

# Engineering a mevalonate pathway in *Escherichia coli* for production of terpenoids

Vincent JJ Martin<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Douglas J Pitera<sup>1,3</sup>, Sydnor T Withers<sup>1</sup>, Jack D Newman<sup>1</sup> & Jay D Keasling<sup>1</sup>

Isoprenoids are the most numerous and structurally diverse family of natural products. Terpenoids, a class of isoprenoids often isolated from plants, are used as commercial flavor and fragrance compounds and antimalarial or anticancer drugs. Because plant tissue extractions typically yield low terpenoid concentrations, we sought an alternative method to produce high-value terpenoid compounds, such as the antimalarial drug artemisinin, in a microbial host. We engineered the expression of a synthetic amorphadiene synthase gene and the mevalonate isoprenoid pathway from *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* in *Escherichia coli*. Concentrations of amorphadiene, the sesquiterpene olefin precursor to artemisinin, reached 24 g caryophyllene equivalent/ml. Because isopentenyl and dimethylallyl pyrophosphates are the universal precursors to all isoprenoids, the strains developed in this study can serve as platform hosts for the production of any terpenoid compound for which a terpene synthase gene is available.

Terpenoids comprise a highly diverse class of natural products from which numerous commercial flavors, fragrances and medicines are derived. These valuable compounds are commonly isolated from plants, microbes and marine organisms. For example, terpenoids extracted from plants are used as anticancer and antimalarial drugs<sup>1,2</sup>. Because these compounds are naturally produced in small quantities, purification from biological material suffers from low yields, impurities and consumption of large amounts of natural resources. Furthermore, because of the complexity of these molecules, the chemical syntheses of terpenoids are inherently difficult and expensive and produce relatively low yields<sup>3–5</sup>. For these reasons, the engineering of metabolic pathways to produce large quantities of complex terpenoids in a tractable biological host presents an attractive alternative to extractions from environmental sources or chemical syntheses.

Here we describe the production of amorphadiene from the bacterium *E. coli*. Amorphadiene is the sesquiterpene olefin precursor to artemisinin, a valuable and powerful antimalarial natural product first isolated from sweet wormwood or *Artemisia annua*. In certain regions of the world, strains of *Plasmodium* have emerged that are resistant to the traditional antimalarial drugs of choice, such as chloroquine, mefloquine, halofantrine, quinine and the sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine combination. Artemisinins have been acclaimed as the next generation of antimalarial drugs because they show little or no cross-resistance with existing antimalarials<sup>6–8</sup>. Commercial production of artemisinin currently relies on its extraction and purification from plant material and, as would be expected, the yields are low<sup>9</sup>. Artemisinin is but one example of a group of terpene-based natural products that have been used in treating human disease. These include Taxol, a diterpene extracted from the Pacific yew that is extremely effective in the treatment of

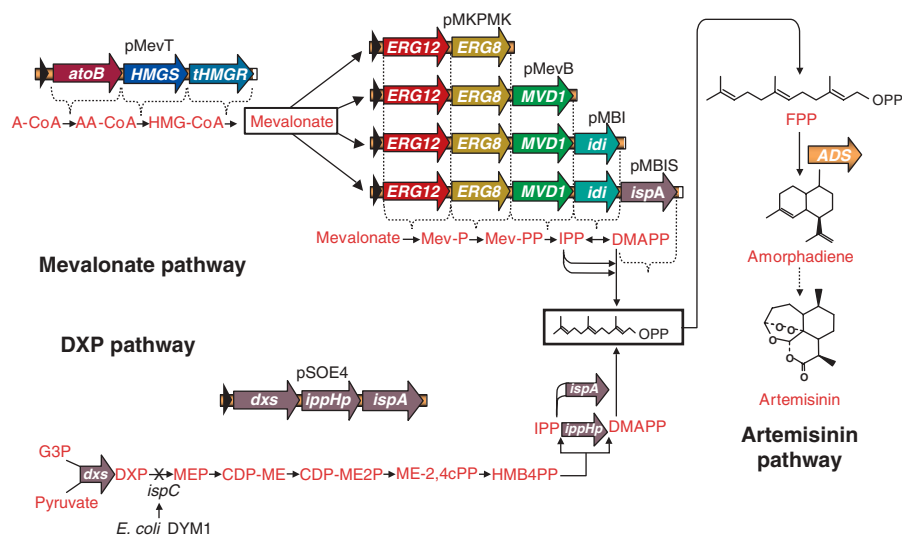
certain cancers<sup>10,11</sup>, and irufloven, a third-generation semisynthetic analog of the sesquiterpene illudin S that are in late-stage clinical trials for the treatment of various refractory and relapsed cancers<sup>12,13</sup>. In general, these drugs are extracted from the host plant, in which they accumulate in very small amounts, before further derivatization or use.

To eliminate the need for plant extraction, we sought to produce terpenoid compounds at high yields in a microbial host by introducing a heterologous, high-flux isoprenoid pathway into *E. coli*. Although most terpene olefins are active when derivatized, the ability to produce the olefin backbone in large quantities in a genetically and metabolically tractable host represents an important step toward producing terpenoid-based drugs in large-scale fermentations. Because all terpenoids are produced from the same universal precursors, host microbes engineered to produce copious quantities of these precursors may be used to biosynthesize any terpene.

Two isoprenoid biosynthetic pathways exist that synthesize the precursors, isopentenyl pyrophosphate (IPP) and its isomer dimethylallyl pyrophosphate (DMAPP) (Fig. 1). Eukaryotes other than plants use the mevalonate-dependent (MEV) isoprenoid pathway exclusively to convert acetyl-coenzyme A (acetyl-CoA) to IPP, which is subsequently isomerized to DMAPP. Plants use both the MEV and the mevalonate-independent, or deoxyxylulose 5-phosphate (DXP), pathways for isoprenoid synthesis. Prokaryotes, with some exceptions<sup>14</sup>, use the DXP pathway to produce IPP and DMAPP separately through a branch point<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 1). IPP and DMAPP precursors are essential to *E. coli* for the prenylation of tRNAs<sup>16</sup> and the synthesis of farnesyl pyrophosphate (FPP), which is used for quinone and cell wall biosynthesis.

Several groups have described the engineering of the DXP pathway to increase the supply of isoprenoid precursors needed for

<sup>1</sup>Department of Chemical Engineering, 201 Gilman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720-1462, USA. <sup>2</sup>Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, 1 Cyclotron Road (HILD 201), Berkeley, California 94720, USA. <sup>3</sup>These authors contributed equally to this work. Correspondence should be addressed to J.D.K. (keasling@socrates.berkeley.edu).



**Figure 1** Production of amorphaadiene via the DXP or mevalonate isoprenoid pathways and depiction of the synthetic operons used in this study. Black triangles represent the  $P_{LAC}$  promoter and tHMGR refers to an N-terminal truncated product of the native HMGR gene. Gene symbols and the enzymes they encode (all genes were isolated from *S. cerevisiae* except where noted): *atoB*, acetoacetyl-CoA thiolase from *E. coli*; *HMGS*, HMG-CoA synthase; *tHMGR*, truncated HMG-CoA reductase; *ERG1*, mevalonate kinase; *ERG8*, phosphomevalonate kinase; *MVD1*, mevalonate pyrophosphate decarboxylase; *idi*, IPP isomerase from *E. coli*; *ippHp*, IPP isomerase from *Haematococcus pluvialis*; *dxs*, 1-deoxy-D-xylulose 5-phosphate synthase; *ispC*, 1-deoxy-D-xylulose 5-phosphate reductoisomerase; *ispA*, FPP synthase from *E. coli*; *ADS*, amorphaadiene synthase. Pathway intermediates: G3P, glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate; DXP, 1-deoxy-D-xylulose 5-phosphate; MEP, 2-C-methyl-D-erythritol 4-phosphate; CDP-ME, 4-diphosphocytidyl-2-C-methyl-D-erythritol; CDP-ME2P, 4-diphosphocytidyl-2-C-methyl-D-erythritol 2-phosphate; ME-2,4cPP, 2-C-methyl-D-erythritol 2,4-cyclopyrophosphate; HMB4PP, 1-hydroxy-2-methyl-2-(*E*)-butenyl 4-pyrophosphate; IPP, isopentenyl pyrophosphate; DMAPP, dimethylallyl pyrophosphate; FPP, farnesyl pyrophosphate; A-CoA, acetyl-CoA; AA-CoA acetoacetyl-CoA; HMG-CoA, hydroxymethylglutaryl-CoA; Mev-P, mevalonate 5-phosphate; Mev-PP, mevalonate pyrophosphate.

high-level production of carotenoids in *E. coli*<sup>17–19</sup>. Balancing the pool of glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate and pyruvate, or increasing the expression of 1-deoxy-D-xylulose 5-phosphate synthase (*DXS*; encoded by the gene *dxs*) and IPP isomerase (encoded by *idi*), resulted in increased carotenoid buildup in the cell. Though improvements in isoprenoid production were noted, this approach most likely suffered from limitations owing to control mechanisms present in the native host. Because the DXP pathway may be tied to unknown physiological control elements in *E. coli*, we chose to bypass this pathway by engineering the expression of the *S. cerevisiae* mevalonate-dependent pathway in *E. coli*. We found that expression of this heterologous pathway in *E. coli* led to such an abundance of isoprenoid precursors that cells either ceased to grow or mutated to overcome the toxicity. The simultaneous expression of a synthetic amorphaadiene synthase gene<sup>20</sup> in our engineered strain resulted in high-level production of amorphaadiene and alleviated growth inhibition. Because IPP and DMAPP are the universal precursors to all isoprenoids, the strains reported here can serve as platform hosts for the production of any terpenoid compound for which the biosynthetic genes are available.

## RESULTS

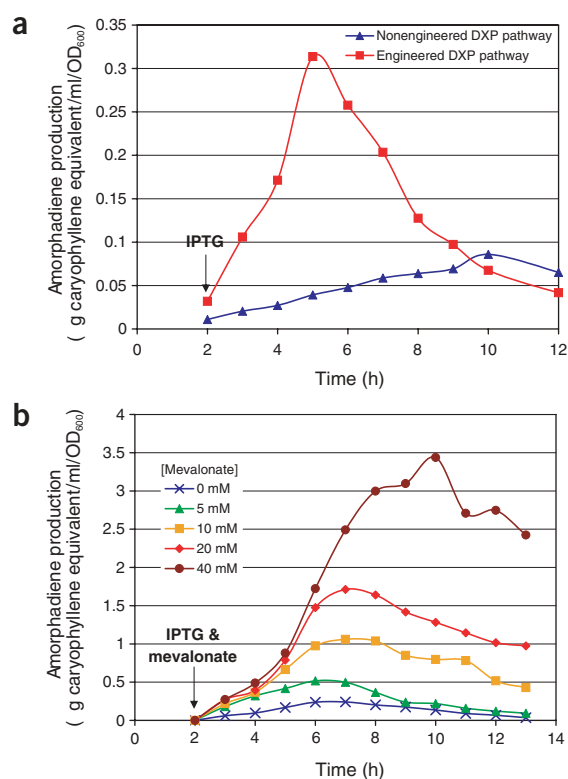
### Synthase gene assembly and amorphaadiene production

Previous studies on the production of sesquiterpenes using native plant genes established that poor expression of the plant genes in *E. coli* restricted the terpene yields<sup>21</sup>. To overcome the difficulties in express-

ing terpene synthases and to achieve high-level production of the artemisinin precursor amorphaadiene, we synthesized and expressed a codon-optimized variant of *ADS*, the gene encoding amorphaadiene synthase, designed for high-level expression in *E. coli*. By expressing a codon-optimized synthase, we hoped to shift the limitation of microbial terpene synthesis from expression of the synthase gene to supply of the precursor (FPP) by the isoprenoid pathway. The *ADS* gene synthesis, which used a two-step assembly and a one-step amplification PCR, yielded the expected 1.7 kb product. Sequence analysis of three *ADS* genes from independent clones identified two mutations or more in each of the genes. A functional *ADS* gene was assembled from two clones and by means of two site-directed mutagenesis reactions. Expression of the synthetic *ADS* gene in *E. coli* DH10B resulted in a peak concentration of amorphaadiene of 0.086 g caryophyllene equivalent/ml/OD<sub>600</sub> after 10 h of growth in LB medium (Fig. 2a). The peak concentration of amorphaadiene increased to 0.313 g caryophyllene equivalent/ml/OD<sub>600</sub> (Fig. 2a) upon coexpression with the SOE4 operon encoding *DXS*, *IPP*Hp and *IspA* (Fig. 1), which are rate-limiting enzymes of the native DXP isoprenoid pathway. Given this 3.6-fold increase in amorphaadiene concentration upon coexpression, we suspected that FPP synthesis and not *ADS* expression limited amorphaadiene production in this engineered host.

### Engineering the mevalonate-dependent pathway in *E. coli*

To increase the intracellular concentration of FPP substrate supplied to the amorphaadiene synthase, we assembled the genes encoding the mevalonate-dependent isoprenoid pathway from *S. cerevisiae* into operons and expressed them in *E. coli*. To simplify the task of engineering an eight-gene biosynthetic pathway, we divided the genes into two operons, referred to as 'top' and 'bottom.' The 'top' operon, *MevT*, transforms the ubiquitous precursor acetyl-CoA to (*R*)-mevalonate in three enzymatic steps (Fig. 1). The 'bottom' operon converts the (*R*)-mevalonate to IPP, DMAPP and/or FPP depending on the construct (Fig. 1). To test the functionality of the heterologous pathway, an *E. coli* strain deficient in isoprenoid synthesis (strain DYM1) was transformed with plasmids expressing the three different bottom operon constructs *pMevB*, *pMBI* and *pMBIS* (Fig. 1). Strain DYM1 has a deletion in the *ispC* gene<sup>22</sup> and therefore cannot synthesize 2-C-methyl-D-erythritol 4-phosphate, an intermediate in the endogenous isoprenoid biosynthetic pathway (Fig. 1). As expected, all strains grew in the presence of 2-C-methyl-D-erythritol, but only the strains harboring *pMBI* or *pMBIS*, and not *pMevB*, grew on plates supplemented with 1 mM mevalonate in the absence of methylerythritol (data not shown). These results established that the synthetic MBI and MBIS operons were functional and capable of supplying IPP and DMAPP required for the growth of *E. coli*. Because the DXP pathway supplies the cells with IPP and DMAPP from a branch point<sup>15</sup>, a mutation in *ispC* prohibits the synthesis of both precursors. Although *E. coli* maintains a nonessential copy of the IPP isomerase gene on its chromosome<sup>23</sup>, the



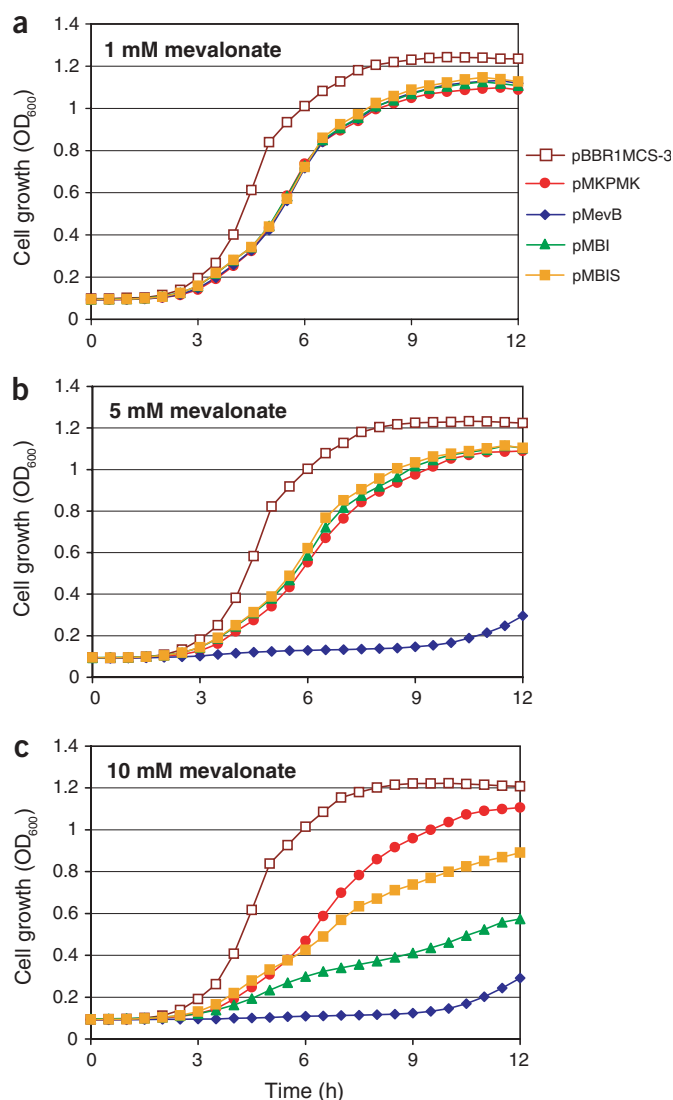
**Figure 2** Comparison of the production of amorphaadiene in LB medium. (a) Amorphaadiene production by the synthetic amorphaadiene synthase was measured from *E. coli* DH10B (nonengineered DXP pathway) and *E. coli* DH10B harboring the pSOE4 plasmid (engineered DXP pathway, Fig. 1) and (b) from *E. coli* DH10B expressing the mevalonate bottom operon (pMBIS, Fig. 1) in cultures supplemented with increasing amounts of DL-mevalonate. Because amorphaadiene was not available commercially, its concentrations were reported as equivalents of caryophyllene, another sesquiterpene olefin, using a standard curve and the relative abundance of ions 189 and 204 *m/z* of the two compounds.

gene's expression seems to be too low to support the growth of *E. coli* when only IPP is supplied by the MevB operon.

To complete the mevalonate pathway and allow the synthesis of sesquiterpene precursors from a simple and inexpensive carbon source, the pMevT plasmid expressing the remaining three genes (*atoB*, *HMGs* and *tHMGs*) of the mevalonate isoprenoid pathway was transformed with either pMBI or pMBIS. Coexpression of the two operons, which together encode a complete pathway for the synthesis of isoprenoids from acetyl-CoA, complemented the *ispC* deletion even in the absence of mevalonate, indicating that the MevT operon was functional (data not shown).

### Amorphaadiene synthesis from mevalonate

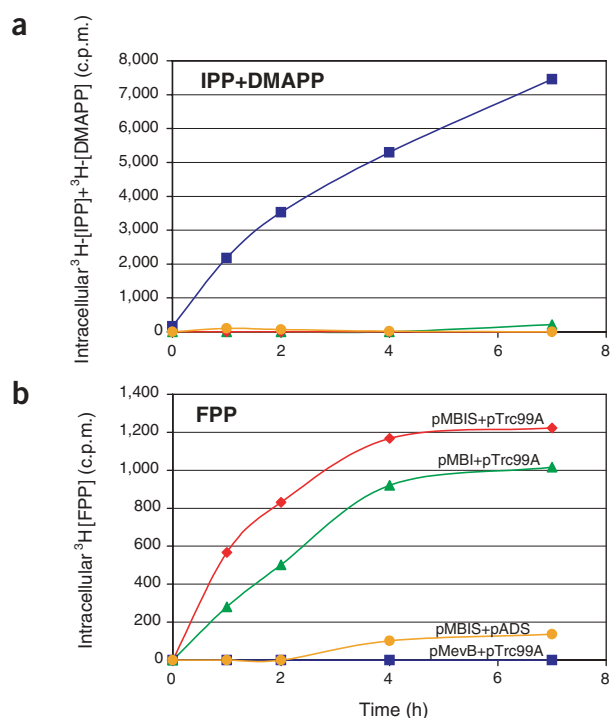
To achieve high-level production of amorphaadiene and to determine if the supply of FPP to the terpene synthase was limiting amorphaadiene yields, the mevalonate pathway was coupled to amorphaadiene synthesis in *E. coli*. Cells harboring the *ADS* gene coexpressed with the MBIS operon were grown in medium supplemented with exogenous mevalonate. Gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (GC-MS) analysis of the culture extracts showed that the peak amorphaadiene concentration from these cultures was proportional to the amount of mevalonate added to the medium, up to a concentration of 40 mM mevalonate (Fig. 2b). These results indicated that flux from the MBIS



**Figure 3** Growth curves of *E. coli* showing the inhibition effect caused by increasing concentrations of DL-mevalonate in the LB medium. The *E. coli* strains harbor either the pBBR1MCS-3 (empty plasmid control), pMKPMK, pMevB, pMBI or pMBIS plasmids expressing the various mevalonate operons described in Figure 1.

operon did not limit amorphaadiene production at the highest mevalonate concentration used. Cultures supplemented with 40 mM mevalonate produced a peak concentration of 3.4 g caryophyllene equivalents/ml/OD<sub>600</sub>, which is a 40- and 11-fold increase over the endogenous and engineered DXP pathway, respectively. The drop in amorphaadiene concentration with time was due to the loss of the volatile terpene to the headspace, which means that these reported production values are certainly underestimated.

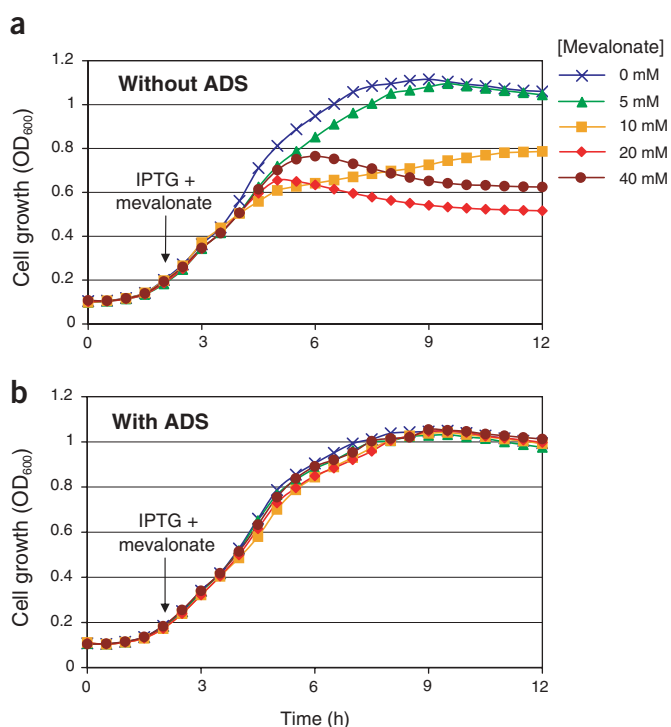
We observed severe growth inhibition upon addition of more than 10 mM mevalonate in the control cultures where the amorphaadiene synthase was not expressed (Fig. 3). To investigate the cause of this inhibition, we measured the growth of *E. coli* DH10B from strains harboring either the pMKPMK, pMevB, pMBI or pMBIS plasmid in media supplemented with increasing concentrations of exogenous mevalonate. Although the addition of 5 mM mevalonate to the medium inhibited the growth of cells harboring pMevB, this concen-



**Figure 4** Prenyl pyrophosphate accumulation in resting cells harboring various mevalonate operons. (a) Intracellular accumulation of [ $^3\text{H}$ ]isopentenyl pyrophosphate (IPP) and [ $^3\text{H}$ ]dimethylallyl pyrophosphate (DMAPP). (b) Intracellular accumulation of [ $^3\text{H}$ ]farnesyl pyrophosphate (FPP) from cell suspensions of *E. coli* harboring pMevB+pTrc99A, pMBI+pTrc99A, pMBIS+pTrc99A or pMBIS+pADS. The HPLC method used to analyze IPP and DMAPP could not resolve the two intermediates. Therefore, the counts per minute (c.p.m.) reported as IPP+DMAPP are from a single HPLC peak.

tration of mevalonate did not affect the growth of cells harboring pMKPMK, pMBI or pMBIS (Fig. 3). Expression of the operons in the absence of mevalonate or in media supplemented with 1 mM mevalonate resulted in only a slight decrease in growth. Thus, from these data we hypothesized that the accumulation of IPP, which occurs in cells with high flux through the mevalonate pathway, is toxic and inhibits normal cell growth. To compare the intracellular prenyl pyrophosphate pools in the same strains, resting cells harboring the different mevalonate operon constructs were fed radiolabeled mevalonate and the labeled metabolites were tracked. As predicted, the strain expressing MevB accumulated IPP but not FPP, whereas the MBI and MBIS strains accumulated FPP but did not build up measurable levels of intracellular IPP (Fig. 4). Simultaneous expression of the amorpha-diene synthase consumed the excess FPP pool that accumulated in the MBIS host, as shown by a decrease in intracellular FPP.

Because cells expressing MBIS accumulated FPP and exhibited growth inhibition in the presence of 10 mM mevalonate, we suspected that coexpression of the amorpha-diene synthase would alleviate the growth inhibition by channeling the intracellular prenyl pyrophosphate intermediates to the volatile terpene olefin. As expected, approximately 2 h after addition of 10–40 mM mevalonate and IPTG, growth inhibition was observed only in strains lacking the ADS gene (Fig. 5). In contrast, cells coexpressing the MBIS operon and the synthase gene, both under control of IPTG-inducible promoters, exhibited normal growth rates at all mevalonate concentrations (Fig. 5). As shown previ-



**Figure 5** Effect of amorpha-diene synthase (ADS) expression on the growth of *E. coli* harboring pMBIS. (a) pMBIS and the empty expression vector pTrc99A (without ADS) or (b) pADS expressing the amorpha-diene synthase. LB medium was supplemented with 0 mM, 5 mM, 10 mM, 20 mM or 40 mM of DL-mevalonate.

ously, amorpha-diene production from these cultures increased proportionally with the addition of exogenous mevalonate (Fig. 2b), further supporting the conclusion that the conversion of FPP to amorpha-diene has a key role in minimizing growth inhibition. Taken together, these data strongly suggest that the engineered mevalonate pathway produces high levels of the prenyl pyrophosphate precursors. However, in the absence of the IPP isomerase, FPP synthase and terpene synthase to channel the pathway intermediates to the terpene olefin, toxic levels of intracellular prenyl pyrophosphates, especially IPP, may accumulate.

### Amorpha-diene synthesis from acetyl-CoA

To achieve amorpha-diene production from a simple and inexpensive carbon source, the pMevT plasmid was introduced into *E. coli* harboring the pMBIS and pADS plasmids. This strain was tested for its ability to produce amorpha-diene in the absence of exogenous mevalonate. Peak amorpha-diene production from the complete mevalonate pathway reached 3.1 g caryophyllene equivalent/ml/OD<sub>600</sub> after 9 h of growth in LB medium. This represents 36- and 10-fold improvements over the peak production for the strains with the native and engineered DXPP pathway (0.086 and 0.313 g caryophyllene equivalents/ml/OD<sub>600</sub>, respectively, as described above) (Fig. 6). From the comparison of the amorpha-diene production between the complete (Fig. 6) and the 'bottom' (Fig. 2b) mevalonate pathways, we estimated that the MevT pathway produced the equivalent of approximately 40 mM of exogenous mevalonate. Glycerol was amended in the cultures to investigate the effect on amorpha-diene yields of supplying an additional carbon source. The addition of 0.8% glycerol to the LB medium led to higher biomass yields and prolonged amorpha-diene production well into the stationary phase of growth. The glycerol-amended culture reached



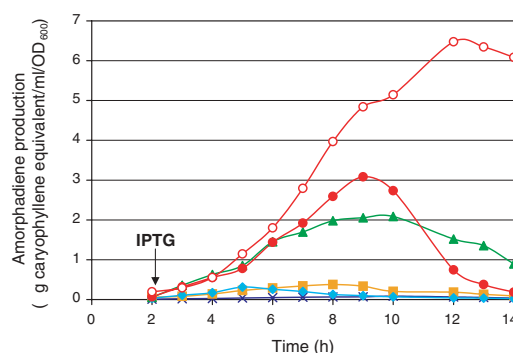
optical densities of 3.7 and amorphaadiene concentrations of 24 g caryophyllene equivalents/ml. Using the rate of amorphaadiene loss from the LB culture (Fig. 6) and assuming that the cells no longer produced amorphaadiene after 11 h, we estimated a mass transfer coefficient of 0.87/h. By using this coefficient to account for the loss of amorphaadiene to the headspace, we estimated a total production of approximately 22.6 and 112.2 mg/l from the LB and LB + 0.8% glycerol cultures, respectively. From these data, it is clear that the expression of the mevalonate-dependent isoprenoid biosynthetic pathway delivers high levels of isoprenoid precursor for the production of sesquiterpenes from a simple carbon source and that optimization of fermentation conditions should result in terpene production in the g/l range.

## DISCUSSION

The development of artemisinin, a promising and potent antimalarial drug, has been limited by the costs associated with extracting the compound from its natural sources and the complexity of the alternative chemical synthesis<sup>2,7,24</sup>. Classical plant breeding and selection combined with improved agricultural practices may not be adequate to lower the costs of artemisinin production to a price affordable for those most affected by the pathogen. Several laboratories have focused on the isolation of *Artemisia annua* L. genes involved in artemisinin synthesis in the hope of lowering the cost of artemisinin production by improving the yields from genetically engineered plants<sup>20,25–27</sup>. The first gene discovered encoded the amorphaadiene synthase, which converts FPP to amorphaadiene. We sought to capitalize on this discovery by expressing the terpene synthase gene in a microbial host engineered to produce high levels of the FPP precursor for enhanced yields of the sesquiterpene olefin.

From our previous work on the microbial production of plant sesquiterpenes in *E. coli*, we concluded that poor expression of the synthase genes limits high terpene olefin yields from this host<sup>21</sup>. To circumvent this limitation, we chose to synthesize an amorphaadiene synthase gene from oligonucleotides using the *E. coli* codon preferences, which can greatly improve protein expression<sup>28</sup>. Comparison of sesquiterpene production in *E. coli* expressing native sesquiterpene synthase genes<sup>21</sup> and *E. coli* expressing the synthetic *ADS* gene showed from a 10- to 300-fold improvement in terpene synthesis in the latter.

Insufficient supply of the prenyl pyrophosphate precursor by the native DXP pathway was shown to limit carotenoid<sup>29</sup> and taxadiene<sup>30</sup> yields in *E. coli*. Metabolic engineering of the DXP pathway<sup>17,18,31–34</sup> increased the flux in carotenoid accumulation by 2- to 40-fold over incubation periods of 20–50 h. Likewise, in this study we observed a threefold increase in sesquiterpene accumulation after 5 h using a similar engineering strategy (Fig. 6). These observations imply that this approach to engineering the DXP pathway results in only a modest increase in flux that may be detectable only by using carotenoid biosynthesis as a reporter and long incubation periods. In this work, we demonstrate that the mevalonate isoprenoid pathway is a superior biosynthetic route for delivering high-level isoprenoid precursors to terpene synthases for large-scale production. By engineering the *S. cerevisiae* mevalonate-dependent isoprenoid pathway into *E. coli*, we circumvent the mevalonate pathway's native regulatory elements found in yeast while bypassing those of *E. coli*'s native DXP pathway. In fact, the heterologous pathway leads to such a vast excess of prenyl pyrophosphates that cell growth is inhibited. Coexpression of a synthetic sesquiterpene synthase consumes the excess pool of precursor, thereby eliminating growth inhibition and providing high yields of amorphaadiene. Although total biosynthesis of artemisinin was not achieved in this study, the engineered biochemical pathway could be extended to produce artemisinic acid. Artemisinic acid can then be



**Figure 6** Comparison of amorphaadiene production between *E. coli* expressing the native DXP pathway and the engineered isoprenoid pathways. The symbols represent amorphaadiene production from cells supplying FPP to synthase using the native DXP pathway (pLac33, pBBR1MCS-3, dark blue  $\circ$ ); the engineered DXP pathway (pSOE4, pBBR1MCS-3, light blue diamond); the mevalonate bottom pathway in the absence of DL-mevalonate (pLac33, pMBIS, yellow square); the mevalonate bottom pathway in medium supplemented with 30 mM DL-mevalonate (pLac33, pMBIS, green triangle); the complete mevalonate pathway (pMevT, pMBIS, filled red circle) and the complete mevalonate pathway in medium supplemented with 0.8% glycerol (open red circle).

converted to high yields (40%) of artemisinin or one of the derivatives via a photo-oxidation cyclization reaction<sup>35</sup>.

In summary, the production of terpene-based compounds first requires the ability to produce large quantities of the olefin precursor. Our work provides a microbial host capable of producing precursors for the large-scale production of any terpene olefin and represents the first essential step toward the production of a broad range of terpene-based compounds in microorganisms. The use of microbes as platform hosts for the synthesis of terpenes offers several advantages over existing methods because they are better suited for the engineering of enzymes and biochemical pathways. For example, the amorphaadiene gene may be easily replaced with any terpene synthase for high-level production of the new terpene. Furthermore, *in vitro* evolution and combinatorial biosynthesis of sesquiterpene biochemical pathways in microbes may lead to artemisinin derivatives or even new sesquiterpene lead compounds. Although greatly improved yields were obtained by combining the expression of a synthetic sesquiterpene synthase with a recombinant mevalonate pathway, the data suggest that a maximum yield was not attained. Therefore, efforts are now directed at identifying the pathway bottlenecks to maximize the flux and optimize expression of the mevalonate pathway.

## METHODS

**Strains and media.** *E. coli* DH10B was used as the cloning and isoprenoid expression strain (see Supplementary Table 1 online for a summary of the strains and plasmids used in this study). For the growth studies, the optical density of cultures expressing the various recombinant pathways was measured with a microtiter plate reader (SpectraMax, Molecular Devices) from 200  $\mu$ l cultures of LB broth in 96-well plates incubated at 37  $^{\circ}$ C with continuous shaking. DL-Mevalonolactone was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich and 2-C-methyl-D-erythritol was synthesized from citraconic anhydride according to the protocol of Duvold *et al.*<sup>36</sup>. The *ispC* mutant *E. coli* strain DYM1<sup>22</sup> (kindly provided by Haruo Seto, University of Tokyo) was used to test the functionality of the synthetic mevalonate operons. The DYM1 strain was propagated on LB medium containing 0.5 mM methylerythritol and transformed DYM1 cells were first allowed to recover on plates supplemented with methylerythritol before being streaked on test media. Media used to test the functionality of the operons were supplemented with 1 mM DL-mevalonate prepared by mixing 1 volume

of 2 M DL-mevalonolactone with 1.02 volumes of 2 M KOH and incubating at 37 °C for 30 min<sup>37</sup>.

**Synthesis of amorphaadiene synthase gene.** The synthetic *ADS* gene was designed using CalcGene<sup>28</sup> and the protein sequence of the synthase isolated by Mercke *et al.*<sup>20</sup> (see Supplementary Fig. 1 online for gene sequence and list of oligonucleotides). To assemble the *ADS* gene, each of the 84 overlapping oligonucleotides (Gibco-BRL) was dissolved in distilled, deionized H<sub>2</sub>O to a final concentration of 100 M. A mixture was prepared by combining 10 l of each of the individual oligonucleotides. The first PCR reaction in the two-step PCR assembly of *ADS* contained in 100 l, 1 Pfu polymerase buffer (20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.8, 2 mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>, 10 mM KCl, 10 mM (NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, 0.1% Triton X-100, 0.1% mg/ml BSA), 0.25 mM of each dNTP, 1 M of oligonucleotides mixture and 5 U Pfu polymerase (Stratagene). The PCR cycling program was 94 °C for 30 s, 40 °C for 2 min, 72 °C for 10 s followed by 40 cycles at 94 °C for 15 s, 40 °C for 30 s, 72 °C for 20 s + 3 s per cycle. The second PCR reaction contained in 100 l, 33 l of the first assembly reaction, 1 Pfu buffer, 0.25 mM of each dNTP and 5U Pfu polymerase. The PCR program for the second step of the assembly was as follows: 94 °C for 30 s, 40 °C for 10 s, 72 °C for 10 s followed by 25 cycles at 94 °C for 15 s, 40 °C for 30 s, 72 °C for 45 s + 1 s per cycle. The DNA smear in the range of 1.7 kb was gel purified and used as template for a third and final PCR reaction containing in 100 l, 1X Pfu buffer, 0.25 mM of each dNTP, 250 nM each of the two outside primers (T-1 and B-42), 10 l of the gel purified DNA and 5 U Pfu polymerase. The PCR program was 40 cycles of 94 °C for 45 s and 72 °C for 4 min followed by a final step at 72 °C for 10 min. The expected 1.7-kb band was gel purified and ligated into pTcr99A using 5' *Nco*I and 3' *Xma*I sites designed into the gene sequence, thereby generating pADS. Two rounds of site-directed mutagenesis were needed to eliminate point mutations and generate a functional gene.

**Construction of the DXP pathway operon.** The *dxs* gene of *E. coli* was spliced to the IPP isomerase gene (*ippHp*) from pAC-LYC04 (ref. 38) using overlapping extensions and PCR primers *dxs1*, *dxs2*, *ippHp1* and *ippHp2* (see Supplementary Table 2 online for primer sequences). The *E. coli ispA* gene was isolated by PCR using primers *ispa1* and *ispa2* and ligated to the *Nco*I site 3' to *ippHp*. The three-gene DXP operon was amplified with primers SOE-f and *ispa2* and ligated into the *Kpn*I-*Pst*I sites of pMevT, thereby replacing the MevT operon with the SOE4 operon.

**Construction of the mevalonate pathway operons.** The *S. cerevisiae* mevalonate pathway was engineered as two separate, independently expressed operons. The genes encoding the last three enzymes of the biosynthetic pathway, mevalonate kinase (MK; gene, *ERG12*), phosphomevalonate kinase (PMK; gene, *ERG8*) and mevalonate pyrophosphate decarboxylase (MPD; gene, *MVD1*, also known as *ERG19*), were isolated by PCR from chromosomal DNA preparations of *S. cerevisiae*. The individual genes were spliced together (MevB, Fig. 1) using overlapping extensions from primers MK-f, MK-r, PMK-f, PMK-r, MPD-f and MPD-r. The genes encoding the first three enzymes of the mevalonate pathway, the acetoacetyl-CoA thiolase from *E. coli* (AACT or *atoB*), 3-hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl-CoA synthase (HMGS or *ERG13*) and a truncated version of 3-hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl-CoA reductase<sup>39</sup> (tHMGR1), were isolated and spliced together as a single operon (MevT, Fig. 1) using the following primers: *atoB*-f, *atoB*-r, HMGS-f, HMGS-r, tHMGR-f and tHMGR-r. Individual genes were isolated by PCR using Pfu DNA polymerase and a standard PCR protocol. The synthetic operons were ligated into pCR4 (TA vector from Invitrogen), after the addition of 3' A overhangs, and sequenced to ensure accuracy. The MevB operon was ligated into the *Pst*I site of pBRR1MCS-1 (ref. 40), generating pMevBCm. The *idi* gene was ligated into the *Xma*I site, 3' to MevB using primers *idi*-f and *idi*-r and the MBI operon was moved to the *Sac*I-*Sac*I sites of pBRR1MCS-3 to generate pMBI. The *idi* gene was excised from pMBI using *Xma*I, thereby generating pMevB. The *ispA* gene from *E. coli* was ligated into the *Sac*I-*Sac*I sites of pMBI using primers *ispa*-f and *ispa*-r, thereby producing pMBIS. The MevT operon was ligated into the *Xma*I-*Pst*I sites of pBAD33 (ref. 41). To place the operon under control of the P<sub>LAC</sub> promoter, the *araC*-P<sub>BAD</sub> *Nsi*I-*Xma*I fragment was replaced with the *Nsi*I-*Xma*I fragment of pBRR1MCS, thereby generating pMevT. To generate pLac33, the MevT operon was excised from pMevT with *Sac*I.

**GC-MS analysis of amorphaadiene.** Amorphaadiene production by the various strains was measured by GC-MS as previously described<sup>21</sup> by scanning only for two ions, the molecular ion (204 *m/z*) and the 189 *m/z* ion. Cells were grown in LB medium at 37 °C for 2 h and induced to express the *ADS* and the mevalonate pathway by the simultaneous addition of 0.5 mM IPTG and varying concentrations of mevalonate. Amorphaadiene concentrations were converted to caryophyllene equivalents using a caryophyllene standard curve and the relative abundance of ions 189 and 204 *m/z* to their total ions. The sesquiterpene caryophyllene was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich.

**Radio-HPLC analysis of intracellular prenol pyrophosphates.** Intracellular IPP+DMAPP and FPP levels were measured using a resting cell suspension assay supplemented with (*R*)-[5-<sup>3</sup>H]mevalonate (39 Ci/mmol; Perkin-Elmer Life Sciences). Cells induced with 0.5 mM IPTG were grown in LB broth at 37 °C to an OD<sub>600</sub> of ~0.6, harvested, washed once and suspended to 20 concentration in 100 mM KPO<sub>4</sub> buffer (pH 7.4). Unlabeled DL-mevalonate (10 mM) and <sup>3</sup>H-radiolabeled (*R*)-mevalonate (60 Ci) were added to 8 ml of cell suspension and incubated at 37 °C. Cells from 1.5-ml aliquots were washed twice with cold KPO<sub>4</sub> buffer and the intracellular IPP+DMAPP and FPP were extracted from cell pellets with 1 ml of 2:1 (vol/vol) methanol/chloroform. The cell extracts were dephosphorylated using potato acid phosphatase as previously described by Fujii *et al.*<sup>42</sup> The prenol alcohols were resolved on a reverse phase C-18 column (4.5 mm 250 mm, 5 mm particle size; Alltech) by HPLC (Agilent Technologies model 1100) using the method of Zhang and Poulter<sup>43</sup> and detected with a flow-through scintillation counter (Packard BioScience, Radiomatic model 500TR).

*Note: Supplementary information is available on the Nature Biotechnology website.*

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#### COMPETING INTERESTS STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests.

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