BtToxin_Digger: a comprehensive and high-throughput pipeline for mining toxin protein genes from *Bacillus thuringiensis*

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Summary: *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) which is a spore-forming gram-positive bacterium, has been used as the most successful microbial pesticide for decades. Its toxin genes (*cry*) have been successfully used for the development of GM crops against pests. We have previously developed a web-based insecticidal gene mining tool BtToxin_scanner, which has been proved to be the most important method for mining *cry* genes from Bt genome sequences. To facilitate efficiently mining major toxin genes and novel virulence factors from large-scale Bt genomic data, we re-design this tool with a new workflow. Here we present BtToxin_Digger, a comprehensive, high-throughput, and easy-to-use Bt toxin mining tool. It runs fast and can get rich, accurate, and useful results for downstream analysis and experiment designs. Moreover, it can also be used to mine other targeting genes from large-scale genome and metagenome data with the addition of other query sequences.

Availability and Implementation: The BtToxin_Digger codes and instructions are freely available at https://github.com/BMBGenomics/BtToxin_Digger. A web server of BtToxin_Digger can be found at http://bcam.hzau.edu.cn/BtToxin_Digger.

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1 Introduction

The toxins produced by *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) have insecticidal activity against many agricultural and forestry pests, so they are widely used in the development of biopesticides and GM insect-resistant crops. Bt products represent more than 60% of the biopesticide market (Siegwart *et al.*, 2015). Crystal protein (Cry) produced by Bt as the major toxin can kill insects from many orders including Lepidoptera, Diptera, and Coleoptera, etc. The *cry* gene is one of the most important genes used for the

41 development of genetically modified (GM) crops targeting insect pests. From 1996 to
42 2016, the planting of Bt maize and cotton had delivered $50.6 billion and $54 billion
43 of extra farm income, respectively (G Brookes and Barfoot, 2018). Due to the
44 importance of Bt toxins, many researchers and companies have been working on the
45 discovery of new toxin genes (Sanahuja *et al.*, 2011). Other toxins with insecticidal
46 activity produced by Bt include Cyt (Cytotoxic toxin protein) and Vip (Vegetative
47 insecticidal protein), etc (Palma *et al.*, 2014). Previously, we developed an on-line tool
48 BtToxin_scanner to predict Crys encoding genes from Bt genome sequences (Ye *et al.*,
49 2012). It can handle several assembled genomes every time and provide useful
50 comparative results between the precited toxin and with known ones. During the past 7
51 years, it was widely used by researchers worldwide (Méric *et al.*, 2018; Prado *et al.*,
52 2014; Ruan *et al.*, 2015; Zheng *et al.*, 2017). Here we re-designed the previous tool to
53 provide a novel, high-throughput, and local software BtToxin_Digger which can be
54 directly used to handle large-scale genomic and metagenomic data to predict all kinds
55 of putative toxin genes. It also generates comprehensive and readable results to
56 facilitate the downstream sequence analysis or experiment design (Figure 1).

57 **2 Methods**

58 The tool accepts multiple forms of input data including Reads (pair-end reads, long-
59 reads, or hybrid-reads), genomic or metagenomic assemblies, coding sequences (CDSs),
60 and protein sequences. PGCGAP (Liu *et al.*, 2020) was used for genome assembly and
61 pretreatment. ORFs finding and translation are performed by BioPerl (Stajich *et al.*,
62 2002). All protein sequences with a length above 115-aa are searched against the

database and trained models by BLAST (Camacho *et al.*, 2009), HMMER (Eddy, 2011), and LIBSVM (Chang and Lin, 2011), respectively. After that, the candidate proteins are blasted against a background database to filter out the false-positive records. Then several Perl scripts are used to parse the results to get the putative target protein genes.

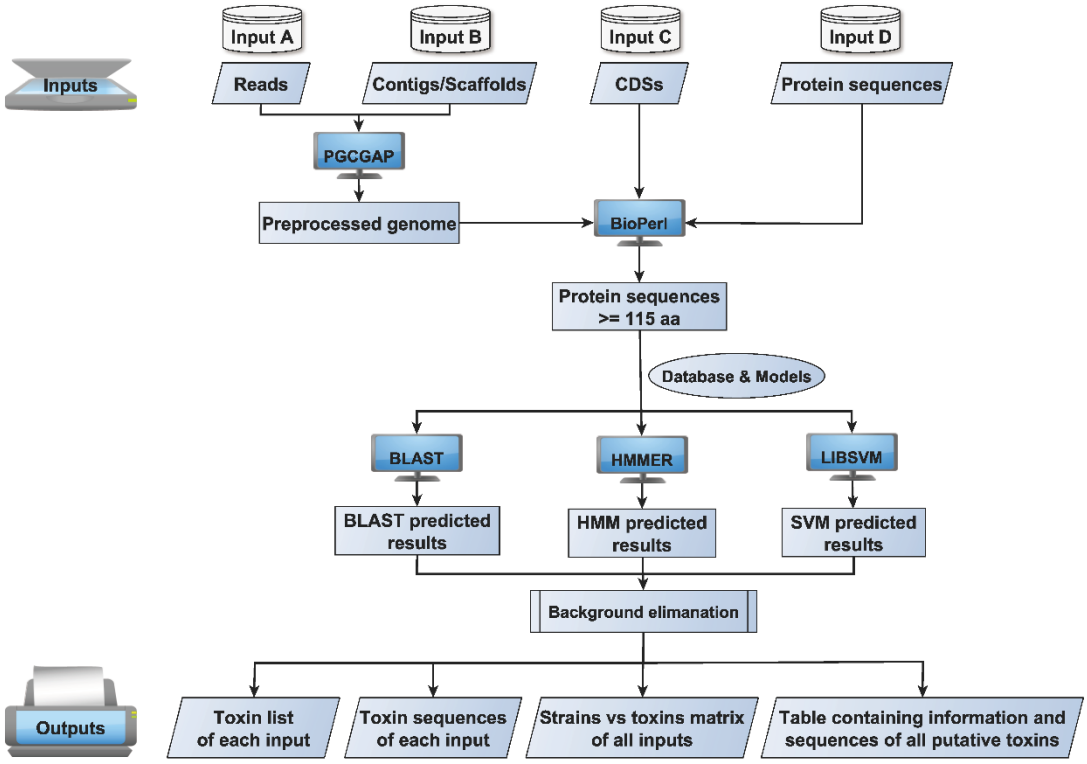

Figure 1. A diagram of the BtToxin_Digger pipeline.

3 Results

BtToxin_Digger can be easily installed on Linux, macOS, and Windows Subsystem for Linux (WSL) platforms by the conda package manager (Grüning *et al.*, 2018) or docker container. We tested BtToxin_Digger on a laptop with an Intel CPU containing 8 threads of GHz-2.50 and 16 GB memory. It took 14 minutes to process the 1.3-Gbp raw reads to get the results. Moreover, it just takes less than one minute to finish the whole analysis when the other three inputs were provided. BtToxin_Digger can also be used to mine other interesting protein genes with the replacement of the Bt toxin database by

77 other target sequences. We also developed a webserver

78 http://bcam.hzau.edu.cn/BtToxin_Digger for users with less data (assembled genomes,

79 amino acid sequences and coding sequences only) to analize.

80 We compared BtToxin_Digger with the existing tool BtToxin_scanner (Ye *et al.*, 2012)

81 and CryProcessor (Shikov *et al.*, 2020). As can be seen from Table 1, BtToxin_ Digger

82 adopts more mining methods, supports more types of input files and toxins, and gets

83 more friendly output results. Compared with the other two software, it is more suitable

84 for large-scale toxin gene mining, and at the same time, it can easily implement the

85 high-throughput analysis.

86 Table 1. Comparation of BtToxin_Digger, BtToxin_scanner and CryProcessor.

Tool	**Main methods used**	**Supported inputs**	**Supported toxins**	**Outputs**	**Flux**
BtToxin_Digger	Blast, HMM, SVM	Illumina/Pacbio/Oxford reads, assembled genomes, protein sequences, coding sequences, ORFs	Cry, Cyt, Vip, Other toxins	Toxin list file and sequences file for each input, a matrix file describes all strains vs. all toxins, an integrated file contains sequences and information of all inputs	Unlimited number of inputs with a one-line command
BtToxin_scanner	Blast, HMM, SVM	Assembled genomes, protein sequences, ORFs	Cry	Toxin list file and sequences file for each input	One submit at a time
CryProcessor	HMM	Illumina reads, representing genome assembly graph files, protein sequences	Three-domain Cry	A directory containing multiple files for each input	Unlimited number of inputs with additional shell scripts

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Practice with the sample dataset

We also provide the sample dataset to demonstrate the usage of BtToxin_Digger (Supplementary File 1). To use this tool, users should install it on their computers and have a preliminary understanding of Linux. Users can refer to the protocol (Liu *et al.*, 2020) to build their bioinformatics analysis platform and refer to https://github.com/BMBGenomics/BtToxin_Digger#installation to install BtToxin_Digger. We also prepared a webpage (https://github.com/liaochenlanruo/pgcgap/wiki/Learning-bioinformatics) for users without Linux skills to learn the basic Linux commands. Because the reads file is too large for upload and download, here we only demonstrate the running method of assembled genome, protein sequences, and coding sequences. Users can visit https://github.com/BMBGenomics/BtToxin_Digger#examples for more information.

Step 1. Download the Example dataset (Supplementary File 1) and unzip files.

Step 2. Open a terminal and enter the directory.

```
cd ExampleDataset
```

Step 3. Processing assembled genomes

```
BtToxin_Digger --SeqPath ./Genome --SequenceType nucl --Scaf_suffix .fas --threads 4
```

Step 4. Processing protein sequences

```
BtToxin_Digger --SeqPath ./AAs --SequenceType prot --prot_suffix .faa --threads 4
```

Step 5. Processing coding sequences

```
BtToxin_Digger --SeqPath ./CDSs --SequenceType orfs --orfs_suffix .ffn --threads 4
```

The running results are stored in Supplementary File 2. *.list: toxin list of each strain;

*.gbk: toxin sequences in Genbank format of each strain; Bt_all_genes.table: a matrix describes Strains vs. Toxins; All_Toxins.txt: a table containing all information and sequences of all toxin genes. See Supplementary Table 1 for details.

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