

**BARLEY ALLELOCHEMICALS  
AS SELF DEFENCE PROPERTIES  
AGAINST VERTEBRATE ANIMALS**

**A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Master of Rural Science  
of the University of New England**

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## Declaration

*I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree.*

*I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all source used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.*



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March 25, 1996

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## Summary

Plant secondary metabolites have been demonstrated to act as self defence agents against other species. Allelochemicals found in barley, gramine and hordenine, have similar effects on other plants, fungi, bacteria and insects (invertebrates). However, there has been a lack of evidence for barley allelopathy as a self defence mechanism against vertebrate animals.

Four experiments were carried out to study the effects of the secondary metabolites of barley, gramine and hordenine, on the growth of two vertebrate species (laboratory mice and broiler chickens). The objectives of the study were to provide information on the potential value of these metabolites in self defence of barley against vertebrate pests. All experiments were conducted at the Animal House of the University of New England, Armidale, NSW. Water and feed were provided *ad libitum*. There were two different levels, 50 and 500 ppm, of both gramine and hordenine which were incorporated into the feed of the treatment groups.

The first experiment was designed to assess any possible adverse effects of both alkaloids on mice. Laboratory mice were given feeding choice between standard laboratory feed and alkaloid-containing feed. In the second and third experiments, animals (both mice and broiler chickens) were not given feeding choice but were provided with different concentrations of either gramine or hordenine in feed. The last experiment studied possible synergistic effects of the two alkaloids, gramine and hordenine, on broiler chickens.

Overall, the treatments did not significantly affect the growth of mice and chickens. However, gramine 500 ppm in feed significantly reduced feed intake in mice. Small quantities of both gramine and hordenine were recovered from the livers of both animal species through High Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) analysis. However, when mice were given feeding choice, the recovered gramine and hordenine

were detected from high level treatments (500 ppm) only. The amount of alkaloid recovered was associated with the concentration given in feed.

The main finding of the present study is that gramine had more effects than hordenine on the animals tested. A high concentration (500 ppm) of either gramine or hordenine was sufficient to induce changes in liver structure of the chickens. These changes were indicated by cell vacuolation even though they were not necessarily associated with reduced feed intake or growth rate of the animals. The changes are congruent with damage observed in cells of other species exposed to secondary metabolites.

Broiler chickens provided a better model for this study than did laboratory mice. Broiler chickens have a very fast growth rate and are able to seek food immediately after hatch. However, laboratory mice cannot be weaned until three weeks after birth and have attained a significant proportion (up to 80%) of their adult body weight by the time they are introduced to the experimental feeds. Therefore, the effects of allelochemicals on feed intake and growth rate in vertebrates are more likely to be demonstrated in broiler chickens than in mice.

## Contents

	Page
Declaration .....	ii
Acknowledgment .....	iii
Summary .....	iv
List of figures .....	x
List of tables .....	xi
List of plates .....	xii
Chapter 1. Introduction .....	1
1.1. History of Agriculture .....	2
1.2. Pressures on Agriculture.....	2
Chapter 2. Literature Review .....	6
2.1. Allelopathy .....	7
2.2. The history of allelopathy .....	8
2.3. Allelochemicals: secondary metabolites.....	9
2.4. Release of allelochemicals from plants .....	11
2.4.1. Volatilisation.....	12
2.4.2. Root Exudation.....	13
2.4.3. Leaching .....	15
2.4.4. Decomposition of plant residues .....	16
2.5. Transport of allelochemicals in the environment.....	18
2.6. Factors affecting the production and activity of allelochemicals.....	18
2.7. Activity of allelochemicals .....	23
2.7.1. Effects of allelochemicals on weed management .....	24
2.7.2. Effects of allelochemicals on other organisms .....	25
2.8. Interpretation of the effects of allelochemicals .....	28
2.9. Occurrence of allelopathy in crop plants .....	30
2.10. Common features of allelopathy in crops .....	31
2.11. Barley as a case study for allelopathy in crops.....	37
2.11.1. Activity of barley allelochemicals against weeds .....	39
2.11.2. Activity of barley allelochemicals against other organisms .....	40
2.11.3. Deficiencies in knowledge and need for further research.....	42
Chapter 3. Materials and Methods .....	43
3.1. Introduction .....	44
3.2. Animals .....	44
3.3. Preparation of Feed .....	45

3.3.1. Mouse Feed .....	45
3.3.2. Chicken Feed .....	45
3.4. Housing, Care and Maintenance .....	46
3.4.1. Mice.....	46
3.4.2. Chickens .....	46
3.5. Sacrifice of Animals and Collection of Tissue .....	47
3.6. Determination of Gramine and Hordenine.....	47
3.7. Histological Examination.....	50
3.8. Experimental Design .....	51
Chapter 4. Preliminary Assessment of the Effects of Gramine and Hordenine on Vertebrates.....	52
4.1. Introduction .....	53
4.2. Materials and Methods .....	53
4.3. Results .....	55
4.3.1. Body Weight.....	55
4.3.2. Feed Intake .....	55
4.3.3. Liver Weight.....	57
4.3.4. HPLC Analysis of Liver .....	59
4.4. Discussion.....	59
Chapter 5. Effects of Gramine and Hordenine on Mice.....	62
5.1. Introduction .....	63
5.2. Materials and Methods .....	63
5.3. Results .....	64
5.3.1. Body Weight.....	64
5.3.2. Feed Intake .....	64
5.3.3. Liver Weight.....	66
5.3.4. HPLC Analysis of Liver .....	68
5.4. Discussion.....	68
Chapter 6. Effects of Gramine and Hordenine on Broiler Chickens.....	72
6.1. Introduction .....	73
6.2. Materials and Methods .....	73
6.2.1. Experimental Design .....	73
6.2.2. Data Collection .....	74
6.2.3. Histological Examination.....	74
6.3. Results .....	74
6.3.1. Body Weight.....	74
6.3.2. Feed Intake .....	76
6.3.3. Liver Weight.....	77
6.3.4. HPLC Analysis of Liver .....	77
6.3.5. Feed Conversion Ratio .....	78
6.3.6. Histological Examination.....	79
6.3.7. Additional Observation.....	80
6.4. Discussion.....	80

Chapter 7. Synergistic Effects of Gramine and Hordenine on Broiler Chickens..	86
7.1. Introduction .....	87
7.2. Materials and Methods .....	87
7.3. Results .....	88
7.3.1. Body Weigh .....	88
7.3.2. Feed Intake .....	88
7.3.3. Liver Weigh .....	89
7.3.4. HPLC Analysis of Liver .....	89
7.3.5. Feed Conversion Ratio .....	91
7.3.6. Histological Examination.....	92
7.4. Discussion.....	92
Chapter 8. General Discussion .....	96
8.1. General Discussion .....	97
8.2. Conclusion .....	104
References .....	106

## Appendices

	Page
Appendix A: The composition of Custom Mix mouse feed.....	129
Appendix B: The composition of Chick Starter Feed and Broiler Finisher Feed .....	129
Appendix C: Buffered 10% Formalin (pH 7).....	130
Appendix D: Mobile Phase for HPLC .....	130
Appendix E: The Histokine tte Process .....	130
Appendix F: The Staining Process (Ehrlich's Haemotoxylin and Eosin).....	131
Appendix G: Body weights of mice receiving different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in feed during the feeding choice experiment .....	133
Appendix H: Total feed intakes of mice receiving different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in feed during the feeding choice experiment .....	134
Appendix I: Liver weights of mice receiving different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in feed during the feeding choice experiment .....	135
Appendix J: Liver weights of mice receiving different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine .....	135
Appendix K: Liver weights of chickens receiving different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine.....	135
Appendix L: Body weights of mice receiving different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in feed.....	136
Appendix M: Feed intakes of chickens receiving different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in feed .....	137
Appendix N: Feed conversion ratios of chickens receiving different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in feed.....	137



Appendix O: Body weights of chickens receiving different combination of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in feed.....	138
Appendix P: Feed intakes of chickens receiving different combination of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in feed .....	139
Appendix Q: Feed conversion ratios of chickens receiving different combination of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in feed.....	139

## List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1.1. Evolution and current perception of the relationship among agricultural technologies.....	3
Figure 2.1. The production and release of allelochemicals from plant to the environment .....	12
Figure 2.2. A relationship of the factors and processes affecting the transport of allelochemicals from the site of production to the target plant .....	19
Figure 2.3. The biosynthesis pathway of gramine from tryptophan .....	38
Figure 2.4. The formation of hordenine from tyrosine .....	39
Figure 3.1. The flow diagram of purification for hordenine.....	48
Figure 3.2. The flow diagram of purification for gramine.....	49
Figure 4.1. Body weight of mice for eight weeks of treatment.....	56
Figure 4.2. Body weight of mice as percentage of initial body weight.....	56
Figure 4.3. Mouse feed ingested for eight weeks of treatment .....	57
Figure 4.4. Total amount of feed taken by mice during the experiment .....	58
Figure 4.5. Liver weight of mice after eight weeks of treatment .....	58
Figure 5.1. Body weight of mice over twelve weeks of experimental period .....	64
Figure 5.2. Body weight of mice as a percentage of initial body weight .....	65
Figure 5.3. Mouse feed ingested for alkaloid treatments.....	65
Figure 5.4. Liver weight of mice after twelve weeks of alkaloid treatments .....	66
Figure 6.1. Body weight of broiler chickens over seven weeks of experimental period.....	75
Figure 6.2. Chicken feed ingested over seven weeks of age .....	77
Figure 6.3. Liver weight of chickens at seven weeks of age .....	78
Figure 6.4. Feed conversion ratio of chickens receiving different levels of alkaloids .....	79
Figure 7.1. Body weight of broiler chickens over seven weeks of age.....	89
Figure 7.2. Chicken feed intake over the experimental period.....	90
Figure 7.3. Liver weight of chickens at seven weeks of age .....	90
Figure 7.4. Feed conversion ratio of chickens exposed to combinations of different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine.....	92

## List of tables

	Page
Table 4.1. Gramine and hordenine content in liver.....	59
Table 5.1. Feed intakes of mice receiving different levels of alkaloids gramine and hordenine in the feed .....	67
Table 5.2. Gramine and hordenine content in liver.....	68
Table 6.1. Body weight of chickens receiving different levels of alkaloids.....	76
Table 6.2. Gramine and hordenine content of chicken liver.....	79
Table 7.1. Liver weight of broiler chickens at seven weeks of age .....	91
Table 7.2. Gramine and hordenine content of chicken liver.....	91

## List of plates

	Page
Plate 6.1. Micrographs of livers from chickens receiving different levels of gramine and hordenine incorporated into feed .....	82
Plate 6.2. Lesions on the feet of chickens receiving 500 ppm gramine in feed during weeks 4 and 5 of the experiment .....	83
Plate 7.1. Micrographs of livers from chickens receiving combinations of levels of gramine and hordenine incorporated into feed.....	93