# Light signals generated by vegetation shade facilitate acclimation to low light in shade-avoider plants

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MRC and JFMG conceived the original research plan, directed and coordinated the study. LM, IF-S, AI-S and MR-C measured and analyzed photosynthetic parameters, respiration and pigment levels; SP, IR-V and WQ performed all the other experiments. All authors analyzed their data and discussed the results. MRC and JFM-G wrote the paper with revisions and contributions or/and comments of all other authors.

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**SUMMARY**

When growing in search for light, plants can experience continuous or occasional shading by other plants. Plant proximity causes a decrease in the ratio of red to far-red light (low R:FR) due to the preferential absorbance of red light and reflection of far-red light by photosynthetic tissues of neighboring plants. This signal is often perceived before actual shading causes a reduction in photosynthetically active radiation (low PAR). Here we investigated how several Brassicaceae species from different habitats respond to low R:FR and low PAR in terms of elongation, photosynthesis and photoacclimation. Shade-tolerant plants such as *Cardamine hirsuta* displayed a good adaptation to low PAR but a poor or null response to low R:FR exposure. By contrast, shade-avoider species, such as *Arabidopsis thaliana*, showed a weak photosynthetic performance under low PAR but they strongly elongated when exposed to low R:FR. These responses could be genetically uncoupled. Most interestingly, exposure to low R:FR of shade-avoider (but not shade-tolerant) plants improved their photoacclimation to low PAR by triggering changes in photosynthesis-related gene expression, pigment accumulation and chloroplast ultrastructure. These results indicate that low R:FR signaling unleashes molecular, metabolic and developmental responses that allow shade-avoider plants (including most crops) to adjust their photosynthetic capacity in anticipation of eventual shading by nearby plants.

**Key words:** chloroplasts, elongation, light, photoacclimation, photosynthesis, shade-avoider, shade-tolerance.

## INTRODUCTION

Light is essential for plants as a source of energy and environmental information. Shading by nearby individuals can reduce light quantity (i.e. photon supply) and hence compromise photosynthetic activity and growth, a problematic situation in intensive cropping systems. To deal with the outcomes of mutual shading, plants have developed response mechanisms based on the perception of light quality, i.e., spectral information (Casal, 2013; Martinez-Garcia *et al*, 2010). The preferential absorbance of red light (R) and reflection of far-red light (FR) by photosynthetic tissues results in a decreased ratio of R to FR (R:FR) when light is reflected from or filtered through green stems and leaves. The low R:FR is a very reliable light signal that announces the close presence of nearby plants that may compete for resources.

Plants growing in ecosystems where access to light is restricted (e.g., in forest understories) show a shade-tolerant habit by adapting their light capture and utilization systems to low light intensity conditions. By contrast, plants growing in open habitats are shade-avoiders (also referred to as shade-intolerant or sun-loving). In shade-avoider plant species, such as *Arabidopsis thaliana* and most sun-loving crops, perception of the low R:FR signal by the phytochrome photoreceptors activates a signaling pathway that eventually triggers a set of responses known as the shade avoidance syndrome (SAS). The most prominent phenotype following exposure to low R:FR is elongation (e.g., of seedling hypocotyl, leaf petiole and stem internode tissues), intended to overgrow neighboring competitors and outcompete them in the access to light. If the neighboring individuals overgrow and eventually shade the plant, the consequent reduction in light quantity (i.e., in the amount of radiation available for photosynthesis) results in additional and stronger SAS responses such as reduced leaf size, attenuated defense mechanisms and early flowering (Roig-Villanova & Martinez-Garcia, 2016).

The most extensively studied SAS response by far is hypocotyl elongation in *A. thaliana*. In this species, low R:FR inactivates phytochrome B (phyB), releasing PHYTOCHROME INTERACTING FACTORs (PIFs) that can then regulate gene expression and promote elongation growth. This response is also repressed by negative SAS regulators such as ELONGATED HYPOCOTYL 5 (HY5), amongst many others (Cifuentes-Esquivel *et al*, 2013; Ciolfi *et al*, 2013). Biological activity of these transcription factors can be modulated by additional components of the SAS regulatory network such as LONG HYPOCOTYL IN FAR-RED 1 (HFR1, which binds PIFs to prevent their binding to target genes) and phytochrome A (phyA, which gets stabilized in shade and then promotes HY5 accumulation) (Ciolfi *et al*, 2013; Martinez-Garcia *et al*, 2014; Yang *et al*, 2018). Both HFR1 and phyA hence act as additional SAS repressors that were recently found to be instrumental for the adaptation to shade. Indeed, the shade-tolerant *Cardamine hirsuta*, a close

relative of *A. thaliana*, does not elongate when exposed to low R:FR unless the function of phyA or HFR1 is genetically lost in mutant plants (Hay *et al*, 2014; Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019; Paulisic *et al*, 2021).

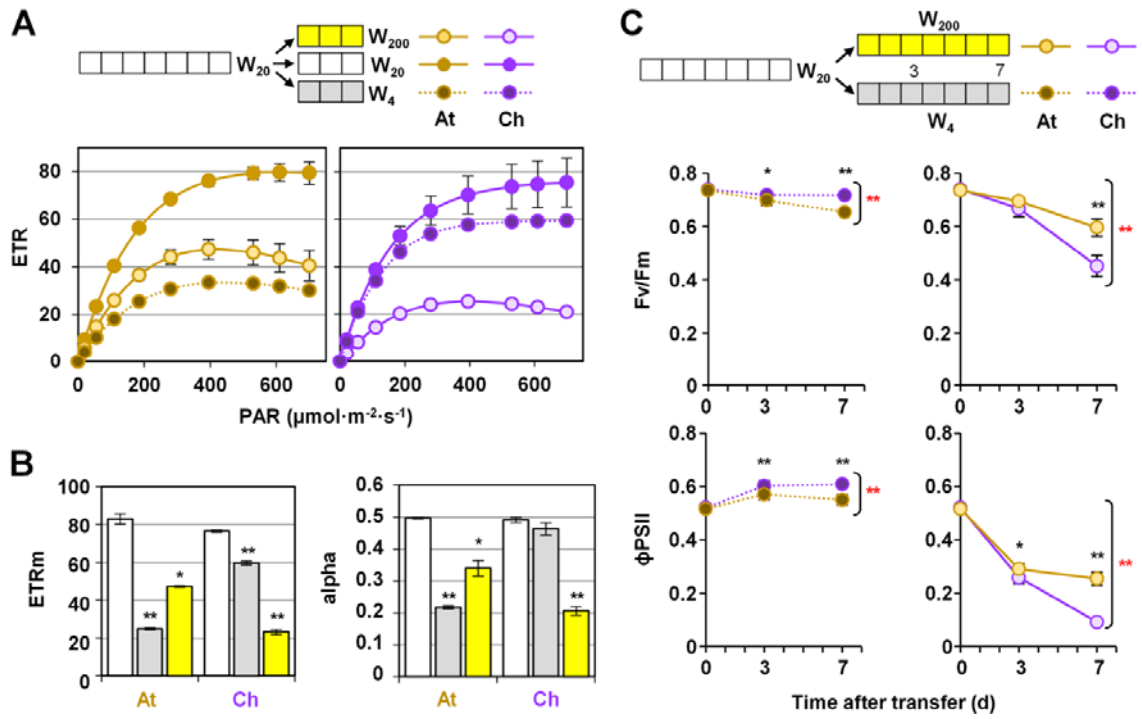
Differences between shade-avoider and shade-tolerant species are not restricted to changes in elongation after exposure to low R:FR. Photoacclimation (i.e., the ability of plants to adjust photosynthesis to changes in the incident light with specific phenotypic changes) also diverges. Variation of photoacclimation responses among species on day-to-week time scale has been associated to two main strategies (Murchie & Horton, 1997; Ptushenko & Ptushenko, 2019). The first one consists of an alteration of photosynthetic pigment content, which positively correlates with photosynthetic capacity. The second one involves changes in the photosynthetic machinery, which appears to be more important in plant species from environments where temporal and spatial variations in light irradiance are common, e.g., margins of woodlands. Combinations of these two main strategies give rise to the observed diversity in photoacclimation. In the case of *A. thaliana* and *C. hirsuta*, a differential response to low R:FR in terms of photosynthetic pigment accumulation has been observed. Chlorophyll and carotenoid levels drop about 20 % in *A. thaliana* plants grown under low R:FR conditions, whereas the decrease is attenuated in *C. hirsuta* plants (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019). Whether photosynthetic capacity and/or chloroplast ultrastructure is differentially impacted by low R:FR in these species remains unknown. In terms of light quantity, the shade-avoider *A. thaliana* showed a lower capacity to acclimate to reduced photosynthetically active radiation (low PAR) but a higher capacity to acclimate to intense light (high PAR) compared to the shade-tolerant *C. hirsuta* (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019). A similar physiological behavior has been described for shade-avoider and shade-tolerant species of the genus *Tradescantia* (Benkov *et al*, 2019), a model to study the ecology of photosynthesis and the mechanisms of photoacclimation in plants (Ptushenko & Ptushenko, 2019). The possible connections between low R:FR signaling and photoacclimation responses in plants remain, however, virtually unknown. Here we explored natural and engineered genetic diversity to investigate this connection using different Brassicaceae species.

## RESULTS

### Different Brassicaceae species present divergent photoacclimation responses

We previously showed that, compared to sun-loving *A. thaliana* Col-0 (At), shade-tolerant *C. hirsuta* Ox (Ch) exhibits a better ability to maintain photosynthesis after transfer to low PAR but a stronger chlorophyll loss when light intensity increases (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019). To better characterize the photoacclimation responses of these two Brassicaceae species, both At and Ch were germinated and grown for 7 days under control PAR conditions ($W_{20}$, 20-24 µmol $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) and then transferred to either lower PAR ($W_4$, 4 µmol $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) or higher PAR ($W_{200}$, 200 µmol $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) for up to 7 more days (Fig. 1). Light curve analysis at day 3 after the transfer already showed clearly opposite responses of At and Ch, i.e., a better photosynthetic activity of Ch compared to At when transferred to $W_4$ and a better activity of At compared to Ch when transferred to $W_{200}$ (Fig. 1A). Derived parameters such as maximum electron transport rate (ETRm) and photosynthetic rate in light-limited region of the light curve (alpha) also illustrated that At performed better than Ch after transfer to higher light ($W_{200}$) but worst after transfer to lower light ($W_4$) (Fig. 1B). Other photosynthetic parameters such as maximum quantum efficiency of PSII (Fv/Fm) and light use efficiency of PSII (ϕPSII) also showed differences between At and Ch at day 3 after transfer, but these differences became clearer at longer times of exposure to either $W_{200}$ or $W_4$ (Fig. 1C). Specifically, Fv/Fm values were lower in Ch than in At after transfer to higher light, while the opposite was observed when transferred to lower light. A similar trend was observed in the case of ϕPSII (Fig. 1C). These results together indicate that Ch tolerates better the transfer to lower PAR (consistent with Ch being more tolerant to shade), while an increase in light irradiance compromises photosynthetic efficiency in Ch more than in shade-avoider At. Based on these results, we used light curve analysis at day 3 or earlier to estimate photoacclimation to lower PAR and Fv/Fm measurements at day 7 to estimate photoacclimation to higher PAR.

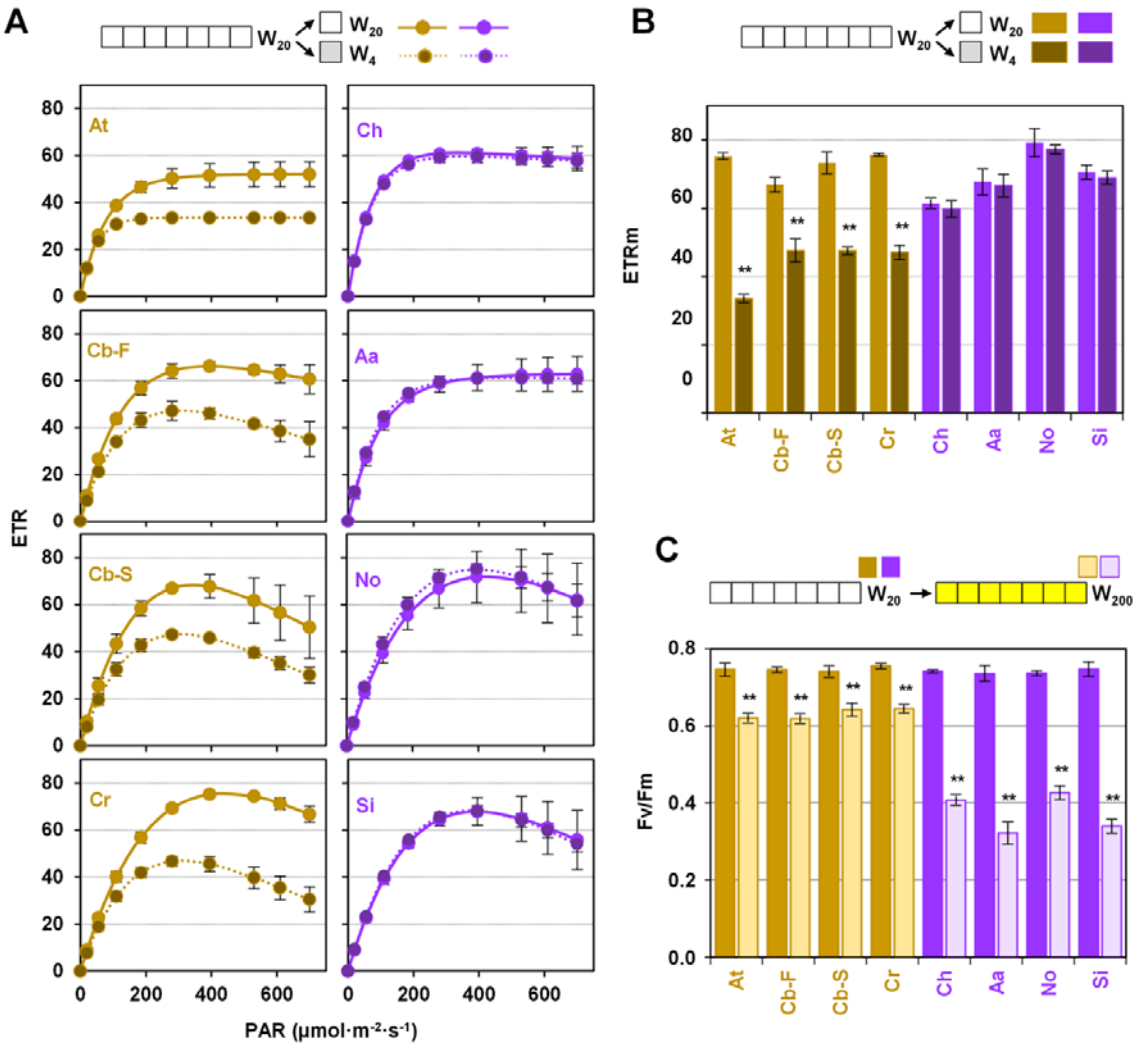
Besides At and Ch, the Brassicaceae family (mustards) includes many food crops (e.g., cauliflower, broccoli, radish, cabbage, kale, and similar green leafy vegetables) and a diversity of wild species from forested and open habitats. As a first step to explore the possible connection between low PAR and low R:FR responses, we analyzed photoacclimation and hypocotyl elongation in six different Brassicaceae species or accessions, including At and Ch as controls. The selected wild mustards were *Arabis alpina* (Aa), two accessions of *Capsella bursa-pastoris*, Freiburg-1 (Cb-F) and Strasbourg-1 (Cb-S), *Capsella rubella* (Cr), *Nasturtium officinale* (No), and *Sisymbrium irio* (Si). Initially, we aimed to classify them as shade-avoider or shade-tolerant based on photoacclimation responses. After germination and growth for 7 days under W, seedlings were either kept under control $W_{20}$ or transferred to lower light ($W_4$). Light curve analyses at day 1 after




the transfer already showed differential responses that served to classify the accessions in two groups (Fig. 2). Similar to the shade-avoider At, seedlings of Cb-F, Cb-S and Cr showed a lowering of the curve under $W_4$ conditions, whereas those of Aa, No and Si behaved as the shade-tolerant Ch and showed virtually identical light curves under $W_{20}$ and $W_4$ (Fig. 2A). ETRm and alpha values also illustrated that the $W_4$ treatment led to decreased photosynthetic performance in At, Cb-F, Cb-S and Cr but not in Ch, Aa, No and Si (Fig. 2B, Supplemental Fig. S1). We next analyzed photoacclimation to increased irradiation quantifying Fv/Fm before or after transferring 7-day-old $W_{20}$-grown seedlings to $W_{200}$ for 7 additional days. Again, At grouped together with the two accessions of Cb and with Cr as they acclimated much better to high PAR compared to the group formed by Ch, Aa, No and Si (Fig. 2C). Together, these photoacclimation results led to classify the former group as shade-avoiders, and the latter as shade-tolerant species.

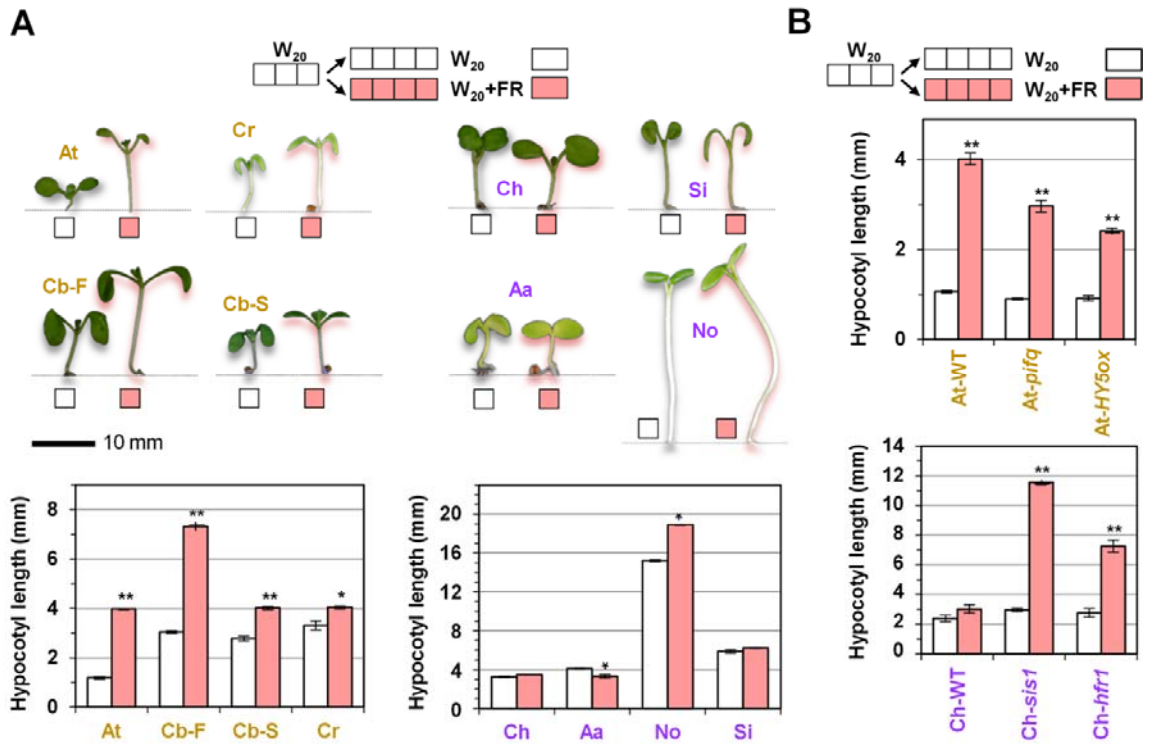
**Photoacclimation responses can be uncoupled from shade-driven hypocotyl elongation**

Next, we investigated whether the classification of the selected mustard species as shade-avoider or shade-tolerant based on their photoacclimation features correlated with their elongation response to low R:FR. After germination and growth for 3 days under $W_{20}$ (R:FR=1.5-3.3), seedlings were either kept under $W_{20}$ or transferred to FR-supplemented $W_{20}$ ($W_{20}$+FR, R:FR=0.02) for 4 additional days, and then hypocotyl length was measured (Fig. 3). Similar to At, the Cb-F accession showed a strong hypocotyl elongation response, whereas Cb-S, Cr and No elongated moderately in response to low R:FR. By contrast, Ch, Aa and Si did not elongate in response to low




R:FR (Fig. 3A). These results confirm that the elongation response to low R:FR cannot be fully predicted based on the photoacclimation phenotype of a particular accession. Nonetheless, accessions classified as shade-avoider based on their photoacclimation behavior (i.e. poor photoacclimation to decreased PAR but good photoacclimation to increased PAR) exhibit a range of elongation responses to low R:FR (i.e. from moderate to strong elongation), whereas plant species with a shade-tolerant photoacclimation responses display either no elongation or a mild shade-avoider phenotype in terms of hypocotyl elongation when exposed to low R:FR (e.g. No).

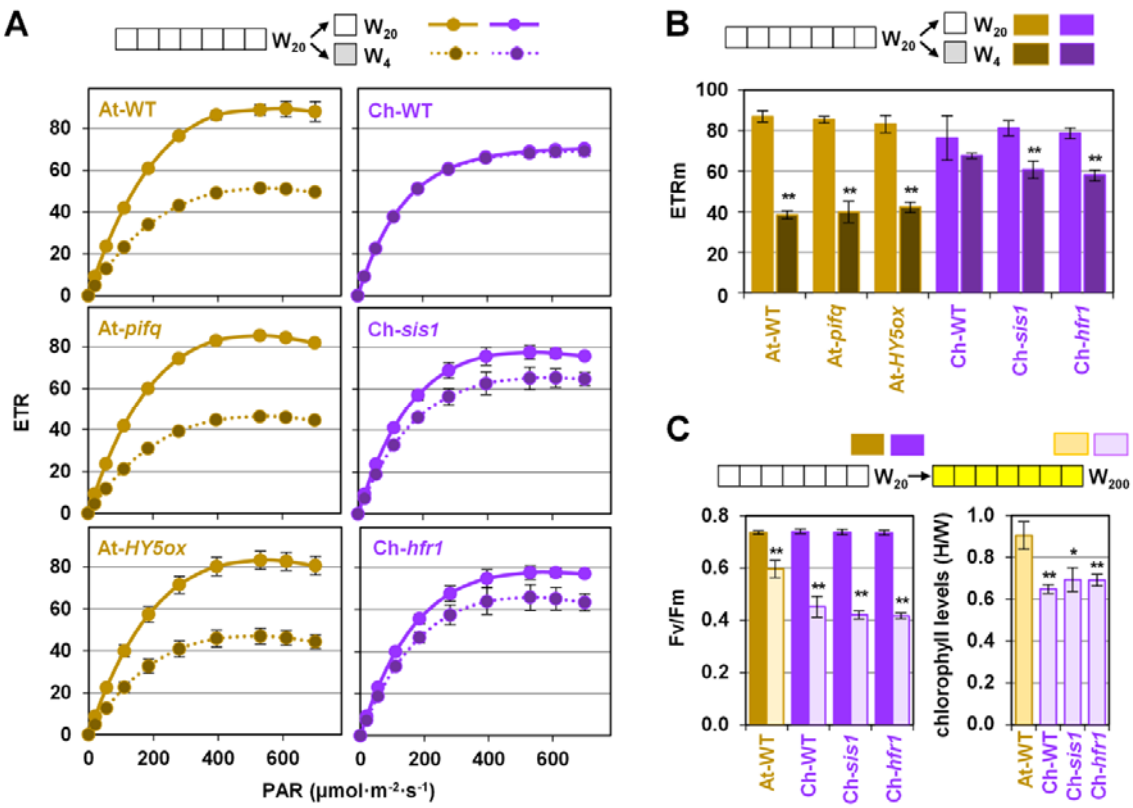
The shade-avoider or shade-tolerant elongation phenotype in response to low R:FR can be reversed by manipulating the levels of specific SAS regulators. Previous results have shown that At lines overexpressing *HY5* (At-*HY5ox*) display an attenuated hypocotyl response to low R:FR (Ortiz-Alcaide *et al*, 2019), whereas a similar but weaker response was observed in a quadruple mutant defective in all members of the photolabile PIF quartet (At-*pifq*) (Fig. 3B). Despite the different degrees of elongation response to low R:FR, these two lines showed photoacclimation responses to lower PAR very similar to those of wild-type (At-WT) controls (Fig. 4). Both light curves (Fig. 4A)




and ETRm values (Fig. 4B) were almost identical in At-WT plants and mutants hyposensitive to low R:FR. In the case of *C. hirsuta*, lines deficient in phyA (Ch-*sis1*) or HFR1 (Ch-*hfr1*) gain the ability to elongate when exposed to low R:FR (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019; Paulisic *et al*, 2021) (Fig. 3B). In contrast to the shade-hyposensitive At mutants, the hypersensitive Ch mutant lines appeared to gain a partial shade-avoider phenotype in terms of photoacclimation to low PAR, as lower values of light curves (Fig. 4A) and ETRm (Fig. 4B) were observed under $W_4$ compared to $W_{20}$. However, photoacclimation to increased PAR ($W_{200}$) estimated from Fv/Fm values and also from chlorophyll levels (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019) was similar for Ch-WT, Ch-*sis1* and Ch-*hfr1* plants (Fig. 4C). We therefore concluded that manipulation of the plant ability to elongate in response to proximity shade hardly impacts their photoacclimation capacity, at least when plants are growing in the absence of the low R:FR signal.

**Activation of low R:FR signaling causes a decrease in pigment levels and photosynthetic activity**

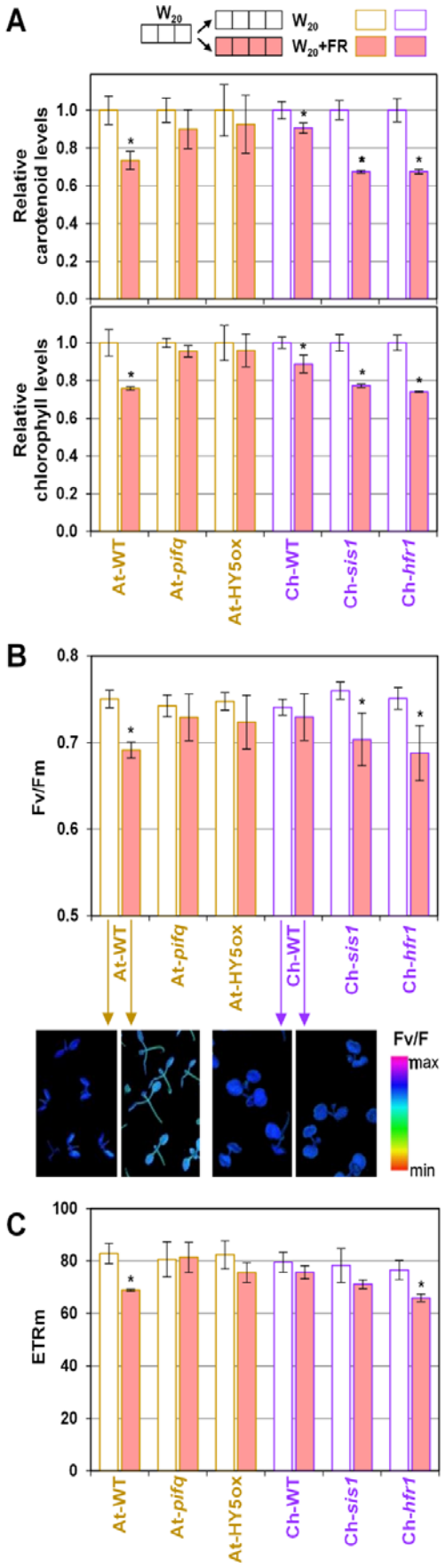
Low R:FR signals not only influence hypocotyl elongation but they are also known to reduce the contents of photosynthetic pigments (chlorophylls and carotenoids) in many plant species (Bou-Torrent *et al*, 2015; Cagnola *et al*, 2012; Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019; Patel *et al*, 2013; Roig-Villanova *et al*, 2007). The reduction is observed in both elongating (At-WT) and non-elongating (Ch-WT) seedlings, but it is stronger in the former (Fig. 5). *C. hirsuta* mutants that gained the



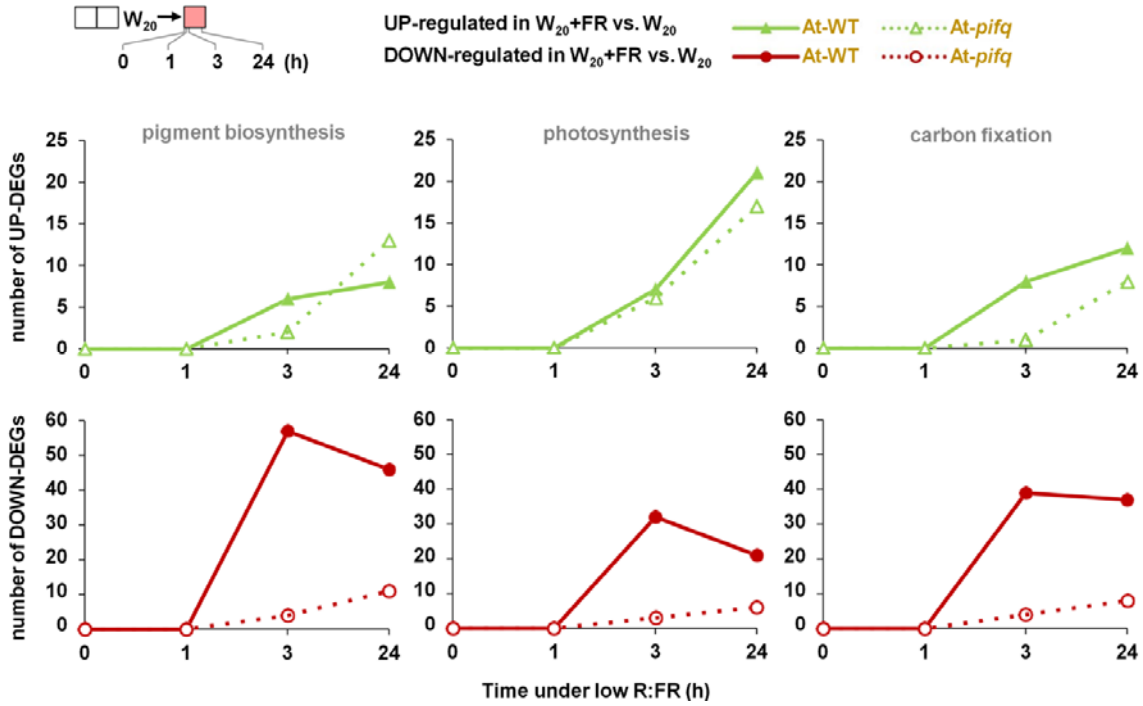

199 ability to elongate in response to shade, such as Ch-*sis1* and Ch-*hfr1*, also displayed stronger
200 reductions in photosynthetic pigment contents relative to Ch-WT after low R:FR exposure (Fig. 5A)
201 (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019). Conversely, *A. thaliana* mutants with a reduced ability to elongate
202 in response to shade, such as At-*pifq* and At-*HY5ox* (Fig. 3B), showed attenuated reduction of
203 pigment contents relative to At-WT when exposed to low R:FR (Fig. 5A).

204 To test whether decreases in photosynthetic pigment levels driven by simulated shade
205 exposure might affect photosynthetic activity, we next measured Fv/Fm and ϕPSII in seedlings
206 grown either under $W_{20}$ or under $W_{20}$+FR (Fig. 5B, Supplemental Fig. S2A). Indeed, low R:FR was
207 found to result in decreased photosynthetic activity in the lines with strong pigment loss responses
208 independently on the species (At-WT, Ch-*sis1* and Ch-*hfr1*). ETRm and alpha parameters also
209 tended to be lower in W+FR-exposed At-WT, Ch-*sis1* and Ch-*hfr1* seedlings compared to W
210 controls (Fig. 5C, Supplemental Fig. S2B). The effect of low R:FR on photosynthesis was much
211 less dramatic in the rest of the lines (At-*pifq*, At-*HY5ox* and Ch-WT), which consistently displayed
212 a reduced impact of $W_{20}$+FR exposure on their photosynthetic pigment levels (Fig. 5).

213 Proximity shade signals have also been found to impact photosynthesis at the level of gene
214 expression. Analyses of low R:FR-triggered transcriptomic changes showed reduced levels of
215 transcripts encoding photosynthesis-related proteins (e.g. enzymes involved in chlorophyll and
216 carotenoid biosynthesis, components of the photosynthetic apparatus, and/or members of the carbon



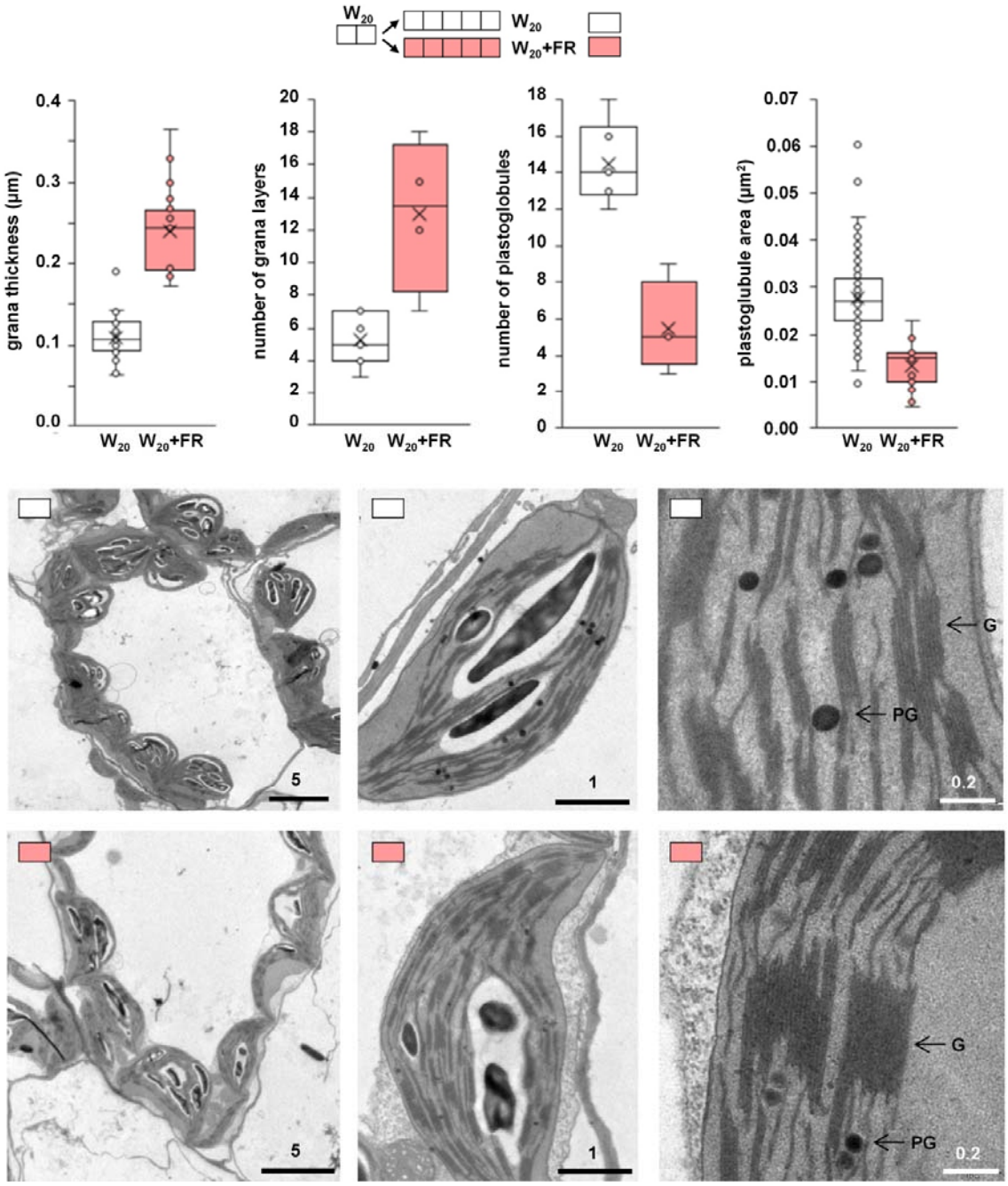

217 fixation process) in several species, including alfalfa (Lorenzo *et al*, 2019), maize (Shi *et al*, 2019),



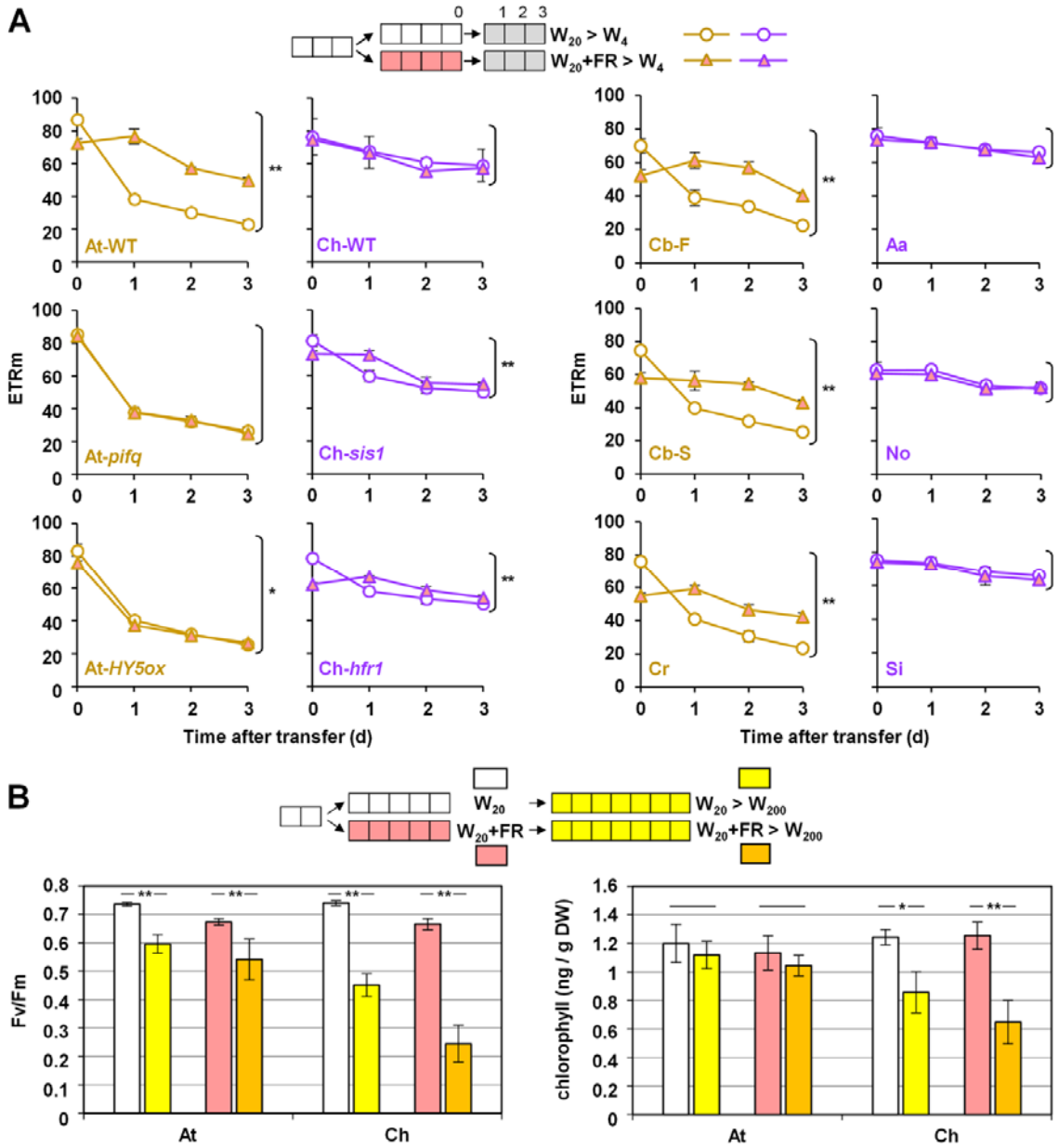

tomato (Cagnola *et al*, 2012) and *A. thaliana* (Leivar *et al*, 2012). Interestingly, the changes in the expression of photosynthesis-related genes triggered by low R:FR are attenuated in the At-*pifq* mutant compared to At-WT seedlings (Fig. 6). This is particularly evident in the case of low R:FR-repressed photosynthetic genes (Fig. 6), suggesting that the PIF-mediated regulation of gene expression in response to low R:FR is instrumental for the observed changes in photosynthesis (Fig. 5).

**Exposure of shade-avoider plants to low R:FR improves their photoacclimation to low PAR**

The observation that exposure of low R:FR caused a decreased in photosynthetic activity of At-WT seedlings and shade-hypersensitive Ch mutants prompted us to analyze whether this light signal may also cause changes in chloroplast ultrastructure. Cotyledons from At-WT seedlings germinated and grown for 2 days under $W_{20}$ and then either kept in $W_{20}$ or transferred to $W_{20}$+FR for 5 additional days were collected and used for transmission electron microscopy (TEM). Chloroplasts from low R:FR-exposed samples were found to exhibit larger grana stacks and contain less and smaller plastoglobules compared to W-grown controls (Fig. 7). Interestingly, similar changes are associated to low PAR photoacclimation (Lichtenthaler, 2007; Rozak *et al*, 2002; Wood *et al*, 2018). We therefore reasoned that exposure to low R:FR in the absence of any light intensity change might trigger responses to anticipate a foreseeable shading involving a decrease in PAR. To test this hypothesis, we analyzed light curves of WT and mutant seedlings grown in either $W_{20}$ or $W_{20}$+FR and then transferred to lower PAR ($W_4$) for 3 days (Fig. 8). Pre-exposure of At-WT




seedlings to low R:FR ($W_{20}$+FR) resulted in a strongly attenuated reduction in ETRm after their transfer to lower PAR (Fig. 8A). By contrast, At mutants with reduced SAS elongation responses also lost the response to low R:FR in terms of improved photoacclimation to lower PAR ($W_4$) (Fig. 8A). Pre-treatment with $W_{20}$+FR had virtually no effect on the photoacclimation of Ch-WT seedlings to lower PAR ($W_4$) but caused a slight but significant improvement of ETRm in shade-hypersensitive Ch mutants at day 1 after transfer to $W_4$ (Fig. 8A). When analyzing photoacclimation to higher PAR, pre-exposure of At-WT or Ch-WT seedlings to $W_{20}$+FR resulted in no improvement




compared to $W_{20}$-grown controls (Fig. 8B). If anything, Ch-WT seedlings grown under $W_{20}$+FR photoacclimated worse than $W_{20}$-grown seedlings when exposed to higher light intensity (Fig. 8B).

The battery of mustards that grouped together with At in terms of photoacclimation responses (Cb-F, Cb-S and Cr) (Fig. 2, Supplemental Fig. S1) also showed improved photoacclimation to reduced PAR when pre-exposed to low R:FR, whereas the simulated shade signal did not have an effect on those clustered with Ch (Aa, No and Si) (Fig. 8A). This low R:FR-dependent phenotype was independent of the growing light intensity and photoperiod, as it was also observed in At-WT seedlings growing under $W_{200}$ or $W_{200}$+FR for 8 h or 16 h a day (i.e., under long day or short day conditions, respectively) and then transferred to $W_{15}$ (Supplemental Fig. S3). Because both the response of shade-avoider plants to low R:FR and the acclimation to low light involve a reduced

respiration rate to cope with the limited generation of photoassimilates and hence contribute to carbon balance (Cagnola *et al*, 2012)(Casal 2013), we next measured changes in respiration in whole wild-type At and Ch seedlings exposed or not to low R:FR and then transferred to reduced PAR (Supplemental Fig. S4). In $W_{20}$ controls, respiration (estimated as total oxygen consumption in darkness) was reduced in At seedlings when they were moved to $W_4$. When exposed to $W_{20}$+FR, however, respiration was already lower and did not significantly change after transferring to lower PAR. By contrast, Ch seedlings showed similar respiration values in all conditions (Supplemental Fig. S4). Based on these data we conclude that detection and transduction of low R:FR signals not only allows shade-avoider plants to overgrow their neighbors but also to pre-adapt their photosynthetic and respiratory machinery to foreseeable conditions of actual shading involving reduced PAR. By contrast, shade-tolerant plants have a better adapted capacity to grow under reduce PAR and do not seem to use the low R:FR signal.

## DISCUSSION

Plants have been traditionally classified as shade avoider and tolerant based mostly on their natural habitat, although virtually all plants are exposed to at least some degree of shade during their lifetime. As an ecological concept, shade tolerance refers to the capacity of a given plant to tolerate low light levels, but it is also associated with a wide range of traits, including phenotypic plasticity to optimize light capture (Valladares & Niinemets, 2008). Analyzing a range of caulescent herbs, it was suggested that the elongation response upon exposure to low R:FR was dependent on the shade habit, the shade-avoiders elongating the most and the shade-tolerant showing a mild or no elongation response (Smith, 1982). Indeed, elongation might not be the best solution for plants that spend all their lives under a canopy or permanently shaded by other plants. Another important parameter to ascertain the degree of shade tolerance of a plant is photoacclimation capacity, which is essential for plant fitness in environments with changing light input conditions (e.g., those where the growth of nearby plants may suddenly compromise access to light). By taking into account both parameters (the hypocotyl elongation response and the capacity to acclimate to low or high PAR), here we analyzed the shade tolerance of several Brassicaceae species, including the closely related mustard model systems *A. thaliana* and *C. hirsuta*. As a rule of thumb, we observed that *C. hirsuta* and other species showing a good photoacclimation response to lower PAR (and badly performing after transfer to higher PAR) showed a poor or null elongation response to low R:FR (Fig. 2, 3). Mustards such as *A. thaliana* that photoacclimated poorly to lower PAR but better to higher PAR tended to more conspicuously elongate their hypocotyls in response to low R:FR, but there were exceptions of poorly elongating species such as *Nasturtium officinale* (Fig. 2, 3). Furthermore, mutation of genes encoding SAS regulators can dramatically change the elongation response to low R:FR without improving the photoacclimation phenotype (Fig. 4). Together, these results confirm that the capacity for photosynthetic acclimation to changing irradiance is a species-specific trend (Bailey *et al*, 2001) and a reliable indicator of shade tolerance. The shade-induced hypocotyl elongation response should only be used as a complementary phenotype to classify a plant as shade-tolerant (badly adapted to higher PAR exposure, well adapted to live under lower PAR and poorly responsive to low R:FR) or shade-avoider (well adapted to higher PAR, poor performers under lower PAR that elongate when exposed to low R:FR).

Our results also unveiled that an activation of low R:FR signaling in shade-avoider species such as *A. thaliana* (At-WT) and shade-tolerant *C. hirsuta* plants with mutations causing low R:FR hypersensitivity (Ch-*sis1* and Ch-*hfr1*) regulated photosynthesis at multiple levels. We confirmed that exposure to W+FR caused a substantial decrease in the levels of photosynthetic pigments (chlorophylls and carotenoids) in these lines (Bou-Torrent *et al*, 2015; Molina-Contreras *et al*,

2019; Paulisic *et al*, 2021; Roig-Villanova *et al*, 2007) and proved that the changes had a direct impact on decreasing phytosynthetic activity (Fig. 5). Low R:FR treatments are known to trigger changes in gene expression within minutes (Kohnen *et al*, 2016). These changes, which are often instrumental for altering rapid growth responses, such as hypocotyl or petiole elongation, are usually mediated by PIFs (Cifuentes-Esquivel *et al*, 2013; de Wit *et al*, 2015; Galstyan *et al*, 2011; Gallemi *et al*, 2017; Hornitschek *et al*, 2009). PIFs were also found to regulate longer-term changes in gene expression such as those affecting photosynthetic genes (Fig. 6). Because loss of PIFQ function in the At-*pifq* mutant resulted in a much attenuated response to W+FR compared to At-WT in terms of photosynthetic gene expression (Fig. 6) but it also prevented photosynthetic pigment and activity loss (Fig. 5), we propose that stabilization of PIFQ proteins following low R:FR exposure triggers a reprogramming of photosynthesis-related gene expression that eventually results in lower pigment levels and reduced photosynthetic activity. Based on the results obtained with other mutants (Fig. 5), we speculate that this signaling network is further influenced by factors such as HFR1 and HY5, which prevent PIF binding to target genes by heterodimerization (Hornitschek *et al*, 2009) or competition for promoter binding sites (Toledo-Ortiz *et al*, 2014), respectively.

Concomitant with the described molecular and physiological changes, we discovered that low R:FR treatment of At-WT seedlings triggered ultrastructural changes in the chloroplast endomembrane systems resembling those occurring after transfer to low PAR (Fig. 7). Grana with more thylakoid layers and increased thickness were observed in the chloroplasts of At seedlings exposed to simulated shade. By contrast, chloroplasts from tobacco leaves that received end-of-day-FR treatments (considered to induce similar shade responses as low R:FR) showed fewer thylakoid layers per granum but more small grana spread throughout the chloroplast compared to end-of-day R controls (Kasperbauer & Hamilton, 1984). While these differences in chloroplast ultrastructure might derive from distinct treatments being applied to diverse species, both solutions likely contribute to optimize photosynthesis in the shade, when relatively less photons would strike a leaf. Indeed, leaves that develop under low PAR have chloroplasts with less plastoglobules (which are derived from thylakoid membranes) and more thylakoids per granum (Rozak et al., 2002; Lichtenthaler, 2007; Wood et al., 2018). Based on these results, we suggest that the chloroplast ultrastructural changes observed in At-WT plants grown under low R:FR are most likely aimed to acclimate their photosynthetic machinery to perform better under low PAR by, for instance, allowing a more efficient energy transfer. In agreement, pre-treatment with low R:FR improved photoacclimation to low PAR of At-WT seedlings but had no effect in At mutants defective in low R:FR signaling (Fig. 8). Further experiments showed that the observed positive effect of low R:FR exposure for acclimation to low PAR can be observed in At-WT plants growing under different

light conditions (Supplemental Fig. S3) and in other shade-avoider Brassicaceae (Cb-F, Cb-S and Cr), but not in shade-tolerant species such as Ch, Aa, No and Si (Fig. 8A).

At low irradiances, a proper balance between carbon allocation to growth and to respiration is important to meet the challenges associated with a shade environment. Wild-type At (shade-avoider) but not Ch (shade-tolerant) seedlings showed a drop in dark respiration when irradiation was reduced (Supplemental Fig. S4), likely to reduce carbon loss for a better carbon balance. This adaptive mechanism might contribute to explain why shade-avoider and shade-tolerant species appear to show little or no differences in carbon balance under low light conditions (Pons & Poorter, 2014; Sterck *et al*, 2013). Similar to that observed for photosynthetic activity (Fig. 8), the respiration drop observed in At-WT seedlings was attenuated by pre-exposure to low R:FR (Supplemental Fig. S4). Interestingly, there is evidence for the specific activation/deactivation of respiratory pathways by the phytochrome system at different levels (Igamberdiev *et al*, 2014; Ribas-Carbo *et al*, 2008). Regardless of the signaling pathway connecting low R:FR perception to reduced photosynthesis and respiration, this is likely part of an anticipation mechanism for shade-avoider plants to prepare for the foreseeable reduction in PAR associated with shading. Indeed, low R:FR signals are perceived before actual shading takes place and light becomes limiting, and hence they are considered to act as a warning signal that shading might occur (Casal, 2013; Martinez-Garcia *et al*, 2010). When shade-avoider plants such as *A. thaliana* and most crops (including tomato, cereals, or legumes) grow among taller plants or in a forest understory, they will use the low R:FR signals coming from a closing canopy to elongate (to overgrow its neighbors) but also to readapt its photosynthetic and respiratory machinery to low PAR before actual shading takes place. By contrast, shade-tolerant plants are adapted to grow under dim light and hence photoacclimation to low PAR is hardly improved even when hypersensitive mutants that show shade-avoider responses in terms of elongation (Fig. 3) and photosynthesis (Fig. 6) are pre-exposed to low R:FR (Fig. 8).

While the observed decrease in respiration and photosynthetic pigment and activity levels in shade-avoider plants appears to be part of the anticipation mechanism to an eventual reduction in PAR, a too committed response might be detrimental if light conditions change (e.g., if shading does not occur or shade plants become exposed again to direct sunlight). We have previously shown that a compensation mechanism exist that represses the response to low R:FR when the photosynthetic capacity of chloroplasts is compromised (Ortiz-Alcaide *et al*, 2019). The retrograde (i.e. chloroplast-to-nucleus) pathway that adapts low R:FR perception and signaling to the photosynthetic status of the plant involves the antagonistic factors PIFs and HY5, which also participate in retrograde signaling when underground seedlings are illuminated and start their photomorphogenic (i.e. photosynthetic) development (Martin *et al*, 2016; Ortiz-Alcaide *et al*, 2019;

Ruckle *et al*, 2007; Xu *et al*, 2016). The balance of positive and negative regulators together with the chloroplast-mediated control of SAS likely contribute to prevent an excessive response to shade, hence preventing photooxidative damage (resulting from light intensity exceeding the photosynthetic capacity of the plant) and facilitating the return to high R:FR conditions if the low R:FR signal disappears (e.g. if a commitment to the shade-avoidance lifestyle is unnecessary). Together, our work demonstrates that regulation of photosynthetic (chloroplast) performance is both an output and an input of the response of plants to shade. Our results therefore contribute to a better understanding of how plants respond to shade, a knowledge that will contribute to optimally grow crop plants closer together or/and under canopies (e.g., in intercropping settings).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Plant material and growth conditions

*Arabis alpina* (*pep1-1* mutant) (Wang *et al*, 2009), *Arabidopsis thaliana* (Col-0 accession), *Cardamine hirsuta* (Oxford, Ox accession) (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019), *Capsella bursa-pastoris* (accessions Strasbourg-1, Str-1 and Freiburg-1, Fre-1), *Capsella rubella* and *Sisymbrium irio* plants were grown in the greenhouse under long-day photoperiods (16 h light and 8 h dark) to produce seeds, as described (Gallemi *et al*, 2017). Seeds of *C. bursa-pastoris* were collected by Ruben Alcazar (University of Barcelona, Spain) from wild populations in Strasbourg (France, coordinates: 48.612436, 7.767881; Str-1) and Freiburg (Germany, coordinates: 47.994945, 7.861979; Fre-1). Seeds of *Capsella rubella*, collected from wild populations in Crete (Greece, coordinates 35.29, 24.42; accession 879) were previously described (Koenig *et al*, 2019). Seeds of *Sisymbrium irio* were collected from wild populations in Bellaterra (Barcelona, Spain, coordinates: 41.497731, 2.109558). Seeds of *Nasturtium officinale* were provided by a seed company (www.semillasfito.es). *A. thaliana* and *C. hirsuta* mutant and transgenic lines were previously available in our laboratories (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019; Ortiz-Alcaide *et al*, 2019; Paulisic *et al*, 2021).

For the light acclimation experiments seedlings were germinated and grown in Petri dishes containing solid medium without sucrose (0.5x MS-): 2.2 g/L MS basal salt mixture (Duchefa), 1% (w/v) agar, 0.25 g/L 2-(*N*-morpholino)ethanesulfonic acid -MES- (Sigma Aldrich), pH 5.7). Normal light conditions refer to white light (W) produced by cool-white vertical fluorescent tubes (PAR of 20-24 µmol $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$, $W_{20}$) with a R:FR of 1.5-3.3. Low light and high light conditions corresponded to W of PAR values of 4 ($W_4$) and 200 ($W_{200}$) µmol $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$, respectively, produced by horizontal fluorescent tubes. Low R:FR treatment was produced by supplementing $W_{20}$ with FR ($W_{20}$+FR). FR was emitted from a GreenPower LED module HF far-red (Philips), providing a R:FR of 0.02

(Martinez-Garcia *et al*, 2014). For the light acclimation experiments shown in Supplemental Fig. S3, seedlings were germinated and grown in Petri dishes, as previously described, but exposed to long-day (LD, 16 h light / 8 h darkness) or short-day (SD, 8 h light / 16 h darkness) photoperiods. The light part of the photoperiod was produced by cool-white horizontal fluorescent tubes of 200-210 µmol $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ PAR ($W_{200}$) with R:FR of 2-3.5). In that case, low light conditions corresponded to values of 15 µmol $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ PAR ($W_{15}$). In this set-up, low R:FR treatment was produced by supplementing $W_{200}$ with the same FR lamps described above ($W_{200}$+FR), obtaining a R:FR of 0.2-0.25. Light fluence rates were measured with a Spectrosense2 meter (Skye Instruments Ltd), which measures PAR (400–700 nm), and 10 nm windows of R (664–674 nm) and FR (725–735 nm) regions to calculate the R:FR (Martinez-Garcia *et al*, 2014). Full spectra photon distribution of W and W+FR treatments have been described elsewhere (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019).

**Measurement of hypocotyl length**

For hypocotyl measurement, about 30 seeds of each genotype were germinated and grown on plates containing 0.5x MS- solid media. For quantification of hypocotyl length, at least 20 seedlings were analyzed with the FIJI-ImageJ software (Schindelin *et al*, 2012), as described (Roig-Villanova *et al*, 2019). All experiments were repeated at least three times with consistent results. Hypocotyl measurements from all the different experiments were averaged.

**Photosynthetic measurements and pigment quantification**

Whole seedlings were harvested, ground in liquid nitrogen, and the resulting powder was used for quantification of chlorophylls and carotenoids either spectrophotometrically or by HPLC as described (Bou-Torrent *et al*, 2015). Chlorophyll fluorescence measurements were carried out on seedlings using a MAXI-PAM fluorometer (Heinz Walz GmbH) as described (Molina-Contreras *et al*, 2019). Briefly, for every measurement the whole cotyledons of 7 seedlings were considered. Effective quantum yield of photosystem II (PSII) under growth light, ϕPSII, was measured as ΔF/Fm', where ΔF corresponds to Fm'-F (the maximum minus the minimum fluorescence of light-exposed plants). Maximum quantum yield of PSII, Fv/Fm, was calculated as (Fm-Fo)/Fm, where Fm and Fo are respectively the maximum and the minimum fluorescence of dark-adapted samples. For dark acclimation, plates were incubated for at least 30 minutes in darkness to allow the full relaxation of photosystems. Light curves were constructed with 10 incremental steps of actinic irradiance (E; 0, 20, 55, 110, 185, 280, 395, 530, 610, 700 µmol photons·$m^{-2}$·$s^{-1}$of PAR). For each step, ϕPSII was monitored every minute and electron transport rate (ETR) was calculated as E×ϕPSIIx0.84x0.5 (where 0.84 is light absorptance by an average green leaf and 0.5 is the fraction

of absorbed quanta available for PSII). The light response and associated parameters ETRm (maximum electron transport rate) and alpha (photosynthetic rate in light-limited region of the light curve) were characterized by fitting iteratively the model of the rETR versus E curves using MS Excel Solver (Platt *et al*, 1980). The fit was very good in all the cases (r>0.98).

**Respiration measurements**

Seedlings were germinated and grown on 0.5x MS- plates, as described (Supplemental Fig. S4). Before the measurements, seedlings were placed in the dark for about 30 minutes to avoid light-enhanced dark respiration. Five to ten seedlings were then collected, immediately weighed, and placed into the respiration cuvette containing the respiration buffer (30 mM MES pH 6.2, 0.2 mM $CaCl_2$). Oxygen uptake rates were measured in darkness using a liquid-phase Clark-type oxygen electrode (Rank Brothers Ltd) as previously described (Florez-Sarasa *et al*, 2009) at a constant temperature of 23ºC.

**Microarray data analyses**

Microarray data corresponding to *A. thaliana* Col-0 (At-WT) and At-*pifq* seedlings exposed to low-R:FR for 0, 1, 3 and 24 h (Leivar *et al*, 2012) were analyzed to select for differentially-expressed genes (DEGs) specifically related to photosynthesis. The reported list of DEGs was further filtered using cut-offs of FDR <0.05 and log2-transformed fold change (log2FC) higher than 0.585 for upregulated genes and lower than -0.599 for downregulated genes. Then, photosynthesis-related genes were identified by using the KEGG (Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes) Mapper tool (Kanehisa & Sato, 2020).

**Transmission electron microscopy**

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) was carried out as described (Flores-Perez *et al*, 2008). Chloroplast features in the pictures were quantified by using the FIJI-ImageJ software (Schindelin *et al*, 2012).

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

## FIGURE LEGENDS

**Figure 1. *Arabidopsis thaliana* and *Cardamine hirsuta* show antagonistic photoacclimation responses to higher and lower PAR. (A)** Light curves of *A. thaliana* (At) and *C. hirsuta* (Ch) seedlings germinated and grown under white light of 20 $\mu mol \cdot m^{-2} \cdot s^{-1}$ PAR ($W_{20}$) for 7 days and then either kept under $W_{20}$ or transferred to either 200 ($W_{200}$) or 4 ($W_4$) $\mu mol \cdot m^{-2} \cdot s^{-1}$ PAR for 3 more days. Values represent the mean and standard error of n=3 plants for treatment. **(B)** Maximum relative electron transport rate (ETRm) and photosynthetic rate in the light-limited region of the light curve (alpha) calculated from the curves shown in **A**. Asterisks mark statistically significant changes (*t* test * $P<0.05$, ** $P<0.01$) in $W_4$ or $W_{200}$ relative to $W_{20}$. **(C)** Maximum photochemical efficiency of PSII in the dark-adapted state (Fv/Fm) and effective quantum yield calculated at growth light ($\phi$PSII) of seedlings germinated and grown for 7 days under $W_{20}$ and then transferred to either $W_{200}$ or $W_4$ for 7 more days. Data were taken at 0, 3 and 7 days after the transfer. Values are mean and standard error of n=7 seedlings per treatment. Black asterisks mark statistically significant differences between At and Ch at each time point (*t* test * $P < 0.05$ and ** $P <0.01$). Red asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between genotypes over time (two-way ANOVA, **, $P<0.01$).

**Figure 2. Brassicaceae plants can be grouped with either *Arabidopsis thaliana* or *Cardamine hirsuta* based on their photoacclimation responses. (A)** Light curves of *Arabidopsis thaliana* (At), *Capsella bursa-pastoris* (Cb-F and Cb-S), *Capsella rubella* (Cr), *Cardamine hirsuta* (Ch), *Arabis alpina* (Aa), *Nasturtium officinale* (No), and *Sysimbrium irio* (Si) seedlings germinated and grown under white light ($W_{20}$) for 7 days and then either kept under $W_{20}$ or transferred to lower PAR ($W_4$) for 1 more day. Values represent the mean and standard error of n=3 plants for treatment. **(B)** ETRm values calculated from the curves shown in **A**. **(C)** Fv/Fm values of seedlings grown for 7 days under $W_{20}$ and then transferred to higher PAR ($W_{200}$) for 7 more days. Mean and standard error of n=9 seedlings per treatment are represented. Asterisks in **B** and **C** mark statistically significant changes (*t* test, ** $P<0.01$) relative to $W_{20}$.

**Figure 3. The hypocotyl elongation response to low R:FR is plastic in Brassicaceae plants. (A)** The indicated genotypes were germinated and grown under $W_{20}$ for 3 days and then either kept under $W_{20}$ or transferred to low R:FR ($W_{20}$+FR) for 4 more days. Then, pictures were taken and hypocotyl length was measured. **(B)** Hypocotyl length of the indicated mutants grown as indicated in **A**. In both **A** and **B**, mean and standard error of measurements from at least 20 seedlings in n=3

independent experiments per treatment are represented. Asterisks mark statistically significant changes in $W_{20}$+FR relative to $W_{20}$ (*t* test, * $P<0.05$ and ** $P<0.01$).

**Figure 4. Mutations that alter sensitivity to low R:FR do not impact photoacclimation responses. (A)** Light curves of *A. thaliana* and *C. hirsuta* wild-type and mutant seedlings germinated and grown under $W_{20}$ for 7 days and then either kept under $W_{20}$ or transferred to lower PAR ($W_4$) for 1 more day. Values represent the mean and standard error of n=3 plants for treatment. **(B)** ETRm values calculated from the curves shown in **A**. **(C)** Fv/Fm values and HPLC-determined chlorophyll levels of seedlings grown for 7 days under $W_{20}$ and then transferred to higher PAR ($W_{200}$) for 7 more days. Mean and standard error of n=9 seedlings (Fv/Fm) or n=3 independent pools (HPLC) per treatment are represented. Asterisks in **B** and **C** mark statistically significant changes (*t* test, * $P<0.05$, ** $P<0.01$) relative to $W_{20}$.

**Figure 5. Activation of low R:FR signaling reduces photosynthetic pigment levels and activity. (A)** The indicated genotypes were germinated and grown under $W_{20}$ for 3 days and then either kept under $W_{20}$ or transferred to low R:FR ($W_{20}$+FR) for 4 more days. Then, the levels of photosynthetic pigments (carotenoids and chlorophylls) were quantified spectrophotometrically. **(B)** Fv/Fm values of seedlings germinated and grown as indicated in **A**. Lower pictures show false-color images in wild-type seedlings. **(C)** ETRm values of seedlings germinated and grown as indicated in **A**. Mean and standard error of n=3 independent pools of seedlings (HPLC) (**A**) or n=9 seedlings (**B**, **C**) per treatment are represented. Asterisks mark statistically significant changes in $W_{20}$+FR relative to $W_{20}$ (*t* test, * $P<0.05$).

**Figure 6. Exposure to low R/FR triggers changes in photosynthetic gene expression that are attenuated in the hyposensitive At-*pifq* mutant.** Data were extracted from a publicly available experiment (Leivar *et al*, 2012). At-WT and At-*pifq* lines were germinated and grown under 19 $\mu mol \cdot m^{-2} \cdot s^{-1}$ PAR white light ($W_{20}$, R:FR of 6.48) for 2 days and exposed to low R:FR ($W_{20}$+FR, R:FR of 0.006) for 0, 1, 3 or 24 h. Plots represent the number of differentially expressed genes (DEGs) either up- or down-regulated in $W_{20}$+FR vs. $W_{20}$ that are involved in photosynthetic pigment biosynthesis (KEGG pathways ath00906 and ath00860), photosynthesis (ath00195 and ath00196), and carbon fixation (ath00710).

**Figure 7. Low R:FR triggers ultrastructural changes in *A. thaliana* chloroplasts.** At-WT seeds were germinated and grown under $W_{20}$ for 2 days and then either kept under $W_{20}$ or transferred to

554 low R:FR ($W_{20}$+FR) for 5 more days. Cotyledons were then used for TEM analysis of chloroplast
555 ultrastructure. Representative pictures at different scales (numbers indicate μm) are shown.
556 Boxplots show quantification of the indicated parameters from the images. Boxes show the values
557 between the upper and the lower quartile, the cross represents the mean and the horizontal line the
558 median. Whiskers (the upper and lower extremes) and circles represent single data and the ones
559 located outside of the whiskers limit are the outliers (data with the same numerical value are
560 visualized as a single point). For quantifying grana thickness, all the distinguishable structures were
561 used ($W_{20}$ n=30, $W_{20}$+FR n=20). For quantifying grana layers, 4 major grana complexes from
562 higher magnifications were measured. For quantifying the number of plastoglobules, at least 6
563 individual chloroplasts for each treatment were used. Plastoglobule area was measured for all the
564 plastoglobules ($W_{20}$ n=87, $W_{20}$+FR n=22). PG, plastoglobules. G, grana.
565
566 **Figure 8. Pre-exposure to low R:FR improves the photoacclimation to low PAR in shade-**
567 **avoider plants. (A)** The indicated genotypes were germinated and grown under $W_{20}$ for 3 days,
568 transferred to either $W_{20}$ or $W_{20}$+FR for 4 days, and then exposed to $W_4$. Mean and standard error of
569 ETRm values at 0, 1, 2 and 3 days after transfer to $W_4$ are shown (n=3 seedlings per treatment).
570 Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between treatments ($W_{20}$ or $W_{20}$+FR) over
571 time (two-way ANOVA, * $P$<0.05, **, $P$<0.01). **(B)** Wild-type *A. thaliana* and *C. hirsuta* lines
572 were germinated and grown under $W_{20}$ for 2 days, transferred to either $W_{20}$ or $W_{20}$+FR for 5 days,
573 and then exposed to $W_{200}$ for 7 more days. Fv/Fm values and HPLC-quantified chlorophyll levels
574 were determined. Mean and standard error of n=7 seedlings (Fv/Fm) or n=3 independent pools
575 (HPLC) per treatment are represented. Asterisks mark statistically significant differences between
576 values before and after exposure to $W_{200}$ ($t$ test, * $P$<0.05; * * $P$<0.01).
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