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PI Name:	Jinkerson, Robert Ph.D.		
Project Title:	Evaluation of Small Plants for Agriculture in Confined Environments (SPACE) Tomatoes for Space Flight Applications		
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Program/Discipline-- Element/Subdiscipline:			
Joint Agency Name:		TechPort:	No
Human Research Program Elements:	None		
Human Research Program Risks:	None		
Space Biology Element:	(1) Plant Biology		
Space Biology Cross-Element Discipline:	None		
Space Biology Special Category:	(1) Bioregenerative Life Support		
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Contact Monitor:	Massa, Gioia	Contact Phone:	321-861-2938
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Flight Program:	ISS		
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Key Personnel Changes/Previous PI:			
COI Name (Institution):	Orozco-Cardenas, Martha Ph.D. (University of California, Riverside)		
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	<p>Plants can have a tremendously beneficial impact on long spaceflights if some biological hurdles can be overcome. Plants on extended space expeditions can provide a fresh source of food and nutrients, CO₂ uptake capacity, and behavioral health benefits to crewmembers. Most fruit and vegetable bearing plants, however, are too large and produce too much inedible biomass to be part of a bioregenerative life support system. We have recently increased the developmental rate and harvest index of tomato plants dramatically through genetic engineering. These plants rapidly progress through their developmental cycle to produce fruit, minimizing their size and producing little non-fruit biomass. We are calling this extremely dwarf phenotype Small Plants for Agriculture in Confined Environments (SPACE) tomatoes. These plants have been evaluated on Earth but it is not known how this dwarf plant phenotype will manifest in a microgravity environment.</p> <p>This project aims to (1) cultivate SPACE tomato plants in the Advanced Plant Habitat aboard the International Space Station (ISS); (2) determine the physiological response of these plants to grow in microgravity; (3) evaluate fruit grown on the ISS for yield, nutrient levels, and microbial loading; and (4) complete a full life cycle of the SPACE tomatoes aboard the ISS and determine if growing tomatoes seed-to-seed in space alters fruit yields of progeny.</p> <p>The SPACE phenotype is innovative and potentially transformative for spaceflight and ground-based controlled environment agriculture. The SPACE tomato is uniquely suited for environments where physical space is limited. Relatively little research has been done on producing plant traits such as SPACE tomatoes because they serve little agricultural importance in present-day ground-based agricultural systems. Most other mutations that produce plant dwarfs largely keep the proportion of leafy, un-edible material to edible fruit the same. NASA has investigated several dwarf tomatoes but none have been as extreme as the SPACE tomato. The SPACE trait forces the plant quickly through its developmental cycles to produce fruit without the necessity to develop the whole plant. This results in profoundly small plants that produce fruit that is a high fraction of their biomass. This work will determine how well suited SPACE tomatoes are for a bioregenerative life support system. Morphological data of SPACE tomato plants grown in microgravity will also inform future plant genetic engineering strategies on how to create other dwarf plant varieties that are ideally suited for growth on a spacecraft in microgravity.</p>
<p>Task Description:</p>	
<p>Rationale for HRP Directed Research:</p>	
<p>Research Impact/Earth Benefits:</p>	<p>The SPACE phenotype is innovative and potentially transformative for spaceflight and ground-based controlled environment agriculture. The SPACE tomato is uniquely suited for environments where physical space is limited. Relatively little research has been done on producing plant traits such as SPACE tomatoes because they serve little agricultural importance in present-day ground-based agricultural systems. Most other mutations that produce dwarf plants largely keep the proportion of leafy, un-edible material to edible fruit the same. NASA has investigated several dwarf tomatoes but none have been as extreme as the SPACE tomato. The SPACE trait forces the plant quickly through its developmental cycles to produce fruit without the necessity to develop the whole plant. This results in profoundly small plants that produce fruit that is a high fraction of their biomass. This work will determine how well suited SPACE tomatoes are for a bioregenerative life support system. Morphological data of SPACE tomato plants grown in microgravity will also inform future plant genetic engineering strategies on how to create other dwarf plant varieties that are ideally suited for growth in physically confined locations, such as on Earth, in controlled environment agriculture. Data collected on SPACE tomato plant growth, yield, and performance during this project can be used to estimate similar metrics for on-Earth production of SPACE tomatoes in controlled environment agriculture setups. Additionally, optimized culture conditions for SPACE tomato plant growth, such as light, temperature, humidity, and fertilizer levels, can all be used as starting points for tomato growth in on-Earth controlled environment agriculture, such as in vertical farms.</p> <p>Plants can have a tremendous beneficial impact on long spaceflights if some biological hurdles can be overcome. Plants on extended space expeditions can provide a fresh source of food and nutrients, CO₂ uptake capacity, and behavioral health benefits to crewmembers. Most fruit and vegetable bearing plants, however, are too large and produce too much inedible biomass to be part of a bioregenerative life support system. We have recently increased the developmental rate and harvest index of tomato plants dramatically through genetic engineering. These plants rapidly progress through their developmental cycle to produce fruit, minimizing their size and producing little non-fruit biomass. We are calling this extremely dwarf phenotype Small Plants for Agriculture in Confined Environments (SPACE) tomatoes. These plants have been evaluated on Earth but it is not known how this dwarf plant phenotype will manifest in a microgravity environment.</p> <p>This work will determine how well-suited SPACE tomatoes are for a bioregenerative life support system. Morphological data of SPACE tomato plants grown in microgravity will also inform future plant genetic engineering strategies on how to create other dwarf plant varieties that are ideally suited for growth on a spacecraft in microgravity.</p> <p>This project aims to: (1) cultivate SPACE tomato plants in the Advanced Plant Habitat (APH) on board the International Space Station (ISS); (2) determine the physiological response of these plants to growth in microgravity; (3) evaluate fruit grown on the ISS for yield, nutrient levels, and microbial loading; and (4) complete a full life cycle of the SPACE tomatoes on board the ISS and determine if growing tomatoes seed-to-seed in space alters fruit yields of progeny.</p> <p>As a first step to cultivating SPACE tomato plants in the APH on board the ISS, we must determine optimal environmental variables and develop protocols that can be used. To achieve this, we have conducted experiments on seed sterilization, seed germination, plant growth in arcillite, and fertilizer optimization. A seed sterilization protocol was developed that can properly sterilize our seeds to prevent unwanted microbes from making it to the ISS while making sure that our seeds remain viable. Additionally, we have shown that our seeds remain viable during storage in the APH growth substrate for greater than 8 months, which will allow flexibility in scheduling the experiment. The growth substrate in the APH is arcillite, which is a substrate we have not previously grown our tomatoes in. We have developed methods to assess and optimize water and nutrient levels in this substrate. To provide our plants fertilizer, we have identified at what level of slow release fertilizer is toxic to the plants and in the past year determined optimal levels. To determine the layout of plants in the APH, a competition experiment was performed to determine if wildtype tomato plants can outcompete SPACE tomato plants for light, water, or nutrients. A seed harvesting and replanting protocol is also in development that is compatible for microgravity. These findings and established protocols will allow for the best chances of success when our experiment is conducted on the ISS.</p>
<p>Task Progress:</p>	

Bibliography Type:	Description: (Last Updated: 07/05/2023)
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