

8.1 Overview of Photosynthesis

By the end of this section, you will be able to do the following:

- Explain the significance of photosynthesis to other living organisms
- Describe the main structures involved in photosynthesis
- Identify the substrates and products of photosynthesis

Photosynthesis is essential to all life on earth; both plants and animals depend on it. It is the only biological process that can capture energy that originates from sunlight and converts it into chemical compounds (carbohydrates) that every organism uses to power its metabolism. It is also a source of oxygen necessary for many living organisms. In brief, the energy of sunlight is “captured” to energize electrons, whose energy is then stored in the covalent bonds of sugar molecules. How long lasting and stable are those covalent bonds? The energy extracted today by the burning of coal and petroleum products represents sunlight energy captured and stored by photosynthesis 350 to 200 million years ago during the Carboniferous Period.

Plants, algae, and a group of bacteria called cyanobacteria are the only organisms capable of performing photosynthesis (Figure 8.2). Because they use light to manufacture their own food, they are called **photoautotrophs** (literally, “self-feeders using light”). Other organisms, such as animals, fungi, and most other bacteria, are termed **heterotrophs** (“other feeders”), because they must rely on the sugars produced by photosynthetic organisms for their energy needs. A third very interesting group of bacteria synthesize sugars, not by using sunlight’s energy, but by extracting energy from inorganic chemical compounds. For this reason, they are referred to as **chemoautotrophs**.

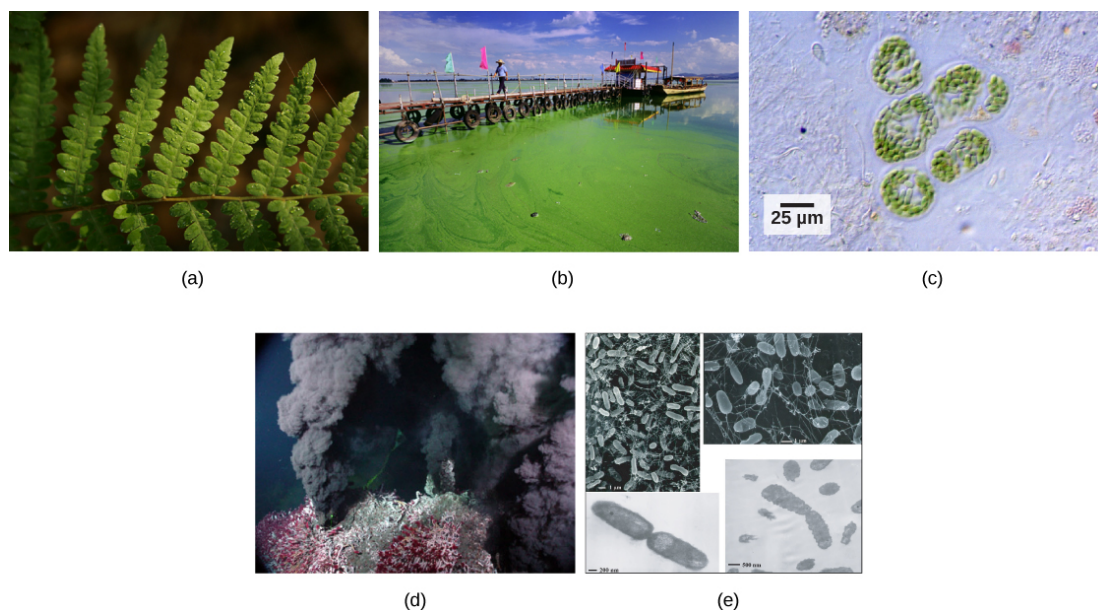


Figure 8.2 Photoautotrophs including (a) plants, (b) algae, and (c) cyanobacteria synthesize their organic compounds via photosynthesis using sunlight as an energy source. Cyanobacteria and planktonic algae can grow over enormous areas in water, at times completely covering the surface. In a (d) deep sea vent, chemoautotrophs, such as these (e) thermophilic bacteria, capture energy from inorganic compounds to produce organic compounds. The ecosystem surrounding the vents has a diverse array of animals, such as tubeworms, crustaceans, and octopuses that derive energy from the bacteria. (credit a: modification of work by Steve Hillebrand, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; credit b: modification of work by "eutrophication&hypoxia"/Flickr; credit c: modification of work by NASA; credit d: University of Washington, NOAA; credit e: modification of work by Mark Amend, West Coast and Polar Regions Undersea Research Center, UAF, NOAA)

The importance of photosynthesis is not just that it can capture sunlight’s energy. After all, a lizard sunning itself on a cold day can use the sun’s energy to warm up in a process called *behavioral thermoregulation*. In contrast, photosynthesis is vital because it evolved as a way to *store the energy from solar radiation* (the

“photo-” part) to energy in the carbon-carbon bonds of carbohydrate molecules (the “-synthesis” part). Those carbohydrates are the energy source that heterotrophs use to power the synthesis of ATP via respiration. Therefore, photosynthesis powers 99 percent of Earth’s ecosystems. When a top predator, such as a wolf, preys on a deer (Figure 8.3), the wolf is at the end of an energy path that went from nuclear reactions on the surface of the sun, to visible light, to photosynthesis, to vegetation, to deer, and finally to the wolf.



Figure 8.3 The energy stored in carbohydrate molecules from photosynthesis passes through the food chain. The predator that eats these deer receives a portion of the energy that originated in the photosynthetic vegetation that the deer consumed. (credit: modification of work by Steve VanRiper, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Main Structures and Summary of Photosynthesis

Photosynthesis is a multi-step process that requires specific wavelengths of visible sunlight, carbon dioxide (which is low in energy), and water as substrates (Figure 8.4). After the process is complete, it releases oxygen and produces glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate (G3P), as well as simple carbohydrate molecules (high in energy) that can then be converted into glucose, sucrose, or any of dozens of other sugar molecules. These sugar molecules contain energy and the energized carbon that all living things need to survive.

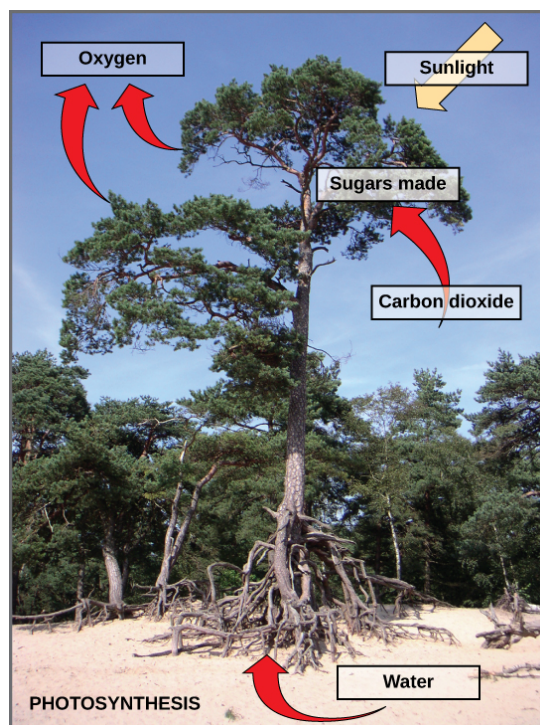


Figure 8.4 Photosynthesis uses solar energy, carbon dioxide, and water to produce energy-storing carbohydrates. Oxygen is generated as a waste product of photosynthesis.

The following is the chemical equation for photosynthesis (Figure 8.5):

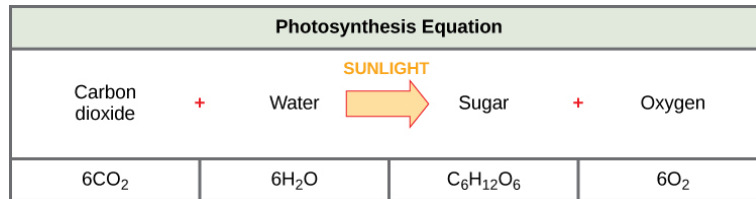


Figure 8.5 The basic equation for photosynthesis is deceptively simple. In reality, the process takes place in many steps involving intermediate reactants and products. Glucose, the primary energy source in cells, is made from two three-carbon G3Ps.

Although the equation looks simple, the many steps that take place during photosynthesis are actually quite complex. Before learning the details of how photoautotrophs turn sunlight into food, it is important to become familiar with the structures involved.

Basic Photosynthetic Structures

In plants, photosynthesis generally takes place in leaves, which consist of several layers of cells. The process of photosynthesis occurs in a middle layer called the **mesophyll**. The gas exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen occurs through small, regulated openings called **stomata** (singular: stoma), which also play roles in the regulation of gas exchange and water balance. The stomata are typically located on the underside of the leaf, which helps to minimize water loss due to high temperatures on the upper surface of the leaf. Each stoma is flanked by guard cells that regulate the opening and closing of the stomata by swelling or shrinking in response to osmotic changes.

In all autotrophic eukaryotes, photosynthesis takes place inside an organelle called a **chloroplast**. For plants, chloroplast-containing cells exist mostly in the mesophyll. Chloroplasts have a double membrane envelope (composed of an outer membrane and an inner membrane), and are ancestrally derived from ancient free-living cyanobacteria. Within the chloroplast are stacked, disc-shaped structures called **thylakoids**. Embedded in the thylakoid membrane is chlorophyll, a **pigment** (molecule that absorbs light) responsible for the initial interaction between light and plant material, and numerous proteins that make up the electron transport chain. The thylakoid membrane encloses an internal space called the **thylakoid lumen**. As shown in Figure 8.6, a stack of thylakoids is called a **granum**, and the liquid-filled space surrounding the granum is called **stroma** or “bed” (not to be confused with stoma or “mouth,” an opening on the leaf epidermis).



VISUAL CONNECTION

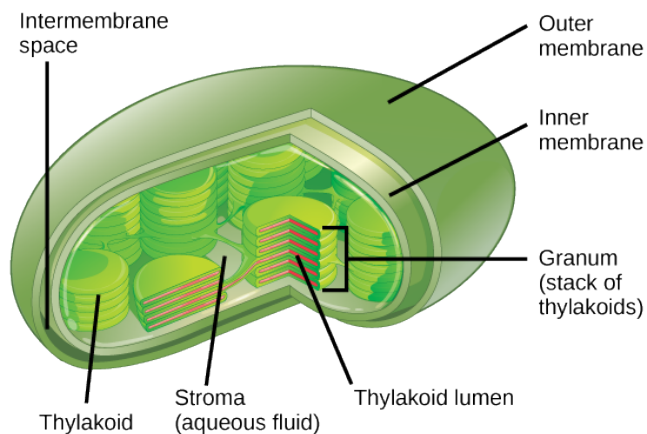


Figure 8.6 Photosynthesis takes place in chloroplasts, which have an outer membrane and an inner membrane. Stacks of thylakoids called grana form a third membrane layer.

On a hot, dry day, the guard cells of plants close their stomata to conserve water. What impact will this have on photosynthesis?

The Two Parts of Photosynthesis

Photosynthesis takes place in two sequential stages: the light-dependent reactions and the light-independent reactions. In the **light-dependent reactions**, energy from sunlight is absorbed by chlorophyll and that energy is converted into stored chemical energy. In the **light-independent reactions**, the chemical energy harvested during the light-dependent reactions drives the assembly of sugar molecules from carbon dioxide. Therefore, although the light-independent reactions do not use light as a reactant, they require the products of the light-dependent reactions to function. In addition, however, several enzymes of the light-independent reactions are activated by light. The light-dependent reactions utilize certain molecules to temporarily store the energy: These are referred to as *energy carriers*. The energy carriers that move energy from light-dependent reactions to light-independent reactions can be thought of as “full” because they are rich in energy. After the energy is released, the “empty” energy carriers return to the light-dependent reaction to obtain more energy. [Figure 8.7](#) illustrates the components inside the chloroplast where the light-dependent and light-independent reactions take place.

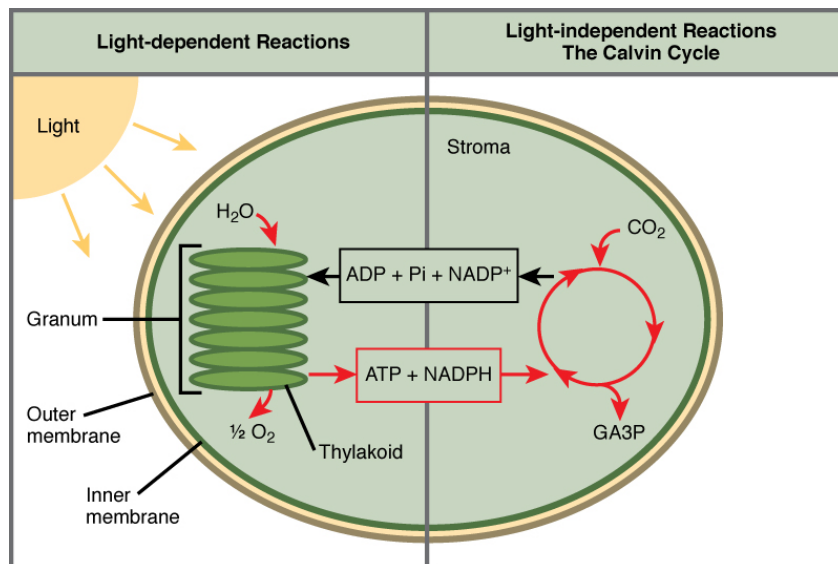


Figure 8.7 Photosynthesis takes place in two stages: light-dependent reactions and the Calvin cycle. Light-dependent reactions, which take place in the thylakoid membrane, use light energy to make ATP and NADPH. The Calvin cycle, which takes place in the stroma, uses energy derived from these compounds to make G3P from CO_2 .

LINK TO LEARNING

Click the [link \(http://openstax.org/l/photosynthesis\)](http://openstax.org/l/photosynthesis) to learn more about photosynthesis.

Everyday Connection

Photosynthesis at the Grocery Store



Figure 8.8 Foods that humans consume originate from photosynthesis. (credit: Associação Brasileira de Supermercados)

Major grocery stores in the United States are organized into departments, such as dairy, meats, produce, bread, cereals, and so forth. Each aisle ([Figure 8.8](#)) contains hundreds, if not thousands, of different products for customers to buy and consume.

Although there is a large variety, each item ultimately can be linked back to photosynthesis. Meats and dairy link, because the animals were fed plant-based foods. The breads, cereals, and pastas come largely from starchy grains, which are the seeds of photosynthesis-dependent plants. What about desserts and drinks? All of these products contain sugar—sucrose is a plant product, a disaccharide, a carbohydrate molecule, which is built directly from photosynthesis. Moreover, many items are less obviously derived from plants: For instance, paper goods are generally plant products, and many plastics (abundant as products and packaging) are derived from “algae” (unicellular plant-like organisms, and cyanobacteria). Virtually every spice and flavoring in the spice aisle was produced by a plant as a leaf, root, bark, flower, fruit, or stem. Ultimately, photosynthesis connects to every meal and every food a person consumes.

8.2 The Light-Dependent Reactions of Photosynthesis

By the end of this section, you will be able to do the following:

- Explain how plants absorb energy from sunlight
- Describe short and long wavelengths of light
- Describe how and where photosynthesis takes place within a plant

How can light energy be used to make food? When a person turns on a lamp, electrical energy becomes light energy. Like all other forms of kinetic energy, light can travel, change form, and be harnessed to do work. In the case of photosynthesis, light energy is converted into chemical energy, which photoautotrophs use to build basic carbohydrate molecules ([Figure 8.9](#)). However, autotrophs only use a few specific wavelengths of sunlight.