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Authors	Dodsworth, S; Orejuela, A; Pérez-Escobar, O; Särkinen, T; Knapp, S
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Digest: Shape-shifting in Solanaceae flowers: the influence of pollinators

Steven Dodsworth¹, Andrés Orejuela², Oscar Pérez-Escobar¹, Tiina Särkinen², Sandra Knapp^{3*}

¹Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond TW9 3AB, Surrey, UK.

²Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, 20A Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5LR, UK.

³Department of Life Sciences, Natural History Museum, London SW7 5BD, UK.

*Correspondence: s.knapp@nhm.ac.uk

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Abstract

Change in floral shape is thought to be driven by pollinator-mediated selection, but drivers of floral shape evolution have been little studied at a macro-evolutionary scale. Smith and Kriebel (2018) examine floral shape across species within lochrominae (Solanaceae) using geometric morphometrics and statistical regression analyses, and show significant correlation between corolla shape variation and shifts in pollination system. Their study highlights the importance of asking when and under what conditions the pollination-shift model may be acting.

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Main Text

Aside from climate, plant-pollinator interactions are thought to be one of the main drivers of diversification in tropical plant lineages (Fig. 1; Gentry 1982, Pérez-Escobar et al. 2017). It has been argued that the great variation in angiosperm flowers is largely influenced by pollinator-mediated selection (Sauquet et al. 2017), a force that has also been linked with diversification of large groups within the flowering plants, such as orchids (Pérez-Escobar et al. 2017). Micro-evolutionary studies aimed at understanding mechanisms underpinning changes in observed phenotypes have clearly demonstrated that pollinator shifts are strongly correlated with changes in floral traits (e.g., *Aquilegia*; Whittall and Hodges 2007). The importance of pollinator-mediated selection in driving divergence at a macro-evolutionary scale, however, remains unclear.

In this issue, Smith and Kriebel (2018) explore the question of pollinator-mediated selection at a macro-evolutionary scale in the Andean shrubs of the solanaceous tribe *Lochrominae*. In order to understand drivers of deep evolutionary shifts in floral traits, they used quantitative data in a phylogenetic context to test the Grant-Stebbins model, which predicts pollinator shifts will drive divergence and potentially speciation (Johnson 2006). In addition, the authors conducted corolla shape measurements based on geometric morphometrics and reconstructed a robust species-level phylogeny.

Pulling together the first such broad-scale data set, Smith and Kriebel (2018) demonstrate that floral shape evolution within the *Lochrominae*, a clade that includes bird- and insect-pollinated species, has been largely pollinator mediated. Using statistical regression methods that account for phylogenetic relationships, they identify multiple shifts from narrow, tubular flowers to more open campanulate and bowl-shaped corollas. These shifts in flower shape are strongly correlated with shifts from hummingbirds, which pollinated the tubular flowers, to a variety of insect pollinators, which pollinate the more open flowers. Potentially, these shifts could also reflect a switch from specialist pollination systems to generalist strategies. Such shifts in pollination systems can occur several times even within genera, and are often associated with rapid processes of genomic and phenotypic change such as hybridization and polyploidization (e.g. McCarthy et al. 2016).

Smith and Kriebel (2018) also highlight reversibility and lability of floral shape and pollination system. *Lochrominae* are part of the *Physalid* clade within the *Solanaceae*, in which the flowers are thought to be ancestrally open and bee pollinated (Knapp 2010). In the *lochrominae*, evolution from tubular flowers to these ancestral open flower shapes has occurred multiple times, with one clear reversal back to a tubular form. The authors suggest this switch might be enabled by tubular-flowered species maintaining some level of insect pollination, which would support previous notions that pollinator syndromes are not universal (e.g., Barrett, 2013; Ollerton et al. 2015).

Smith and Kriebel's (2018) study shows that determining when and why a pollinator-shift model applies is important at macro-evolutionary scales, as not all evolutionary divergence is linked to floral trait shifts, nor are all trait shifts due to pollinator-mediated selection. They suggest that lability of floral traits and pollination systems may be linked to range expansion, opening a rich new seam of hypotheses for floral biologists to test at macro-evolutionary scales.

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Legends

Figure 1. Examples of floral diversity within Solanaceae, a plant family that includes important food crops (e.g. potatoes, tomatoes) but also a diversity of floral forms, including large flowers found in tropical lianas and epiphytes (Orejuela et al., 2017). A) *Brugmansia sanguinea*. B) *Dunalia spinosa*. C) *Browallia speciosa*. D) *Deprea ecuatoriana*. E) *Schultesianthus crosbianus*. F) *Petunia patagonica*. G) *Markea longiflora*. H) *Nicotiana otophora*. I) *Solanum whalenii*. J) *Witheringia* sp.. K) *Physalis pruinosa*.

Photographs: A, B, Jhoana Castillo; C, D, Andrés Orejuela; E, Alex Monro; F, Steven Dodsworth; G, André Cardoso; H, I, K, Sandra Knapp; J, Oscar Alejandro Pérez-Escobar.

