OPEN ACCESS

IJABR

International Journal of Advanced Biotechnology and Research (IJABR)
ISSN 0976-2612, Online ISSN 2278–599X,
Vol-16, Issue3, 2025, p-139-144

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.16744554

Research Article

Impact of Arsenic on Gametophyte Development and Metal Accumulation in a Hyperaccumulator Fern.

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Article Info

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Received: 15/07/2025
Accepted: 03/08/2025
Published: 05/08/2025

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.16744554

Publisher's Note: IJABR Press stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Abstract

Arsenic (As), a toxic metalloid, is a serious environmental contaminant that affects soil, water, and living organisms. *Pteris vittata*, a well-known arsenic hyperaccumulator, serves as an ideal model to study arsenic uptake and tolerance. This study examines the effects of various arsenic concentrations (0, 10, 20, 30, and 40 ppm) on gametophyte development, chlorophyll content, and arsenic accumulation in *P. vittata*. Gametophytes were grown in vitro under controlled conditions, and their physiological responses were assessed through chlorophyll measurement, anatomical observations, and Inductively Coupled Plasma Atomic Emission Spectroscopy (ICP-AES). The results show that chlorophyll content remained stable up to 30 ppm, indicating maintained photosynthetic function, while a moderate reduction observed at 40 ppm demonstrates continued physiological activity even under higher arsenic stress. Arsenic accumulation increased with higher exposure levels, confirming uptake by gametophytic tissues. These results demonstrate the gametophyte's tolerance and accumulation capacity, highlighting its potential for use in phytoremediation of arsenic-contaminated sites.

Keywords: Arsenic, chlorophyll content, gametophytic tissues, phytoremediation, Hyperaccumulator Fern

Introduction

Arsenic (As) contamination is a widespread environmental concern, affecting millions of people globally. It stems from both natural processes—such as weathering of arsenic-rich minerals—and human activities like mining, industrial waste discharge, and the prolonged use of arsenic-based pesticides and fertilizers [1,2]. Once introduced into the soil and water, arsenic can enter the food chain through plant uptake, posing risks to ecosystems and human health. In plants, arsenic toxicity typically leads to oxidative stress, reduced chlorophyll content, inhibited root and shoot growth, and disrupted physiological functions [3].

To address this challenge, phytoremediation-the use of plants to extract, stabilize, or detoxify contaminants—has gained recognition as a sustainable and eco-friendly approach. Among the few plant species capable of thriving in

arsenic-rich environments, *Pteris vittata* (commonly known as Chinese brake fern) stands out. It was the first known terrestrial plant shown to hyperaccumulate arsenic, with concentrations exceeding 1,000 mg/kg in its fronds [4]. This unique ability is linked to its uptake of arsenate (AsV) through phosphate transporters, biochemical reduction to arsenite (AsIII), and efficient translocation and storage of arsenic in aboveground tissues [5,6]. Because of these mechanisms, *P. vittata* is now widely studied for its phytoremediation potential in arsenic-contaminated environments.

Like all ferns, *P. vittata* follows an alternation of generations, cycling between two distinct stages: the diploid sporophyte and the haploid gametophyte. While the sporophyte stage dominates in size and longevity and has been the focus of most research due to its visible arsenic uptake efficiency, the gametophyte, a free-living, photosynthetic structure, plays a crucial role in sexual reproduction and population establishment. Despite its ecological importance, the gametophyte has received comparatively little attention in arsenic-related studies [7]. Its small size, rapid growth, and simpler structure make it a useful model for studying stress responses, especially under controlled conditions [8].

Recognizing this gap, the current study focuses on understanding how *P. vittata* gametophytes respond to varying arsenic concentrations at the physiological and anatomical levels. Specifically, the study explores how arsenic affects chlorophyll content, structural morphology, and arsenic accumulation patterns. These insights not only broaden our understanding of the fern's life cycle responses to stress but also highlight the gametophyte as a promising tool for rapid assessment in phytoremediation research.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Site and Duration

The experiment was conducted in the Plant Tissue Culture Laboratory, Department of Botany, GM Momin Women's College, Bhiwandi, between March and June 2024.

2.2 Plant Material and Culture Conditions

Spores of *Pteris vittata* were surface-sterilized and germinated on Knop's medium (NOPS) under sterile conditions [10]. Mature gametophytes were then transferred to Knop's medium supplemented with sodium arsenate heptahydrate ($Na_2HAsO_4 \cdot 7H_2O$) at five treatment levels: 0, 10, 20, 30, and 40 ppm. Each treatment included nine replicates arranged in a Completely Randomized Design (CRD). Cultures were maintained at 25 ± 2°C with a 16/8-hour light/dark cycle and pH adjusted to 5.8.

2.3 Experimental Duration and Observations

The exposure lasted 30 days. Chlorophyll content was measured on days 15 and 30, anatomical structures were examined at the end of the experiment, and arsenic accumulation was quantified after 30 days.

2.4 Chlorophyll Estimation

1 g of fresh gametophyte tissue was homogenized in 20 mL of 96% ethanol. Absorbance was measured at 649 and 665 nm using a UV-Vis spectrophotometer. Total chlorophyll (mg/L) was calculated using:

Chlorophyll total = 20.2 × A649 + 8.02 × A665

Then converted to mg/g fresh weight.

2.5 Arsenic Quantification by ICP-AES

To quantify arsenic accumulation in gametophytes, 0.5 g of dried and finely ground gametophyte tissue was subjected to acid digestion prior to Inductively Coupled Plasma Atomic Emission Spectroscopy (ICP-AES) analysis [9]. The digestion protocol was as follows:

1. Weigh 0.5 g of dried sample into a Teflon digestion vessel or glass beaker.
2. Add 5 mL of concentrated nitric acid (HNO_3) and allow to predigest at room temperature for 30 minutes to minimize foaming.
3. Add 2 mL of concentrated hydrochloric acid (HCl) to stabilize arsenic in solution. Optionally, add 2 mL of 30% hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2) to enhance oxidation and digestion efficiency.
4. Heat the mixture using either:
   - Hot plate: at 120–150°C until the solution turns clear (~2–3 hours), avoiding vigorous

boiling, or
- Microwave digestion system: controlled heating at ~180°C for 30 minutes.
5. Cool the digest to room temperature, then filter through Whatman No. 42 filter paper to remove any residues.
6. Transfer the filtrate into a 50 mL volumetric flask and dilute to the mark with deionized water.
7. Analyze arsenic concentration using ICP-AES at 193.69 nm emission wavelength. Calibration standards ranging from 10 to 30 ppb arsenic solutions were used for quantification.

3. Observation and Result:

3.1 Impact of Arsenic Exposure on the Morphological Structure of Pteris vittata Gametophytes:

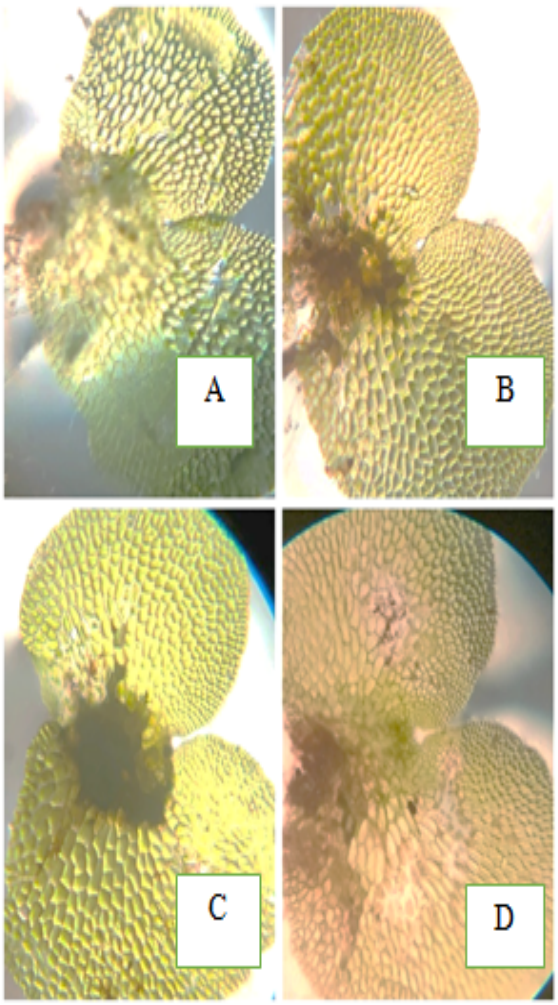

Fig. A–D: Gametophytes treated with 10, 20, 30, and 40 ppm arsenic after 30 days.

Microscopic examination of *Pteris vittata* gametophytes exposed to increasing arsenic concentrations (10–40 ppm) revealed a gradual and concentration-dependent morphological response, demonstrating the species' notable physiological adaptability. At 10 ppm arsenic (Fig. A), the gametophytes maintained normal morphology with well-organized, green cells and no visible signs of damage, indicating strong tolerance to low arsenic levels. Even at 20 ppm (Fig. B), only slight central discoloration was observed, while the margins remained healthy and structurally intact, suggesting the onset of mild stress but with continued normal growth and function. At 30 ppm arsenic (Fig. C), localized browning and signs of necrosis became more evident, particularly in central regions, though peripheral tissues still exhibited chlorophyll retention and partial viability. These points to an adaptive stress response, possibly involving antioxidative mechanisms or metal sequestration pathways. At the highest tested concentration, 40 ppm (Fig. D), the gametophytes exhibited pronounced structural alterations, including extensive browning, necrosis, and partial tissue collapse. Despite this, the persistence of marginal structure and cellular integrity in some regions reflects *P. vittata*'s inherent ability to endure extreme environmental stress.

These observations align with previous reports highlighting *P. vittata*'s hyperaccumulative capacity and tolerance to arsenic through mechanisms such as compartmentalization of arsenic in vacuoles, synthesis of phytochelatins, and enhanced antioxidant enzyme activity [6,15]. The relatively sustained growth at 10–20 ppm and partial tolerance even at 30–40 ppm support the hypothesis that *P. vittata* gametophytes possess intrinsic detoxification and damage-mitigation strategies, making them suitable for phytoremediation applications in arsenic-contaminated environments. These results also provide insights into the developmental stage-specific responses of ferns under metal stress, an area that remains underexplored compared to angiosperms.

3.2 Chlorophyll Content

Treatment (ppm)	Day 15 (mg/L)	Day 30 (mg/L)
Control (0 ppm)	1.647	2.433
10 ppm	1.650	2.427
20 ppm	1.583	2.322
30 ppm	1.461	2.181
40 ppm	0.920	0.555

Table 3.2.1 : Chlorophyll Content (mg/L) in *Pteris vittata* Gametophytes at Different Arsenic Concentrations on Day 15 and Day 30.

The chlorophyll content in *Pteris vittata* gametophytes demonstrated remarkable stability under varying arsenic concentrations, reflecting the species' inherent tolerance to arsenic-induced stress. On both Day 15 and Day 30, chlorophyll levels in the control, 10 ppm, and 20 ppm treatments remained comparable, indicating that the photosynthetic machinery of the gametophytes was largely unaffected at these concentrations. Even at 30 ppm arsenic, chlorophyll content showed only a marginal decrease, underscoring the resilience of *P. vittata* at moderate arsenic exposure. Although a reduction was observed at 40 ppm, chlorophyll was still present at appreciable levels, suggesting that the gametophytes maintain functional photosynthetic capacity even under high arsenic stress.

3.3 Arsenic Accumulation

Sample	Arsenic Concentration (ppm)
10 ppm	0.114
20 ppm	1.663
30 ppm	1.383
40 ppm	2.362

Table 3.3.1: Arsenic Accumulation (ppm) in *Pteris vittata* Gametophytes at Different Arsenic Treatment Levels after 30 Days.

The accumulation of arsenic in *Pteris vittata* gametophytes increased steadily with higher arsenic concentrations in the growth medium, confirming the plant's well-established role as a hyperaccumulator. Across all treatment levels, the gametophytes effectively absorbed and sequestered arsenic, with the greatest accumulation observed at 40 ppm. This capacity highlights the plant's potential utility in removing arsenic from contaminated environments.

Importantly, arsenic uptake up to 30 ppm did not cause a significant decline in chlorophyll content, demonstrating the species' ability to maintain photosynthetic activity under moderate arsenic stress. This tolerance to arsenic toxicity alongside efficient accumulation underscores *P. vittata* gametophytes as promising candidates for phytoremediation strategies aimed at mitigating arsenic pollution.

4. Discussion

This study demonstrates the potential of *Pteris vittata* gametophytes as a model system for understanding arsenic (As) tolerance and accumulation, especially in the context of early-stage phytoremediation. The observed morphological and physiological responses under graded arsenic exposure reveal the gametophyte's notable adaptive capacity during the haploid phase of development.

Chlorophyll content, a key indicator of photosynthetic health, remained stable up to 30 ppm of arsenic, with a decline noted only at 40 ppm, indicating strong physiological resilience. These results are consistent with the findings of Gumaelius et al. [11], who reported that gametophytes of *P. vittata* could grow in arsenate concentrations as high as 20 mM and accumulate arsenic up to 2.5% of their dry weight. Similarly, our results are in agreement with work by Zhao et al. [6], who reported efficient arsenic absorption and internal compartmentalization in the sporophyte stage. Anshita Raj et al. [12]further emphasized that arsenic exposure in gametophytes induces antioxidant responses that protect cellular structures and support sustained photosynthesis under metal stress. Our findings corroborate this, demonstrating that even at elevated arsenic levels, gametophytes retain photosynthetic activity and structural integrity. This suggests that the detoxification and antioxidant

mechanisms commonly observed in sporophytes are also active in gametophytes.

The accumulation patterns in gametophytic tissues support the view that arsenic hyperaccumulation is not limited to the sporophyte phase. While extensive work by Ma et al. [4] and Zhao et al. [6] focused on arsenic uptake in fronds, our study highlights the lesser-known capacity of the gametophyte to accumulate arsenic efficiently despite its simpler anatomy. This finding opens new avenues for utilizing gametophytes in rapid and cost-effective phytoremediation setups, especially in laboratory and controlled environments.

The slight reduction in arsenic accumulation at 30 ppm, despite increased exposure, may point to a regulatory mechanism that restricts uptake under high stress to preserve essential cellular functions. Similar regulatory behavior was observed by Dhankher et al. [13] in *Arabidopsis*, suggesting a broader plant strategy of balancing metal uptake with metabolic stability.

Localized necrosis observed at 40 ppm, accompanied by the survival of peripheral tissues, reflects cellular attempts to compartmentalize stress and protect viable regions—an effect also noted by Singh and Ma[14] when comparing hyperaccumulator and non-hyperaccumulator ferns. This kind of stress compartmentalization supports the view that detoxification mechanisms are actively engaged even at the gametophyte level.

Unlike the sporophyte stage, which takes longer to develop and requires more space, the gametophyte stage provides a quicker and more manageable system for studying metal uptake. As noted by Banks [7] and Raghavan [8], the small size, rapid life cycle, and sensitivity of gametophytes to environmental changes make them ideal for early-stage assessments of metal toxicity and phytoremediation capacity.

5. Conclusion

The study highlights the remarkable ability of *Pteris vittata* gametophytes to tolerate and accumulate arsenic across a range of concentrations. The gametophytes effectively absorbed arsenic even at higher levels while maintaining chlorophyll content up to 30 ppm, indicating their resilience to arsenic-induced physiological stress. This balance between arsenic uptake and physiological stability underscores the adaptability of *P. vittata* gametophytes to contaminated environments.

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