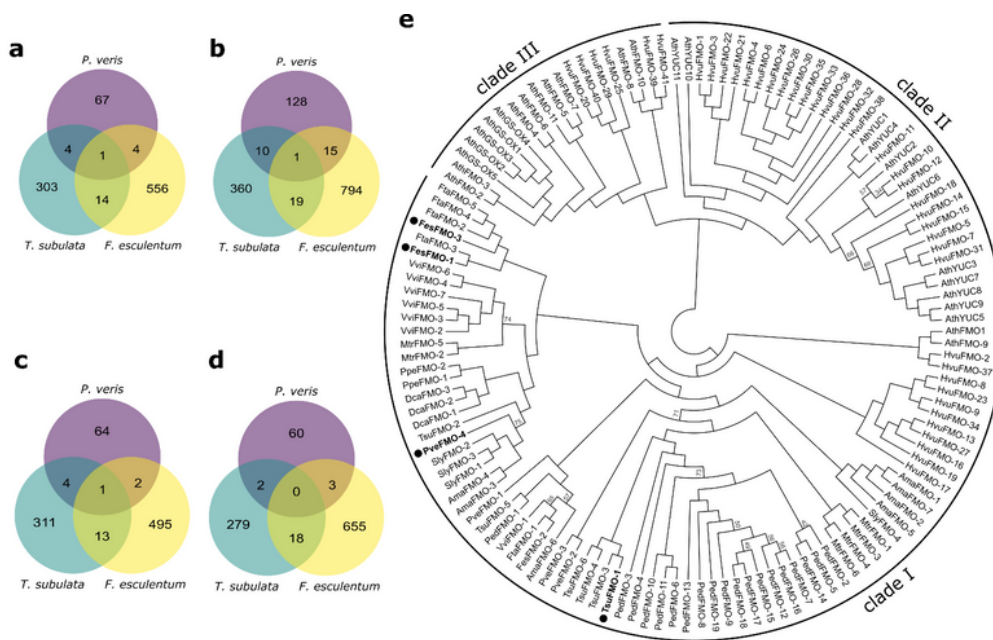


Figure 6

Orthogroups containing genes differentially expressed in *P. veris*, *F. esculentum* and *T. subulata*. a-d. Venn diagrams showing the number of orthogroups containing differentially expressed genes between L- and S-morphs of *P. veris* (purple), *F. esculentum* (yellow) and *T. subulata* (green). **a.** Orthogroups containing genes up-regulated in female organs. One orthogroup (OG0000318) contains genes up-regulated in female organs in the three species (pveT_jg29738, tr_14668, Tsub_00016967-RA), annotated as HSL3

receptor kinases. **b.** Orthogroups containing genes down-regulated in female organs. One orthogroup (OG0000198) contains genes down-regulated in female organs in the three species (pveT_jg28601, tr_16287, Tsub_00008119-RA, and Tsub_00000118-RA), annotated as PIP aquaporins. **c.** Orthogroups containing genes up-regulated in male organs. One orthogroup (OG0000315) contains genes up-regulated in male organs in the three species (pveT_jg17457, tr_6752, Tsub_00026904-RA, and Tsub_00006450-RA). **d.** Orthogroups containing genes down-regulated in male organs. No orthogroup contains genes down-regulated in male organs in the three species. **e.** Cladogram of the OG0000315 orthogroup genes, which contains genes annotated as FMOs, plus *A. thaliana* and *H. vulgare* FMOs. Bootstrap values <75 are shown. The *P. veris*, *F. esculentum* and *T. subulata* DEGs are boldfaced. To ease visualization, genes from the different species are indicated with the prefixes as in Fig. 5f, plus *H. vulgare*, and *D. carota*, indicated as Hvu and Dca, respectively (details on the nomenclature in Suppl. Table S19). Genes that were differentially expressed between L- and S-morphs are boldfaced and marked by black circles.

Supplementary Files

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- [PotenteDistylyTranscriptomeSciRepSupplFigures.pdf](#)
- [PotenteDistylyTranscriptomeSciRepSupplTables.xlsx](#)