Chapter 4

Transformation of *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense*, causal agent of Fusarium wilt of banana, with the green fluorescent protein (GFP) gene.

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ABSTRACT

Fusarium oxysporum f. sp. *cubense* (*Foc*) is the causal agent of Fusarium wilt (Panama disease) of bananas in most tropical and subtropical banana-producing regions of the world. The fungus infects through roots, colonizes the rhizomes and eventually blocks the vascular system of the pseudostems, resulting in plant death. The green fluorescent protein (GFP) emits green fluorescence when excited by blue light, making it a useful tool to study early stages of fungal infection. The objective of this study was to transform *Foc* isolates with the GFP gene. Isolates representing 'subtropical' race 4 of the fungus were transformed with the *sGFP* derivative using hygromycin as a selectable marker. Efficiency and transformation of spheroplasts depended on mycelium age, the choice of enzymes and the temperature and duration of incubation. The transformed isolates did not differ markedly from the wild type isolates in growth and morphological characteristics *in vitro*. Fluorescence microscopy showed expression of the green fluorescent protein in fungal structures. The presence of the GFP DNA in the fungal cells was confirmed by PCR using a GFP specific primer pair and southern blot analysis. Pathogenicity tests showed that the transformation process did not alter pathogenicity of *Foc* isolates. Fungal hyphae within tissues of infected plants fluoresced and the transformed fungus was re-isolated from artificially inoculated plants. Transformants of *Foc* will facilitate future infection studies with this pathogen on banana.

INTRODUCTION

The green fluorescent protein (GFP) from the jellyfish *Aequorea victoria* (Shimomura) has been developed as a reporter for gene expression (Prasher 1992, Chalfie *et al.* 1994, Cubitt *et al.* 1995, Niedenthal *et al.* 1996, Spellig, Bottin & Kahmann 1996, Tsien 1998), a tracer for studying cellular dynamics of filamentous fungi (Suelmann & Fischer 1997, Suelmann & Fischer 2000) and a label to follow development of pathogens within their plant hosts (Sheen *et al.* 1995, Chalfie & Kain 1998, Bottin *et al.* 1999). GFP was first expressed in *Escherichia coli* and *Caenorhabditis elegans* (Chalfie *et al.* 1994).

Expression of the GFP has subsequently been successful in plants (Haseloff & Amos 1995, Sheen *et al.* 1995, Chiu *et al.* 1996) mammals (Pines 1995) and yeasts (Cormack *et al.* 1997). The GFP has also been expressed in numerous filamentous fungi such as *Ustilago maydis* (DC.) Corda (Spellig *et al.* 1996), *Podospora anserina* (Rabenh.) Niessl (Berteaux-Lecellier *et al.* 1998), *Magnaporthe grisea* (T. T. Hebert) M. E. Barr, Kershaw, (Walkey & Talbot 1998), *Cochliobolus heterostrophus* Drechsler (Maor *et al.* 1998), *Mycosphaerella graminicola* (Fuckel) J. Schröt. (Skinner *et al.* 1998), *Colletotrichum lindemuthianum* (Sacc. & Magnus) Briosi & Cavara, (Dumas *et al.* 1999), *Phytophthora parasitica* Dastur, (Bottin *et al.* 1999), *Aspergillus niger* Tiegh. (Du *et al.* 1999) and *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *radicis-lycopersici* Jarvis & Shoemaker, (Lagopodi *et al.* 2002).

The formation of the fluorescent chromophore is apparently not species dependent and this has resulted in success with expression in several heterologous systems. It requires only ultra violet (UV) or blue light and oxygen to fluoresce. The detection of GFP is non-invasive, and non-destructive. There is no need for staining with special dyes or fixing of the sample using heat. However, successful expression of GFP in filamentous fungi requires a GFP derivative that is efficiently translated in fungi, the development of a transformation system in the target

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species, and a strong fungal promoter that drives strong constitutive expression of the GFP (Lorang *et al.* 2001). The *sGFP* derivative has been shown to be efficiently translated and expressed in most filamentous fungi tested (Lorang *et al.* 2001).

The fungal pathogen *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense* (E. F. Smith) Snyder and Hansen (*Foc*) causes a highly destructive vascular wilt disease of banana plants (Stover 1972). *Foc* is a soilborne fungus that infects banana plants through their roots, then colonizes the rhizomes and eventually blocks the vascular vessels of the pseudostems (Stover 1972).

The objectives of this study were to transform isolates of *Foc* with a plasmid harbouring the s*GFP* derivative. Thereafter, we determined whether the transformed isolates retained their integrity and pathogenicity, and confirmed the expression of the GFP in infected plant material.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Fungal isolates and culture conditions

Five virulent 'subtropical' race 4 isolates of *Foc* were selected for transformation with the GFP. These included isolates from South Africa (*Foc* 1, 6, 42), Taiwan (*Foc* 28), and Australia (*Foc* 46). All isolates are maintained on filter paper at 4°C in the culture collection of the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI), University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Preparation of fungal spheroplasts

Spheroplasts of *Foc* were prepared using the method described by Vollmer & Yanofsky (1986) with minor modifications. Isolates were grown on potato dextrose agar (PDA) and the aerial mycelium was harvested after 9-10 days. Conidial suspensions (3.5×10^9 conidia/ml)

were prepared and inoculated into 500 ml potato dextrose broth (PDB) in 2 l Erlenmeyer flasks and placed on a shaker at 15.5 rcf for 18 hours. Cultures were grown overnight, vacuum filtered and then washed with 100 ml of 0.6 M magnesium sulphate ($MgSO_4.7\ H_2O$) solution. Fungal mycelium (1.5 g) was transferred to pre-weighed sterile 50 ml disposable centrifuge tubes and placed on ice. The cells were resuspended in osmotic medium (OM) (0.98 M $MgSO_4$, 8.4 mM Na_2HPO_4, 1.6 mM NaH_2PO_4) (10 ml/g mycelium) and the suspension was transferred to a sterile 250 ml flask on ice.

To ensure complete digestion of fungal cell walls, a modification of the enzyme mixture described by Churchill *et al.* (1990) was used. The enzyme mixture (2 ml/g mycelium) consisted of lysing enzyme (0.15 mg/ml) (Novo Industries 7367155), chitinase (10.4 mg/ml) (Fluka), and β-D-gluconase (21.6 mg/ml) (Sigma). Nine millilitre of enzyme mixture was added to each flask followed by helicase (0.3 ml/g mycelium) (Sigma) added separately, mixed gently, and incubated on ice for 5 min. Bovine serum albumin (BSA) (0.75 ml/g mycelium) (Sigma) was added after 5 min of incubation. This mixture was shaken at 6.7 rcf at 30°C for 3–4 hours. The yield of spheroplasts was checked microscopically to ensure complete digestion of the cell walls.

Five-millilitre-aliquots of the spheroplast solution were mixed with 5 ml of OM. This suspension was carefully overlaid with 10 ml of trapping buffer (0.4 M sorbitol in 100 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7) and centrifuged for 15 min at 3824 rcf, at 4°C to produce two separate phases. The spheroplasts were removed and pooled, placed on ice, and diluted with 2 volumes of 1 M sorbitol. The spheroplast solution was centrifuged in a bench top centrifuge at 2655 rcf at 4°C for 5 min. The pellet was washed with 500 µl of ice-cold sorbitol and centrifuged at 2655 rcf for 5 min at 4°C. The pellet was resuspended in 500 µl STC [1 M sorbitol, 50 mM Tris HCl (pH 8), 50 mM $CaCl_2$] and centrifuged at 2151 rcf for 5 min at 4°C.

The spheroplasts (at 3×10^8 cells/ml) were finally resuspended in a spheroplast storage buffer containing 4 parts STC and 1 part 60% polyethylene glycol (PEG) 6000 and 1% (v/v) dimethylsulfoxide (DMSO). Cells were used or immediately frozen in vials at –80˚C for later use.

Transformation of fungal spheroplasts

A plasmid construct harbouring the s*GFP* derivative was used to express GFP in *Foc*. The construct also contained a hygromycin-B resistance gene, which was used as a selective marker by culturing transformants on a medium containing the antibiotic. The transformation vector (pCT74), which expresses s*GFP* from the ToxA promoter of *Pyrenophora tritici-repentis* (Died.) Drechsler was obtained from L. M. Ciuffetti (Freitag, Ciuffetti & Selker 2001, Lorang *et al.* 2001).

For the transformation, spheroplasts ($2\text{-}3 \times 10^8$/ml in 100 µl) were mixed with 20 µl (0.1-1 µg) plasmid, suspended in 5 µl distilled water, 25 µl of 2 x STC, in a 15 ml screw cap tube. This was followed by the addition of 25 µl 60% PEG 4000 with gentle mixing and incubation at room temperature for 20 min. An additional 1.2 ml of 60% PEG 4000 was then added, mixed gently and the mixture incubated for exactly 5 min at room temperature. Cells clumped together at this stage. Four millilitres of 1 x STC was added and mixed.

Transformed spheroplasts were plated using 500 µl of protoplast suspension per 20 ml of molten regeneration agar precooled to 50°C. The regeneration medium was prepared by dissolving 24 g of PDB and 9 g of agar in 400 ml distilled water. In a separate bottle 273.84 g of sucrose was dissolved in 600 ml distilled water. The contents of both bottles were then autoclaved and mixed while the temperature was still above 50°C. The plates were incubated right side up, overnight. After 16-18 hours, each plate was overlaid with 10-12 ml of 1%

water agar containing hygromycin-B at a concentration of 150 μg/ml. A control plate was included which was not overlaid with hygromycin-B. This was done in order to check the viability of the spheroplasts. After the overlaid agar solidified, plates were incubated right side up at room temperature. Transformed isolates grew through the overlay in the presence of hygromycin-B within 2-7 days.

Morphological and cultural characteristics

Transformants were transferred to water agar, and PDA (supplemented with hygromycin-B) to examine the morphology and cultural characteristics of *Foc* transformants. Non-transformed cultures of the same isolates were used as controls. Slide preparations using a drop of sterile water and a strand of hyphae were studied under the microscope using white and UV light.

Detection of the GFP gene using GFP specific PCR primers

Transformed isolates were grown on PDA plates containing hygromycin-B for 7-10 days. Conidia from actively growing cultures on PDA were used to inoculate PDB medium in a total volume of 100 ml in 250 ml flasks. Fungal isolates were grown in PDB in still culture for 10-14 days, harvested and freeze dried. Mycelial masses were ground to a fine powder in liquid nitrogen. Total DNA from each isolate was extracted using the phenol-chloroform based extraction method described by Raeder & Broda (1985).

Specific primers designed by Lorang *et al.* (2001) were used to confirm the presence of the GFP in *Foc*. The 25 μl PCR reaction cocktail contained 0.4 mM of each deoxynucleoside triphosphates (dNTPs), 10 x PCR buffer, 10 pmole of each primer, 0.25 units Expand High Fidelity *Taq* polymerase (Roche Molecular Biochemicals), and 2 ng of DNA. Both diluted (1:10) and undiluted DNA template was used in the optimisation of the PCR. The GFP

specific primers sequences were GFP1 5' TAG TGG ACT GAT TGG AAT GCA TGG AGG AGT 3'; GFP2 5' GAT AGA ACC CAT GGC CTA TAT TCA TTC 3'. PCR reactions were performed on a Hybaid TouchDown PCR machine (Hybaid Limited). Reaction conditions were initial denaturation at 96°C for 2 min, denaturation at 94°C for 30 s, primer annealing at 58°C for 45 s, elongation of 72°C for 45 s, for 30 cycles, and a final extension 72°C for 7 min. Amplified product was resolved on a 1.5% agarose gel in Tris Acetic acid EDTA (TAE) (242 g Tris, 57.1 ml glacial acetic acid, 100 ml 0.5 M EDTA at pH 8.0) and stained in ethidium bromide and visualised under UV illumination. Sizes of the PCR fragments were estimated using a molecular weight standard (100 bp ladder, Promega).

Confirmation of integration of GFP using Southern blots

The method described by Sambrook, Fritsch & Maniatis (1989) was used for southern blot analysis. Total isolated DNA was digested with *Eco*RI and fragments were separated on a 1% agarose gel in 1 x TAE buffer and blotted onto a positively charged nylon membrane (Roche Molecular Biochemicals). For probe labelling, the Gene Image random prime labelling kit was used (Amersham Life Science). Labelled probes (GFP PCR amplified product) were allowed to hybridise to blotted DNA. This was followed by different stringency washes and incubation in a liquid blocking solution as recommended by the supplier of the kit. Membranes were then incubated with a 500-fold diluted anti-fluorescein-AP conjugate to obtain a fluorescence signal. After washing, fluorescence signals on the membrane were detected using the Gene Images CDP-Star detection kit (Amersham Life Science), which was followed by exposure to an X-ray film.

Pathogenicity tests

Five transformed isolates of *Foc* were used to test whether pathogenicity to bananas had been retained in these cultures. Transformants were grown on half-strength PDA supplemented with hygromycin-B. Conidia were harvested after 5 days and inoculated into Armstrong's

Fusarium medium (Booth 1971) to enhance sporulation. After 5 days, the conidia suspensions were passed through sterile cheesecloth to separate the mycelium from the conidia. The conidial suspension was adjusted to a final concentration of 5 x 10^6 conidia/ml.

Tissue culture-derived Cavendish banana plants were inoculated with the transformed isolates. A hydroponics system where plants were grown in 250 ml plastic cups in sterile distilled water for 7 days was used. The plants were fertilised with a hydroponic mixture of 0.6 g/l Ca(NO$_3$)$_2$ H$_2$O, 0.9 g/l agrasol 'O and 3 g/l Micromax. For inoculation, the plants were removed from plastic cups, the roots slightly wounded by crushing gently and the conidial suspension added to the medium to obtain a final concentration of 5 x 10^5 conidia/ml. Plants were returned to the cups and maintained in a greenhouse at 25°C. Five plants per inoculum were used for the pathogenicity trial. Control plants were treated in the same manner and maintained in sterile water. Disease severity was evaluated 6 weeks after addition of the conidial suspension. Plants were cut just above the roots and internal symptoms rated, using a standardized disease rating scale (Orjeda 1998) for Fusarium wilt of banana.

To determine whether banana tissue had been colonised with transformed *Foc*, thin sections (8–12 μm) of the rhizome and pseudostem were made using a microtome. Sections were prepared, mounted on slides in sterile distilled water and observed under white and UV light using fluorescent microscopy (Zeiss, Mannheim, Germany) equipped with filter blocks (Nikon standard fluorescence filter cubes 78648) with spectral properties matching those of GFP (480 nm excitation, 515 nm emission). Images were captured with an AxioCam HR camera (Carl Zeiss Ltd, Mannheim, Germany) and processed with Corel DRAW-Version 10.0 software (Corel Corporation Ltd. Ontario, Canada).

RESULTS

Preparation of spheroplasts and the transformation process

Approximately 4×10^7 uninucleate spheroplasts were generated for each of the *Foc* isolates used in this study. Mycelial age had a significant effect on the frequency of spheroplast regeneration. Younger mycelial networks resulted in positive and higher frequency of spheroplast regeneration. The type of osmotic stabiliser (sucrose, NaCl, and KCl) used in the regeneration medium also influenced the regeneration of spheroplasts. Sucrose was found to result in the optimal regeneration of spheroplasts.

One hundred hygromycin-B resistant transformants were obtained after the transformation procedure. Sixty percent of transformants were stable when transferred to fresh hygromycin containing medium. Thus, the efficiency of the transformation process with the plasmid containing the transformation vector (pCT74) that expresses *sGFP* from the *ToxA* promoter of *P. tritici-repentis* was sufficient for the purposes of this study.

Morphological and cultural characteristics

Strong constitutive expression of *sGFP* occurred and could be visualised in fungal hyphae, micro- and macroconidia as well as on the dying vascular tissue, pseudostem and rhizome (Fig. 1). All transformants generated from spheroplasts appeared bright green and fluoresced uniformly. No morphological changes in size and shape of vegetative structures were observed. Transformed and wild type isolates varied slightly in mycelial growth but not in sporulation and colony appearance. Transformed strains retained the colony morphology typical of the wildtype, including cottony growth of aerial mycelium and pink pigmentation (Fig. 2).

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Detection of the GFP gene using GFP specific PCR primers

A 417 base pair PCR product was consistently amplified using GFP specific primers and the genomic DNA (diluted or undiluted) of transformed isolates as template. A primer annealing temperature of 58°C was optimal for the PCR conditions. All nontransformed isolates were consistently negative after the amplification reaction (Fig. 3).

Confirmation of the detection of GFP using Southern blots

The presence of the GFP gene in the fungal genome was confirmed with Southern blot analysis. Successful hybridisation occurred using the 417 bp PCR product as a probe against the DNA of the transformed isolates. The gene was not detected in the negative control (Fig. 4).

Inoculation experiments

In the pathogenicity tests, all *Foc* GFP transformants were as pathogenic as the isolates from which they were derived. After 7-14 days wilt symptoms became visible on banana plants inoculated with both transformed and wild type isolates of *Foc*. Severe yellowing and subsequent necrosis of the roots appeared 6 weeks after inoculation (Fig. 5). Characteristic internal symptoms were reddish to dark brown discolouration of infected roots and the vascular tissue. All control plants remained asymptomatic and the pathogen could not be isolated from them. *Foc* transformed with the GFP was observed in the vascular tissue of inoculated banana plants. The movement and colonisation of the fungus could be traced into the stem. Auto fluorescence of the plant did not prevent visualisation of GFP expression. Transformants were successfully re-isolated from diseased plant tissue.

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DISCUSSION

This study reports on the first transformation of *Foc* with the gene coding the GFP. Similar to results obtained for other fungi transformed with the GFP (Freitag *et al.* 2001, Lorang *et al.* 2001), transformed isolates of *Foc* fluoresced uniformly and the integration of GFP was proved to be stable. This emphasizes the effectiveness of this gene as a marker. The slight variation in GFP intensity experienced in the current study can probably be explained by the integration of the plasmid into different chromosomal sites as has been suggested previously (Lorang *et al.* 2001, Lagopodi *et al.* 2002).

Fusarium species are known to change form and colour in response to environmental constraints due to small mutations (Follin & Laville 1966, Booth 1971, Nelson, Toussoun & Marasas 1983, Hawksworth *et al.* 1995). These changes are expressed in *Foc* by means of their growth, colony colour and presence of sclerotia on artificial media (Waite and Stover 1960). Transformation with the GFP in this study, however, did not affect the colony morphology, growth, pigmentation, or sporulation of *Foc*.

Similar to studies involving the GFP transformation of *C. heterostrophus*, (Maor *et al.* 1998), *U. maydis* (Spellig *et al.* 1996) and *Phytophthora palmivora* E. J. Butler (Van West *et al.* 1999), the transformed *Foc* retained its virulence. In their respective studies, Spellig *et al.* (1996) found that GFP expression does not significantly interfere with *U. maydis* development in planta. Maor *et al.* (1998) and Van West *et al.* (1999) found that transformed isolates were as virulent as the wild type isolates, and that high expression levels of GFP did not affect pathogenicity.

The ability to visualize *Foc* in banana tissue infested with GFP-transformed isolates will make it possible to study the infection processes of this fungus in greater detail than has previously

been possible. Transformation of other fungal pathogens has facilitated infection studies in the past (Spellig *et al.* 1996, Van West *et al.* 1999, Freitag *et al.* 2001). We, thus, expect to study details of the disease process, such as the exact mode of penetration and the growth of *Foc* within the host in future.

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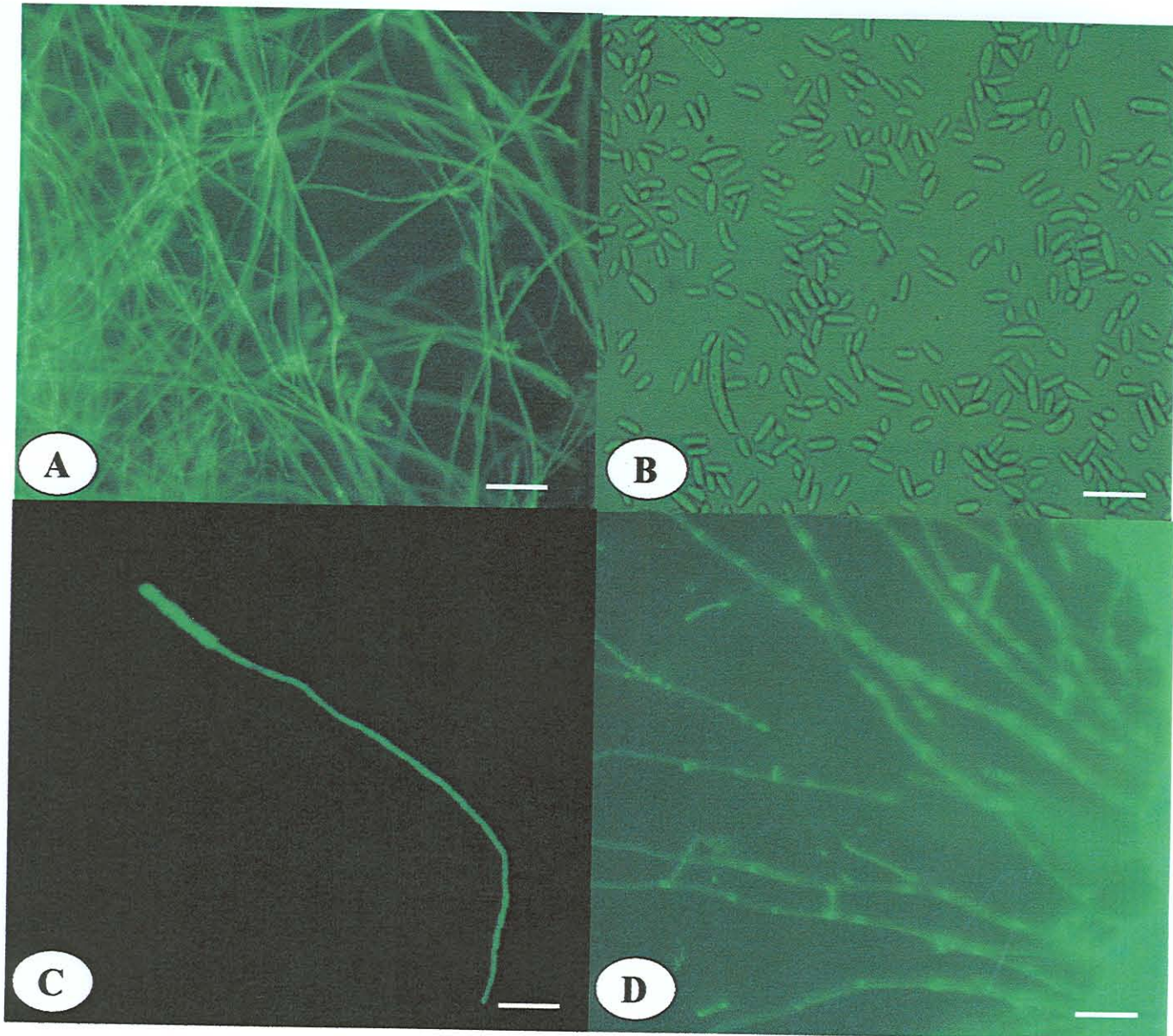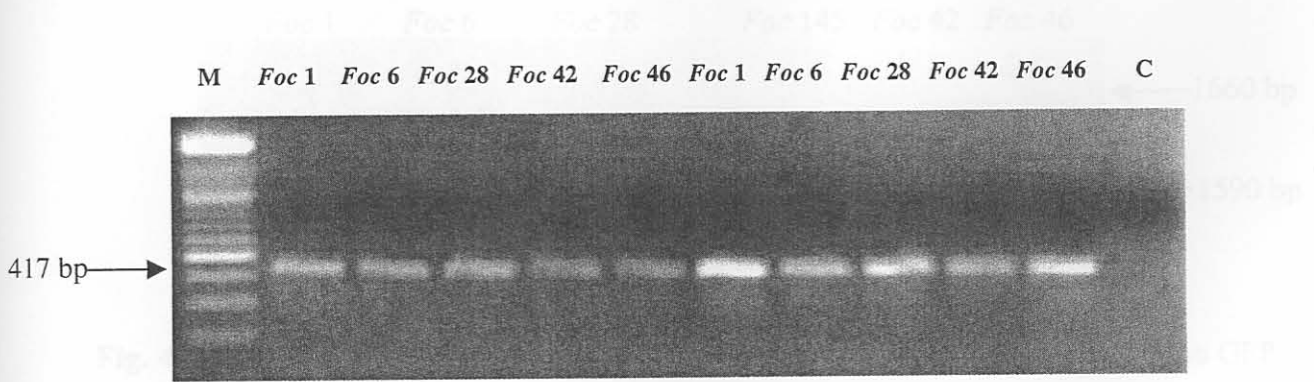
Fig. 1 Structures of transformed isolates of *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense* (*Foc*) fluorescing bright green. **(A)** Fluorescing hyphal mass. **(B)** Typical size and shape of microconidia and macroconidia of *Foc*. **(C)** A germinating macroconidium on a glass slide confirming viability of the fungus. **(D)** Cross section of banana pseudostem showing network of hyphae of *Foc* through the plant tissue.

Scale bar: 10mm = 24 µm)
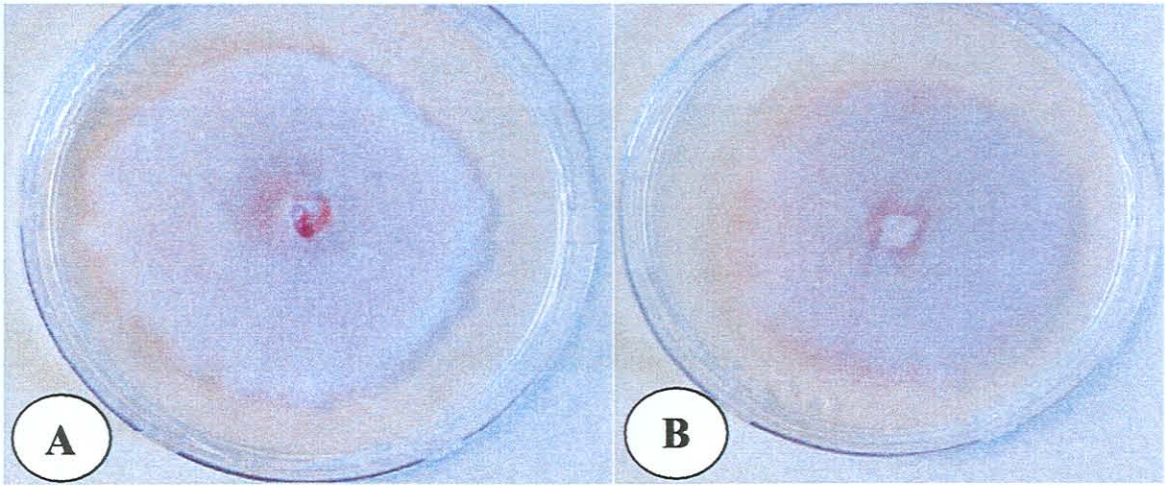
Fig. 2 Cultural characteristics of transformed and wildtype isolates of *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense* grown on PDA. **(A)** Typical cottony growth of wildtype. **(B)** Typical cottony growth of transformed isolate.

M   *Foc* 1   *Foc* 6   *Foc* 28   *Foc* 42   *Foc* 46   *Foc* 1   *Foc* 6   *Foc* 28   *Foc* 42   *Foc* 46   C

417 bp——→

Fig. 3 Confirmation of transformation of GFP gene in the genome of *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense* by PCR using GFP specific primers. A 1.5% agarose gel stained in ethidium bromide and run in 1x TAE to resolve amplified product. Sizes of the amplified products were estimated using a 100 bp ladder. Lanes 1, molecular weight standard; 2-6 amplified product using undiluted template DNA; 7-11 amplified product using 1:10 dilution of template DNA; lane 12 negative control using genomic DNA of an nontransformed *Foc* 145 strain.
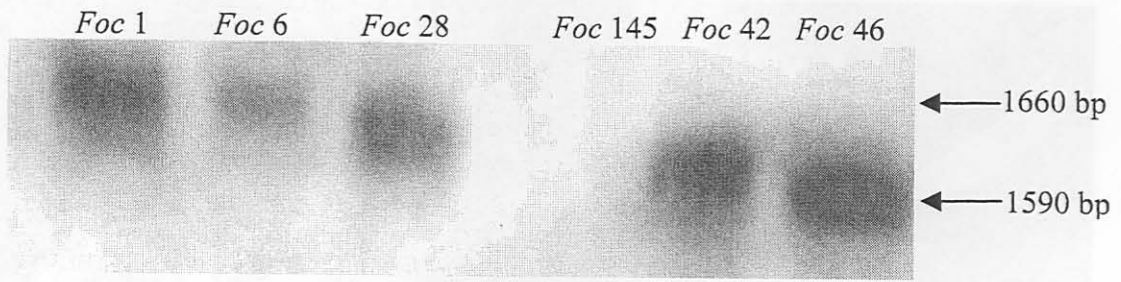
Fig. 4 Southern blot analysis of digested genomic DNA showing the presence of the GFP in the genome of *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense*. Lanes 1-3, *Foc* 1, *Foc* 6, *Foc* 28, lane 4 not loaded, lane 5 nontransformed *Foc* 145, lane 6-7, *Foc* 42, *Foc* 46.
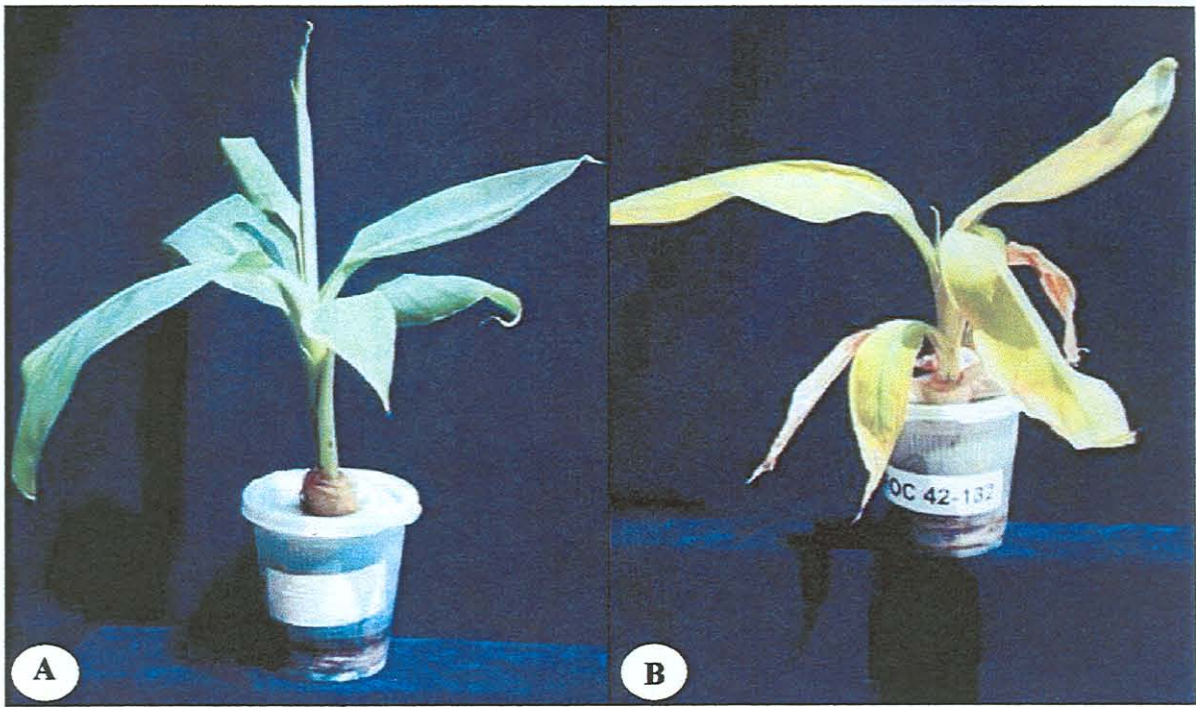
Fig. 5 **(A)** Control plant showing no disease symptoms. **(B)** Plant inoculated with transformed isolate of *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense* (*Foc* 42) showing symptoms of Fusarium wilt.