



Promotion of plant growth by *Pseudomonas fluorescens* strain SS101 via novel volatile organic compounds



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ABSTRACT

Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) from plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) play key roles in modulating plant growth and induced systemic resistance (ISR) to pathogens. Despite their significance, the physiological functions of the specific VOCs produced by *Pseudomonas fluorescens* SS101 (*Pf*:SS101) have not been precisely elucidated. The effects of *Pf*:SS101 and its VOCs on augmentation of plant growth promotion were investigated *in vitro* and *in planta*. A significant growth promotion was observed in plants exposed *Pf*:SS101 under both conditions, suggesting that its VOCs play a key role in promoting plant growth. Solid-phase micro-extraction (SPME) and a gas chromatography-mass spectrophotometer (GC–MS) system were used to characterize the VOCs emitted by *Pf*:SS101 and 11 different compounds were detected in samples inoculated this bacterium, including 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol, 2-butanone and 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene. Application of these compounds resulted in enhanced plant growth. This study suggests that *Pf*:SS101 promotes the growth of plants via the release of VOCs including 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol, 2-butanone and 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene, thus increasing understanding of the role of VOCs in plant-bacterial inter-communication.

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1. Introduction

Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) produced by plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) play key roles in plant growth promotion and induced systemic resistance (ISR) to pathogens [1–3]. A number of bacterial species, from diverse genera including *Bacillus*, *Pseudomonas*, *Serratia*, *Arthrobacter* and *Stenotrophomonas*, produce VOCs influencing plant growth [4–6]. Acetoin and 2,3-butanediol from *Bacillus* are the best known of these compounds and are implicated in significant improvements to plant growth [1]. In addition to promoting growth, VOCs produced by bacilli may elicit ISR [2], indicating several potential roles for VOCs within a plant.

The *Pseudomonas fluorescens* strain SS101 (*Pf*:SS101), a nonpathogenic rhizobacterium, was isolated from the rhizosphere of wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) [7]. This strain can produce a cyclic lipopeptide surfactant, massetolide A, which is an important

molecule in a variety of traits, including swarming motility, biofilm formation, manipulation of zoospores, defense against protozoan predators and ISR [7–11]. It has been shown more recently that induced resistance to *Pseudomonas syringae* pv *tomato* (*Pst*) mediated by *Pf*:SS101 depends upon salicylic acid (SA) signaling and *NONEXPRESSOR OF PR1* (*NPR1*) but not on the jasmonic acid/ethylene (JA/ET) signaling pathway in *Arabidopsis* [12]. Although previous researchers have focused on such important issues, the roles of VOCs derived from *Pf*:SS101 facilitating plant growth promotion remain poorly understood.

To fill this gap in our current knowledge of the functions of VOCs produced by *Pf*:SS101, we investigated whether this bacterium affected plant growth promotion and also how its VOCs modulated plant growth and development. We performed an I-plate assay in which *Pf*:SS101 and plants were placed on each half of an I-plate, thus avoiding physical contact between them. Increased plant biomass, compared to the control, was observed when *Pf*:SS101 was inoculated onto one half of the I-plate. In agreement with this finding, tobacco plants exposed to *Pf*:SS101 were significantly taller and bigger than control plants under soil conditions. These results suggest that VOCs derived from *Pf*:SS101 are key components in

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plant growth promotion. Therefore, we analyzed the biochemical profiles of VOCs produced by growing samples of *Pf.SS101* using solid-phase micro-extraction (SPME) and a gas chromatography-mass spectrophotometer (GC–MS) system. This clearly identified 11 different chemical compounds presenting in samples inoculated with *Pf.SS101*. Moreover, tobacco plants exposed to various concentrations of 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol, 2-butanone and 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene showed clear improvements in plant growth promotion. Collectively, our results suggest that *Pf.SS101* enhances plant growth by producing VOCs, including 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol, 2-butanone and 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Bacterial strain and culture media

The bacterial strain *P. fluorescens* SS101 (*Pf.SS101*) was used in all experiments. King's B broth (KB) plus agar was used as the substrate in experiments to determine interactions between *Pf.SS101* and plants. Stock cultures of *Pf.SS101* were maintained at -80°C in tryptic soy broth (TSB, Difco, MI, USA) containing 20% glycerol.

2.2. Growth promotion by *Pf.SS101* in vitro and in planta

For *in vitro* assays, surface-sterilized tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum* cv. Xanthi-nc) seeds were placed in one half of an I-plate containing $0.5 \times$ Murashige and Skoog (MS) medium (Duchefa Biochemie B.V, The Netherlands, 5 seeds per plate) plus agar. After 1 week of plant growth, a suspension of *Pf.SS101* ($20 \mu\text{l}$, 10^7 cfu ml^{-1}) was dropped onto a sterile paper disc, which was then placed on the other half of the I-plate. The plates were completely sealed with parafilm and incubated at 25°C for 3 weeks under a 12 h light/12 h dark photoperiod. The growth of plants incubated with *Pf.SS101* was assessed using plant fresh weight.

For *in planta* assays, a plate inoculated with *Pf.SS101* was placed beneath the soil at the bottom of a plastic container. A filter ensured that only VOCs from *Pf.SS101* could transfer between the plate and the soil. Surface-sterilized tobacco seeds were sown onto the soil and the seedlings were grown at 25°C for 4 weeks under a 12 h light/12 h dark photoperiod. Plant growth was assessed 4 weeks after sowing.

2.3. Identification of volatiles compounds produced by *Pf.SS101*

Pf.SS101 cultures were grown in KB broth in 20 ml glass head-space bottles (Supelco, Bellefonte, PA, USA) at 28°C for 24 h before collection and analysis of volatiles using SPME and gas chromatography-mass spectrophotometry (GC–MS), as described previously [13] with minor modifications. Commercially available SPME fibers (Supelco, Bellefonte, PA, USA) were used to analyze volatiles from *Pf.SS101*. SPME fibers were desorbed at 60°C for 2 min in the injection port of a Bruker Scion-SQ GC–MS (Bruker, Billerica, MA, USA) with Combi-Pal Autosampler and BR-5ms columns (Bruker, Billerica, MA, USA; length: 30 m, i.d.: 0.25 mm, 0.25 film thickness).

2.4. Verification of the selected synthetic VOCs on plant growth promotion

To confirm that the VOCs identified from *Pf.SS101* promoted plant growth we tested three synthetic VOCs, 2-Butanone, 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol and 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene, at three different concentrations. The procedures for preparation and incubation of tobacco seeds were as described above. The sealed plates were incubated at 25°C for 4 weeks under a 12 h light/12 h dark

photoperiod and the fresh weights of plants were measured after incubation.

2.5. Statistical analysis

The data were subjected to analysis of variance using SAS JMP software (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA). Significant differences in the treatment means of each sample were determined using the Least Significance Difference (LSD) Test at $P = 0.05$. All experiments were performed at least twice. The data from each experiment were analyzed separately.

3. Results

3.1. Plant growth promotion by *Pf.SS101*

To examine whether *Pf.SS101* affected plant growth, surface-sterilized tobacco seeds were sown on $0.5 \times$ MS medium plus agar in a square plate and incubated for 1 week. At this point, small plates inoculated with *Pf.SS101* were placed within the same square plate and the plants were grown for an additional 3 weeks at 25°C . Plants exposed to *Pf.SS101* showed an increase in shoot and root biomass relative to the controls (Supplementary Fig. S1). This suggests that *Pf.SS101* positively modulates plant growth and that VOCs derived from *Pf.SS101* play a role in plant growth promotion.

3.2. Elicitation of plant growth promotion by *Pf.SS101*-mediated VOCs in vitro and in planta

To investigate the effect of VOCs produced by *Pf.SS101* on plant growth, we performed I-plate assays as these avoid any physical contact between tobacco plants and *Pf.SS101*. One-week-old tobacco seedlings growing in one half of an I-plate were co-incubated with a suspension of *Pf.SS101* in the other half of the plate for 3 weeks at 25°C . Biomass production was stimulated in plants exposed to *Pf.SS101* in this manner (Fig. 1A). Following

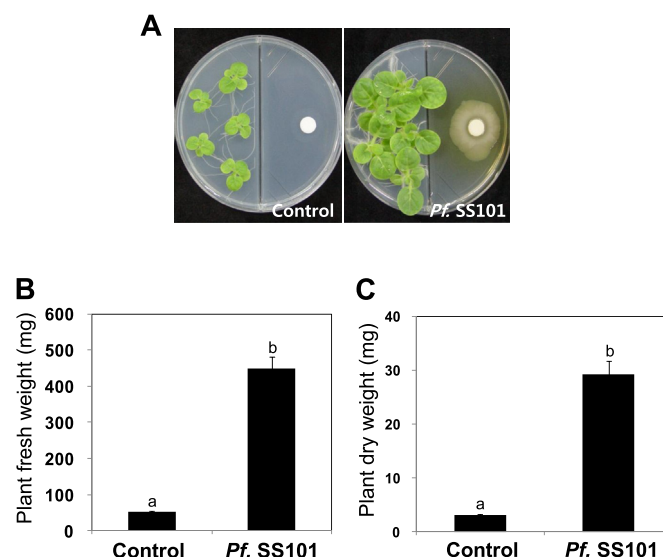


Fig. 1. Effect of VOCs from *Pf.SS101* on plants grown in the I-plate assay. (A) One-week-old seedlings were exposed to VOCs from *Pf.SS101* and incubated for 3 weeks at 25°C . The representative photographs were taken four weeks after sowing. Plant fresh (B) and dry (C) weights were recorded. Error bars indicate the standard error of the mean ($n = 6$). The letters above the columns indicate significant differences between conditions ($P = 0.05$). Experiments were replicated at least three times producing similar results.

exposure to *Pf*.SS101, the fresh and dry weights of plants increased significantly by 8.8- and 9.5-fold, respectively, relative to controls (Fig. 1B and C).

To demonstrate that VOCs were the major regulators of this enhancement of plant growth and development, we created the *in planta* system shown in Fig. 2A. In brief, surface-sterilized tobacco seeds were sown onto autoclaved soil and grown for a week. At this time, a plate containing either *Pf*.SS101 or a control was placed beneath a filter at the bottom of each soil-filled plastic container, ensuring only VOCs produced by *Pf*.SS101 could come into contact with the tobacco plants under soil conditions. The tobacco seedlings were incubated for a further 3 weeks. Growth of tobacco plants in soil was significantly stimulated following exposure to *Pf*.SS101 in comparison to that of control plants (Fig. 2B), with fresh weight of exposed plants being increased by 1.5-fold relative to that of controls (Fig. 2C). Thus, our data indicate that plant growth is promoted by exposure to *Pf*.SS101 both *in vitro* and *in planta*, suggesting that VOCs emitted by *Pf*.SS101 regulate plant growth and development.

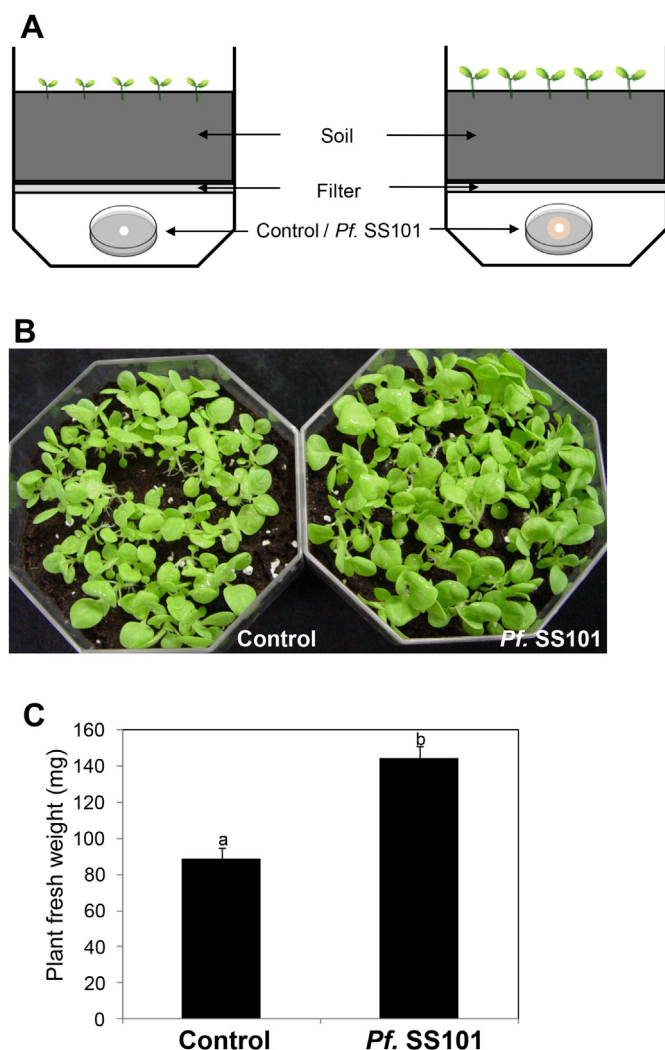


Fig. 2. Effect of VOCs from *Pf*.SS101 on plants grown in soil. (A) Schematic representation of the experimental setup. (B) Surface-sterilized seeds were sown on soil and exposed to VOCs emitted by *Pf*.SS101. The representative photograph was taken three weeks after sowing. (C) Fresh weights of plants of plants exposed to *Pf*.SS101 were higher 3 weeks after sowing. Error bars indicate the standard error of the mean ($n = 5$). The letters above the columns indicate a significant difference between conditions ($P = 0.05$). Experiments were replicated at least three times producing similar results.

3.3. Identification of VOCs emitted by *Pf*.SS101

Since particular VOCs might play key roles in promoting plant growth, we characterized the VOCs emitted by *Pf*.SS101. To obtain a chemical profile of the VOCs produced by *Pf*.SS101, volatile emissions were collected from *Pf*.SS101 cultures grown in KB broth in 20 ml vials at 28 °C for 24 h and analyzed using SPME coupled with GC–MS. The spectrum of VOCs emitted by *Pf*.SS101 contained many peaks but 11 peaks were clearly and consistently identified in experimental samples relative to the controls (Fig. 3; data not shown). All these compounds had a retention time between 2 and 26 min and their molecular weights ranged from 72 to 240 (Fig. 3). Five of the identified compounds were alcohols: 2-Methyl-1-propanol, 3-methyl-1-butanol, 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol, 1-Cyclohexyl-1-pentanol and Trans-9-Hexadecen-1-ol. In addition, two hydrocarbons (1-Nonene and 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene), a ketone (2-Butanone), an ester (Methyl thiolacetate) and an ether (Decyl-Oxirane) were present in the samples collected from *Pf*.SS101 (Fig. 3). The alcohol 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol displayed the highest peak of the 11 compounds detected in the VOC spectrum emitted by *Pf*.SS101 (Fig. 3).

3.4. Assessment of plant growth promotion by specific VOCs released by *Pf*.SS101

Of the 11 compounds identified as prominent VOCs released by *Pf*.SS101, we examined the effects of three, 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol, 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene and 2-Butanone, on the promotion of plant growth. Surface-sterilized tobacco seeds were sown and grown for 1 week in half of an I-plate, as described above, and then one of the compounds, dissolved in methanol to a final concentration of 5, 50 and 500 ng, was applied to the other half of the plate (Fig. 4A). The plates were incubated for 4 weeks at 25 °C to allow plant growth.

Visual inspection revealed that plant growth was enhanced by all three compounds compared to the control treatment (Fig. 4A). The fresh weight of tobacco seedlings was increased approximately 3-fold by the presence of 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol (50 ng) and 2-fold by 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene (5 ng), compared to growth under control conditions (Fig. 4B). In addition, a significant increase in fresh weight was observed in response to all tested concentrations

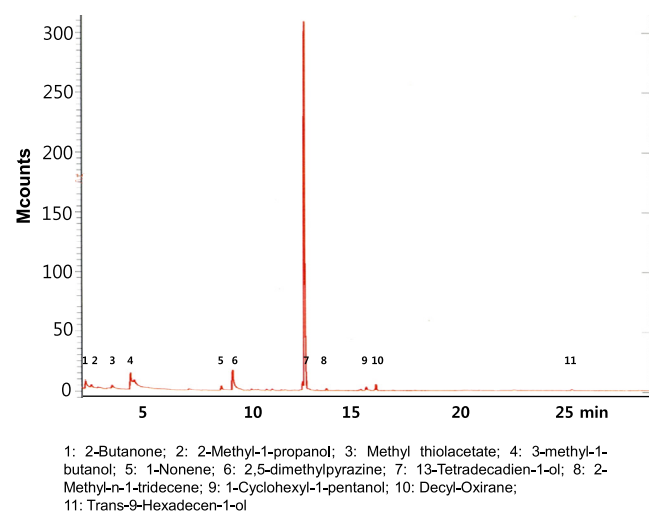


Fig. 3. Identification of VOCs emitted by *Pf*.SS101. *Pf*.SS101 cultures were grown in KB broth in headspace bottles at 28 °C for 24 h to enable collection of emitted VOCs. Analysis of VOCs derived from *Pf*.SS101 was performed using an SPME-GC–MS system. The numbers of the peaks indicate the individual chemical compounds identified during analysis.

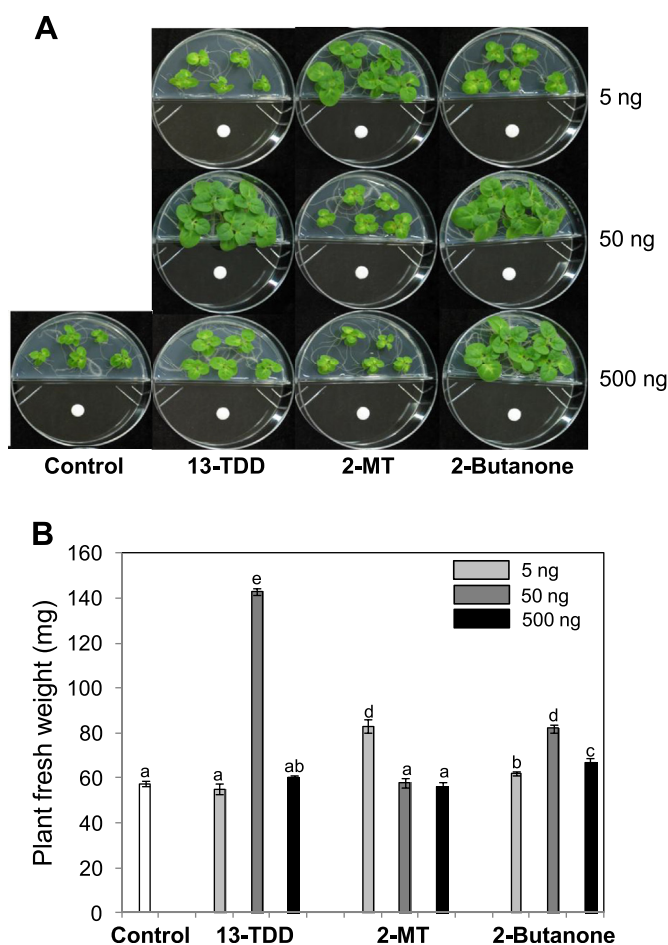


Fig. 4. Assessment of the effects of individual VOCs emitted by *Pf.SS101*. (A) The synthetic VOCs 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol (13-TDD), 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene (2-MT) and 2-Butanone were dissolved in methanol and applied to sterile paper discs at three different concentrations (5, 50 and 500 ng). A disc was placed onto half of an I-plate 1 week after tobacco seeds had been sown on the other half of the plate. The pictures were taken 4 weeks after sowing. (B) Plant fresh weights were monitored and recorded after four weeks. Error bars indicate the standard error of the mean ($n = 5$). The letters above the columns indicate a significant difference between conditions ($P = 0.05$). Experiments were replicated at least three times producing similar results.

of 2-Butanone, with the maximum effect seen in plants exposed to 50 ng 2-Butanone (Fig. 4B). Our results provide strong evidence that VOCs produced by *Pf.SS101* mediate the promotion of plant growth.

4. Discussion

Previous studies of *Pf.SS101* reveal that it is required for ISR and other aspects [7–12]. However, despite these studies, the full roles of *Pf.SS101* and/or VOCs derived from *Pf.SS101* in promoting plant growth and development have been rarely reported. Our study produced several novel results: (1) *Pf.SS101* stimulated plant growth promotion *in vitro* and *in planta*; (2) VOCs derived from *Pf.SS101* were key regulators of plant growth promotion; and (3) exposure to three specific VOCs produced by *Pf.SS101*, 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol, 2-Methyl-n-1-tridecene and 2-Butanone, increased plant biomass. These results provide new insight into the inter-communication between tobacco plants and *Pf.SS101*, increasing our knowledge of the roles of VOCs in *Pf.SS101*-mediated plant growth.

Since the development of an *in vitro* I-plate system in 2003 [1], it has evaluated the effect of specific PGPR on plant growth. That initial study assessed the effects on *Arabidopsis* growth promotion

by *Bacillus subtilis* GB03 and *B. amyloliquefaciens* IN937a and showed a significant improvement in the growth of plants exposed to these bacteria, compared to controls [1]. One of the intriguing findings of our study was that *Pf.SS101* positively affected plant growth (Fig. 1).

Although the I-plate *in vitro* system is useful in determining intra- and inter-kingdom communications, its main drawback is the absent of biological relevance. To overcome this weakness, alternative methods are required for further analysis. We therefore used an alternative *in planta* system to support the I-plate methodology, determining that *Pf.SS101* also stimulates plant growth under soil conditions (Fig. 2). Collectively, our results suggest that plant growth can be promoted by *Pf.SS101*-mediated VOCs in the absence of any contact between *Pf.SS101* and plants.

That specific PGPR promote plant growth and ISR in the absence of any physical contact with plants, suggesting that VOCs are normally involved in these processes [12]. However, few bacterial VOCs with positive or negative impacts on plant growth have been studied [6]. For this reason, it is noteworthy that we have identified specific VOCs derived from *Pf.SS101* (Fig. 3) and confirmed that they improve plant growth (Fig. 4). These results shed new light on how inter-communications between plants and *Pf.SS101* via VOCs.

Several published studies indicate that VOCs released by common PGPR can be classified into numerous chemical groups, including alcohols, hydrocarbons, ketones, acids, ethers, esters, S-containing compounds and inorganic compounds [13–15]. As with these earlier reports, we detected alcohols, hydrocarbons, ketones, ethers and esters using the SPME-GC-MS system (Fig. 3). 2-Butanone, 2-methyl-1-propanol, 3-methyl-1-butanol and Tridecane have been reported previously as compounds emitted by PGPR [13,15]. Quantification of the levels of VOCs produced by *Pf.SS101* and of their effects on facilitating plant growth indicated that 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol was the most important compound. In contrast to other well-known VOCs, 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol has been reported in a relatively narrow context as a component of many lepidopterous sex pheromones [16]. These pheromones can be divided into two independent subgroups by means of their chemical structure [17]. The first subgroup contains pheromones composed of C_{10} to C_{18} acetates, alcohols, aldehydes and their derivatives and the second contains pheromones composed of C_{17} to C_{23} molecules; pheromones belonging to the second subgroup have been identified in specific species of Lepidoptera [18]. Therefore, although we cannot yet elucidate the underlying mechanisms triggered by 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol, our results indicate that this insect-associated VOC plays a critical role in interactions between *Pf.SS101* and plants.

This study demonstrates the relationship between *Pf.SS101* and plants *in vitro* and *in planta*. We provide new evidence that VOCs released by *Pf.SS101* positively modulate plant growth promotion. Biochemical analysis of *Pf.SS101* samples identified 11 independent VOCs. Characterization of these shows a clear role for 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol in plant growth and thus it is a novel candidate for a *Pf.SS101* specific VOC. Our results provide new insight into plant growth promotion by identifying 13-Tetradecadien-1-ol as a VOC produced by *Pf.SS101*, thus broadening the range of functions of VOCs in plant-bacterial interactions.

Conflict of interests

We declare that we have no conflict of interests.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bbrc.2015.04.039>.

Transparency document

Transparency document related to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bbrc.2015.04.039>

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