Biotechnologies towards Sustainable Development in Malaysia

Zarina Zainuddin

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Bioethics and biotechnology: A holistic approach in Islamic perspectives 1
Ahmed Jalal Khan Chowdhury, Zaima Azira Zainal Abidin, Zarina Zainuddin and Suzannah Abdul Rahman

Chapter 2 Malaysia's Sea Cucumber (Echinodermata: Holothuroidea) Database 16
Kamarul Rahim Kamarudin

Chapter 3 Diversity and Exploitation of Sea Cucumbers in Malaysia and Its Neighbouring Countries 25
Kamarul Rahim Kamarudin

Chapter 4 Holothuria (Mertensiosturhia) leucaspilota (Brandt, 1835) in the Marine Environment of Malaysia 36
Kamarul Rahim Kamarudin

Chapter 5 Genetic manipulation for better bioremediation processes 50
Noor Faizul Hadry Nordin

Chapter 6 Microbial bioremediation and sustainable development 64
Noor Faizul Hadry Nordin

Chapter 7 Heavy metal uptakes by plants 74
Phang Ing Chia

Chapter 8 Mechanisms of heavy metal tolerance in plants (I) – Avoidance 84
mechanisms
Phang Ing Chia

Chapter 9 Mechanisms of heavy metal tolerance in plants (I) – Tolerance 89
mechanisms
Phang Ing Chia

Chapter 10 Identifying catalytic residues for peptidases: in silico perspective 97
Noraslinda Muhamad Bunnori

Chapter 11 Important considerations in qRT-PCR 103
Phang Ing Chia
Chapter 12 Molecular approach of macroinvertebrates in tropical wetland, Lake Bera, Malaysia: Towards the assessment of ecosystem health
Nurhidayati Abdul Aziz, Ahmed Jalal Khan Chowdhury, Kamarul Rahim Kamarudin, Mohd Azmi Ambak and Najiah Musa

Chapter 13 Probiotic for sustainability protein source in Malaysia
Tengku Haziyamin Tengku Abdul Hamid

Chapter 14 Bacteriocin as safe antimicrobial agent
Tengku Haziyamin Tengku Abdul Hamid

Chapter 15 Review on marine actinomycetes
Zaima Azira Zainal Abidin

Chapter 16 Biotechnology potential tropical mangrove plant with special emphasis on Avicennia alba in Tanjung Lumpur, Pahang Malaysia
Ahmed Jalal Khan Chowdhury., Deny Susanti, and Nur Sazwi Binti Nordin

Chapter 17 Studies on agronomy, breeding and genetics of Stevia rebaudiana (Bertoni) in Malaysia
Raji Akintunde AbdullahTeef and Mohamad bin Osman

Chapter 18 Identification and characterization of Burkholderia pseudomallei serine and metallopeptidases
Noraslinda Muhamad Bunnori

Chapter 19 Analysis of xylene degradation by bacteria isolated from petroleum contaminated sites
Noor Faizul Hadry Nordin and Marni Farhani Mansor

Chapter 20 Bioadsorption of heavy metals from synthetic waste water by tropical rambutan seed
Ahmed Jalal Khan Chowdhury, Abul Bashar Mohammed Helal Uddin, Mohd Sufian Mohamad Shukri, Kamaruzzaman Yunus

Chapter 21 Chitin and chitosan from fresh water fish tilapia (Oreochromis niloticus) scale
Ahmed Jalal Khan Chowdhury, Nor Hafizah Zakaria, Tengku Haziyamin Tengku Abdul Hamid and Deny Susanti

Chapter 22 Chitin and chitosan from potential shrimps and crabs of Malaysia
Ahmed Jalal Khan Chowdhury, Suffi Nurul Husna, Deny Susanti, Akbar John and Kamaruzzaman Yunus
Chapter 23 Extraction of chitin and chitosan from Malaysian cephalopods “Sotong mengaban” (Sepioteuthis lessoniana) and “Sotong jarum” (Loligo vulgaris)  
Ahmed Jalal Khan Chowdhury, Mohd Hazman Mohd Salleh, Deny Susanti, Akbar John and Jamaluddin Daud  
244

Chapter 24 In Planta Agrobacterium tumefaciens transformation of MR 219 rice  
Zaima Azira Zainal Abidin and Rabiah Abdul Wahab  
258

Chapter 25 Optimisation of transformation system for chilli embryo (Capsicum annuum variety Kulai) using particle bombardment  
Zarina Zainuddin and Rozilawati Mohamad Achil  
268

Chapter 26 Screening of mangrove plants for gram negative antibacterial activity  
Zarina Zainuddin and ‘Izzati Akmal Hasan  
275

Chapter 27 Antibacterial activities of green and ripens banana peel (Musa, AA cv. Sucrier) in Malaysia  
Ahmed Jalal Khan Chowdhury, Dina Fuad, Md. Tariqur Rahman and Akbar John  
284

Chapter 28 Agglutinin and antibacterial activities in oyster, Chama pacifica plasma  
Najiah Musa, Arief Izzaizy Zamani, Ahmed Jalal Khan Chowdhury and Muhamad Hazwan Mat Tar, Nadirah Musa  
298

Chapter 29 The effect of cooking methods on meat samples using PCR-RFLP analysis  
Zaima Azira Zainal Abidin and Haryati Ithnin  
305
Chapter 1/

Studies on agronomy, breeding and genetics of Stevia rebaudiana (Bertoni) in Malaysia

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Introduction

Stevia rebaudiana Bertoni is a natural sweetener plant with zero calorie content and it becomes an inevitable alternative to sugar especially with over 346 million diabetic population across the world. (WHO, 2011). Stevia, also known as sweet leaf, or sugar leaf is a genus of about 150 species of herbs and shrubs (Robert, 2010), a member of the family Compositae and a native to Paraguay (Mark, 2009). It was long known to the Guarani Indians of the Paraguayan highlands who called it caá-êhé, meaning sweet herb. Sweet steviol glycoside is extracted from stevia leaves. Currently over 3 million Malaysians are diabetic and the need for this alternative sweetener substitute cannot be over emphasized. The crop became known in Malaysia about five years ago for its potential as a natural sweetener to substitute sugar in yearly increasing number of diabetic patients and also for its propensity to become a commercial crop, though it was long introduced since 1970s (Berita Harian, 2010). Efforts by the Malaysian government, local industries and farms to bring the crop into lime light in order to reduce or efface sugar consumption among the populace (The Star, 2010). The A’Azam Group, a local company, with the cooperation of its subsidiary, BNG Global Holdings Sdn Bhd, was also involved in research