

The present invention relates to a process for the preparation of 2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid.

2-(4-Hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid is a valuable intermediate, in particular for the preparation of herbicides.

Chemical processes for the preparation of racemic and of pure enantiomeric forms of 2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)-propionic acid have been disclosed. These processes start from hydroquinone and have the disadvantage that they give by-products whose removal, which is necessary, is laborious. This makes economic preparation impossible.

It has been disclosed that microorganisms are able to hydroxylate aromatic compounds. This usually produces dihydroxylated compounds or mixtures of various regioisomers (R.J.W. Byrde, D. Woodcock, Biochem. J. 65 (1957) 682).

The regioselective oxidation of 2-(phenoxy)propionic acid to 2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid by microorganisms has not hitherto been disclosed.

We have now found, surprisingly, that various microorganisms oxidize the valuable 2-(phenoxy)propionic acid to 2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid with high regioselectivity.

The present invention relates to a process for the preparation of 2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid by fermentation, which comprises oxidizing 2-(phenoxy)propionic acid or salts thereof under aerobic conditions in the presence of a microorganism.

A large number of microorganisms are suitable for the process, in particular fungi and bacteria. Utilizable fungi can be isolated, for example, from soil samples, in particular humus-containing soil samples. Particularly suitable for the reaction are *Aspergillus niger* strains. Also suitable are many fungi from the genera *Beauveria*, *Paecilomyces*, *Sclerotium* [sic] and *Coprinus*, which can be obtained, for example, from collections of strains and whose suitability for the hydroxylation can be determined in a straightforward preliminary test. Suitable bacteria

can also be isolated from soil samples, inter alia. Particularly suitable bacteria are Streptomyces strains.

To carry out the process according to the invention, suitable strains are transferred to a nutrient
5 medium containing 2-(phenoxy)propionic acid and incubated aerobically therein under conditions favorable for growth and production by the particular microorganism. The fermentation is carried out continuously or batchwise for 1 to 10 days.

10 The cells of the microorganism, which can also be used in the form of dormant, non-growing cells, are allowed to act directly on the substrate. All conventional incubation processes can be employed, but particularly preferred fermenters are in the form of deep, aerated and
15 agitated tanks. Very good results are obtained by incubation of a liquid nutrient medium.

Suitable nutrient media contain sources of carbon and of nitrogen, and inorganic salts and, where appropriate, small amounts of trace elements and vitamins.
20 Sources of nitrogen which can be used are inorganic or organic nitrogen compounds or materials which contain these compounds. Examples are ammonium salts, nitrates, corn steep liquor, brewer's yeast autolysate, soybean meal, wheat gluten, yeast extract, yeast, urea and potato
25 protein. Examples of sources of carbon which can be used are sugars such as glucose, polyols such as glycerol, or fats such as soybean oil.

Examples of inorganic salts are the salts of calcium, magnesium, manganese, potassium, zinc, copper,
30 iron and other metals. A particularly suitable anion in the salts is the phosphate ion. Growth factors may be added to the nutrient medium, such as biotin, riboflavin or other vitamins.

The ratios of the said nutrients in the mixture
35 depends on the type of fermentation and will be determined in the individual case.

Generally suitable for carrying out the process according to the invention are phenoxypropionic acid

concentrations of about 1 to 100 g/l, preferably about 5 to 50 g/l.

5 The culture conditions are chosen so that the best possible yields are achieved. Cultivation is preferably carried out at from 20 to 40°C, particularly advantageously from 25 to 30°C. The pH is preferably maintained in the range 3 to 9. The pH is particularly advantageously from 4 to 7. An incubation time of from 15 to 100 hours generally suffices. The maximum amount of
10 the desired product accumulates in the medium during this time. The acid is preferably added in the form of a salt, eg. the sodium salt. The acid can be added to the nutrient medium all at once at the start, after growth has taken place or in several portions or continuously during
15 the cultivation.

The use of 2-(phenoxy)propionic acid is preferred, but it is also possible to use salts thereof. Preferred salts are alkali metal and alkaline earth metal salts, for example the Na, K and Li salts.

20 The novel process is suitable for the oxidation both of racemic 2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid and of antipodes thereof. The center of asymmetry remains untouched in the process according to the invention. If, for example, R-2-(phenoxy)propionic acid is used, the
25 configuration is retained and the product is R-2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid. No other hydroxylation products are found in the reaction. Thus the novel process represents a straightforward and more economic method for the selective preparation of 2-(4-
30 hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid.

The examples which follow illustrate the invention:

EXAMPLE 1

Two liquid nutrient media were used to examine
35 various strains of bacteria:

Medium A

	20	g/l	glucose
	5	g/l	yeast extract
	5	g/l	ammonium sulfate
5	0.5	g/l	magnesium sulfate 7-hydrate
	0.05	g/l	manganese sulfate 1-hydrate
	1.5	g/l	potassium dihydrogen phosphate
	3.6	g/l	dipotassium hydrogen phosphate
	1	g/l	(R)-2-(phenoxy)propionic acid
10	2	mg/l	iron(II) sulfate 1-hydrate
	100	μg/l	zinc(II) sulfate 4-hydrate
	300	μg/l	boric acid
	200	μg/l	cobalt(II) [sic] chloride 6-hydrate
	10	μg/l	copper(II) chloride 2-hydrate
15	20	μg/l	nickel(II) chloride 6-hydrate
	30	μg/l	sodium molybdate 2-hydrate

The pH was adjusted to 6.8 with 5 N sodium hydroxide solution. Glucose and phosphates were each autoclaved separately at 121°C for 10 minutes. The (R)-2-(phenoxy)propionic acid was dissolved in water, with a little 5 N sodium hydroxide solution, and sterilized by filtration. The remaining medium was autoclaved at 121°C for 10 minutes.

Medium B

25	20	g/l	glucose
	40	g/l	corn steep liquor
	1.5	g/l	potassium dihydrogen phosphate
	3.6	g/l	dipotassium hydrogen phosphate
	1	g/l	(R)-2-(phenoxy)propionic acid

The pH was adjusted to 6.8 with 5 N sodium hydroxide solution. Glucose and phosphates were each autoclaved separately at 121°C for 10 minutes. The (R)-2-(phenoxy)propionic acid was dissolved in water, with a little 5 N sodium hydroxide solution, and sterilized by filtration. The remaining medium was autoclaved at 121°C for 45 minutes.

20 ml portions of the sterile medium were introduced into sterile 100 ml Erlenmeyer flasks, which were

provided with a sterile cotton plug. One loop of the strain of bacteria to be tested was used to inoculate each flask. The flasks were then incubated at 28°C, shaking at 250 Umm [sic], for 3 to 7 days. Then 1000 μ l of fermentation broth were removed, 100 μ l of 1 N HCl and 800 μ l of ethyl acetate were added, and the mixture was vigorously mixed for 15 seconds. 700 μ l of the organic phase were carefully removed and evaporated in a test tube under a gentle stream of nitrogen at 50°C. The residue was dissolved in 70 μ l of ethyl acetate and transferred quantitatively into a test tube for the gas chromatography. To this were added 30 μ l of N-methyl-N-trimethylsilyltrifluoroacetamide (MSTFA). The samples were then examined by gas chromatography. The external standard used was an authentic sample of (R,S)-2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid which had been chemically synthesized.

The table which follows summarizes the results:

	Genus/species	Collection/ Number	Conversion (%)	Medium
5	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>antibioticus</i>	DSM 40725	11	A
	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>antibioticus</i>	ATCC 11891	10	A
	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>flocculus</i>	ATCC 13850	18	A
10	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>hygroscopicus</i>	ATCC 19040	97	B
	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>hygroscopicus</i>	ATCC 21705	98	A
15	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>kasugaensis</i>	ATCC 15715	4	A
	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>kasugaensis</i>	ATCC 15714	23	B
	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>mediocidicus</i>	ATCC 13279	13	A
20	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>niveus</i>	ATCC 19793	23	A
	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>panayensis</i>	ATCC 31055	2	A
25	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>roseochromogenes</i>	ATCC 21895	4	A
	<i>Streptomyces</i> <i>viridifaciens</i>	ATCC 11989	24	A

EXAMPLE 2

30 About 400 different novel *Streptomyces* strains were isolated from various soil samples by the method of DREWS (Mikrobiologisches Praktikum, 3rd edition, Springer Verlag, pages 47-48, 1976). These strains were tested by the method of Example 1. The table which follows summarizes the conversions by the strains identified as positive.

	<u>Strain number</u>	<u>Conversion (%)</u>	<u>Medium</u>
	1034	8	A
	1045	28	A
	1053	22	A
5	1057	7	A
	1071	11	A
	2476	13	A
	3279	4	A
	3292	33	B
10	3388	26	B
	3520	42	B
	3523	80	A
	3549	80	B
	3558	24	A
15	3559	32	A
	3560	98	A
	3561	90	A
	3565	4	A
	3567	72	B
20	3574	41	A
	3575	24	B
	3782	44	A
	3925	24	B
	4041	14	A
25	5431	19	A
	5432	99	A
	5607	24	A
	5608	26	A
	5613	33	A
30	5619	51	A
	5632	18	A
	5635	15	A
	5636	5	A
	5637	39	A
35	5638	38	A
	5648	25	A
	5654	59	A

EXAMPLE 3

A liquid nutrient medium was prepared with the following ingredients:

	20	g/l	glucose
5	5	g/l	yeast extract
	5	g/l	ammonium sulfate
	0.5	g/l	magnesium sulfate 7-hydrate
	0.05	g/l	manganese sulfate 1-hydrate
	1.5	g/l	potassium dihydrogen phosphate
10	3.6	g/l	dipotassium hydrogen phosphate
	3	g/l	Carbopol® 946 (Carboxyvinyl polymer with an extremely high molecular weight)
	3	g/l	(R)-2-phenoxypropionic acid
15	2	mg/l	iron(II) sulfate 1-hydrate
	100	µg/l	zinc(II) sulfate 4-hydrate
	300	µg/l	boric acid
	200	µg/l	cobalt(II) chloride 6-hydrate
	10	µg/l	copper(II) chloride 2-hydrate
20	20	µg/l	nickel(II) chloride 6-hydrate
	30	µg/l	sodium molybdate 2-hydrate

The pH was adjusted to 6.8 with 5 N sodium hydroxide solution. Glucose and phosphates were each autoclaved separately at 121°C for 10 minutes. The (R)-2-(phenoxy)propionic acid was dissolved in water with a little 5 N sodium hydroxide solution and sterilized by filtration. The remaining medium was autoclaved at 121°C for 10 minutes. 20 ml portions of the sterile medium were introduced into sterile 100 ml Erlenmeyer flasks, which were provided with a sterile cotton plug. One loop of spores of the *Aspergillus niger* ATCC 11394 fungus strain was used to inoculate one flask. The flask was then incubated at 28°C, shaking at 250 rpm, for three days. Then 1000 µl of fermentation broth were removed, 100 µl of 1 N HCl and 800 µl of ethyl acetate were added, and the mixture was vigorously mixed for 15 seconds. 700 µl of the organic phase were carefully removed and evaporated in a test tube under a gentle stream of nitrogen at 50°C. The residue was

dissolved in 70 μ l of ethyl acetate and transferred quantitatively into a test tube for the gas chromatography. To this were added 30 μ l of N-methyl-N-trimethylsilyltrifluoroacetamide (MSTFA). The sample was then examined by gas chromatography. An authentic sample of 2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid was used as reference.

EXAMPLE 4

A liquid nutrient medium was prepared with the following ingredients:

10	40	g/l	glucose
	10	g/l	yeast extract
	0.5	g/l	magnesium sulfate 7-hydrate
	0.05	g/l	manganese sulfate 1-hydrate
	1.5	g/l	potassium dihydrogen phosphate
15	3.6	g/l	dipotassium hydrogen phosphate
	20	g/l	(R)-2-phenoxypropionic acid
	2	mg/l	iron(II) sulfate 1-hydrate
	100	μ g/l	zinc(II) sulfate 4-hydrate
	300	μ g/l	boric acid
20	200	μ g/l	cobalt(II) chloride 6-hydrate
	10	μ g/l	copper(II) chloride 2-hydrate
	20	μ g/l	nickel(II) chloride 6-hydrate
	30	μ g/l	sodium molybdate 2-hydrate

The pH was adjusted to 6.8 with 5 N sodium hydroxide solution. Glucose and phosphates were each autoclaved separately at 121°C for 10 minutes. The (R)-2-(phenoxy)propionic acid was dissolved in water with a little 5 N sodium hydroxide solution and sterilized by filtration. The remaining medium was autoclaved at 121°C for 10 minutes. 50 ml of the sterile medium were introduced into a sterile 100 ml Erlenmeyer flask, which was provided with a sterile cotton plug.

After inoculation with 2.5 ml of a 72 h-old pre-culture of *Beauveria bassiana* ATCC 7159 (cultured in the same medium but in the presence of only 5 g/l (R)-2-(phenoxy)propionic acid), the mixture was inoculated [sic] at 28°C, shaking at 200 rpm, for 4-5 days. The subsequent analysis by gas chromatography revealed that the acid had

been 98 % hydroxylated.

98 % of the (R)-2-(phenoxy)propionic acid had been oxidized to (R)-2-(4-hydroxyphenoxy)propionic acid. The result was the same when the S enantiomer or the racemate
5 of 2-(phenoxy)propionic acid was employed.

EXAMPLE 5

A novel strain of *Aspergillus niger* was isolated from a humus-containing soil sample by the method of DREWS (Mikrobiologisches Praktikum, 3rd edition, Springer
10 Verlag, pages 51-53 (1976)). This strain (No. 1777) was tested by the method of Example 3. 99.8 % of the acid had been oxidized after 3 days.

EXAMPLE 6

Further strains of the species *Aspergillus niger*
15 were tested as described in Example 3 and analyzed after fermentation for 3 and 7 days. The results are summarized in the table which follows:

	Genus/species	Collection/ Number	Conversion (%)	Days
5	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 9142	34	3
		ATCC 11394	98	3
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 26693	100	3
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 1015	83	3
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 10577	70	3
10	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 13794	99	3
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 11414	79	3
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 26550	79	3
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 9029	71	3
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 9642	41	3
15	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 32656	27	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 6275	11	3
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 16404	97	3
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 10575	53	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 10581	85	3
20	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 10549	27	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 1027	51	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 1040	97	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 10553	14	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 10864	65	7
25	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 1004	79	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 16880	99	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 16888	54	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 6273	89	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 7797	79	7
30	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 7983	90	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 10574	100	7
	Aspergillus niger	ATCC 10578	100	7

EXAMPLE 7

Further fungi were tested as in Example 3 and analyzed after fermentation for 3 and 7 days.

	Genus/species	Collection/ Number	Conversion (%)	Days
5	<i>Aspergillus carbonarius</i>	ATCC 8740	7	7
	<i>Aspergillus carbonarius</i>	ATCC 6276	5	7
	<i>Aspergillus foetidus</i>	ATCC 10254	62	7
10	<i>Aspergillus parasiticus</i>	ATCC 26850	7	3
	<i>Aspergillus sclerotiorum</i>	DSM 63357	5	3
15	<i>Aspergillus sclerotiorum</i>	CMI 112328	17	3
	<i>Aspergillus sclerotiorum</i>	CMI 116935	15	3
	<i>Beauvarios [sic] bassiana</i>	ATCC 7159	99	3
20	<i>Paecilomyces farinosus</i>	ATCC 26853	63	7
	<i>Sclerotium rolfsii</i>	ATCC 15206	85	7
	<i>Sclerotium rolfsii</i>	ATCC 15204	19	7
	<i>Sclerotium rolfsii</i>	ATCC 15203	89	7
25	<i>Sclerotium rolfsii</i>	ATCC 15201	81	7
	<i>Sclerotium rolfsii</i>	ATCC 15195	85	7
	<i>Sclerotium rolfsii</i>	ATCC 26326	4	7
	<i>Sclerotium delphinii</i>	ATCC 15196	1	7
30	<i>Coprinus cinereus</i>	ATCC 20120	2	7



Claims

1. A process for the preparation of 2-(4-hydroxy-phenoxy)propionic acid by fermentation, which comprises oxidizing 2-(phenoxy)propionic acid or salts thereof under
5 aerobic conditions in the presence of a microorganism.
2. A process as claimed in claim 1, wherein a fungus is used as microorganism.
3. A process as claimed in claim 1, wherein a bacter-
ium is used as microorganism.
- 10 4. A process as claimed in any of claims 1 to 3, wherein the enantiomers of 2-(phenoxy)propionic acid are employed.