Research & Reviews: Journal of Pharmacognosy and Phytochemistry

e-ISSN: 2347-1234

Phytochemical Screening Methods: Advances and Standardization

Arundhati L. Rao*

Department of Pharmacognosy and Natural Products, JSS College of Pharmacy, Ooty, India

Editorial

Received: 05-Mar-2025, Manuscript No. jprpc-25-169373; **Editor assigned:** 7-Mar-2025, Pre-QC No. jprpc-25-169373 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 18-Mar-2025, QC No jprpc-25-169373; **Revised:** 25-Mar-2025, Manuscript No. jprpc-25-169373 (R); **Published:** 30-Mar-2025, DOI: 10.4172/2347-1234.13.005

***For Correspondence**

Arundhati L. Rao, Department of Pharmacognosy and Natural Products, JSS College of Pharmacy, Ooty, India

E-mail: arundhati.rao@jss.edu.in

Citation: Arundhati L. Rao, Phytochemical Screening Methods: Advances and Standardization. J Pharmacogn Phytochem. 2025.13.005.

ABSTRACT

Phytochemical screening is a crucial step in the identification, characterization, and quality assurance of plant-derived compounds. Over the years, methodologies have evolved from basic qualitative assays to advanced chromatographic and spectrometric techniques. This article provides a comprehensive overview of classical and modern phytochemical screening approaches, emphasizing their significance in standardizing herbal medicines and ensuring consistency in bioactivity.

INTRODUCTION

Phytochemicals—plant-derived bioactive constituents such as alkaloids, flavonoids, terpenoids, and phenolics—form the biochemical basis of herbal therapeutics. Screening of these compounds serves multiple purposes: drug discovery, validation of traditional knowledge, toxicity assessment, and formulation development. With the increasing global use of herbal products, there is an urgent need for standardized and validated screening protocols.

Primary Screening: Qualitative Tests

Phytochemical	Detection Method	Key Reagents
Alkaloids	Precipitation	Mayer's, Dragendorff's, Wagner's
Flavonoids	Color reaction	Shinoda, Alkaline reagent test
Tannins	Color and precipitation	Ferric chloride, Gelatin
Saponins	Foam test	Water shaking method
Glycosides	Hydrolysis + color	Keller-Killiani, Legal's test
Terpenoids	Color reaction	Salkowski, Liebermann–Burchard
Steroids	Color change	Acetic anhydride & H_2SO_4

These tests are simple, inexpensive, and ideal for preliminary screening, especially in resource-limited settings.

Quantitative Estimation Techniques

Total Phenolic Content (TPC): Folin–Ciocalteu method; expressed as gallic acid equivalents.

Total Flavonoid Content (TFC): Aluminum chloride colorimetric assay; measured as quercetin equivalents.

Tannin Content: Vanillin-HCl or Folin–Denis assay.

Alkaloid Estimation: Gravimetric or spectrophotometric quantification post-precipitation.

These assays enable inter-sample comparison and help establish pharmacopoeial benchmarks.

Chromatographic Fingerprinting

Thin Layer Chromatography (TLC)

Quick profiling and comparison with standards.

Derivatization enhances spot visualization (e.g., UV, iodine vapor).

High-Performance Thin Layer Chromatography (HPTLC)

More precise; allows densitometric quantification.

Used in Ayurvedic monographs (e.g., Ashwagandha, Shankhpushpi).

High-Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC)

Quantifies specific markers (e.g., curcumin, andrographolide).

Widely used in regulatory quality control.

Gas Chromatography–Mass Spectrometry (GC–MS)

Detects volatile constituents like essential oils and alkaloids.

Ultra-Performance Liquid Chromatography (UPLC)

Rapid, high-resolution separation of complex plant matrices.

Spectral and Structural Elucidation Tools

UV-Visible Spectroscopy: Assesses purity and λmax.

Infrared (IR) Spectroscopy: Identifies functional groups.

Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR): Provides detailed molecular structure.

Mass Spectrometry (MS): Confirms molecular weight and fragmentation patterns.

Together, these allow compound characterization, identity confirmation, and structural prediction.

Standardization and Regulatory Importance

Marker Compounds: Defined constituents used for standardization (e.g., berberine, sennosides).

Pharmacopoeial Guidelines: WHO, Ayurvedic, and European Pharmacopeia list mandatory tests.

Quality Assurance: Screening ensures authenticity, potency, and absence of adulterants.

Batch Consistency: Essential for clinical efficacy and regulatory approval.

Recent Advances and Automation

Chemometric Tools: PCA, HCA, and other statistical methods assist in pattern recognition and classification.

Metabolomics Platforms: LC–MS/MS and GC–MS based untargeted screening for full phytochemical profiling.

Biosensor-Based Detection: Offers point-of-care identification of specific phytochemicals.

AI and Machine Learning: Used for spectral data interpretation and pattern prediction.

CONCLUSION

Phytochemical screening forms the foundation of herbal drug discovery and standardization. With technological advancements, researchers now have access to rapid, sensitive, and reproducible tools for profiling and quantifying phytoconstituents. Establishing validated, harmonized methods will continue to enhance the credibility and global integration of phytomedicines.

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