

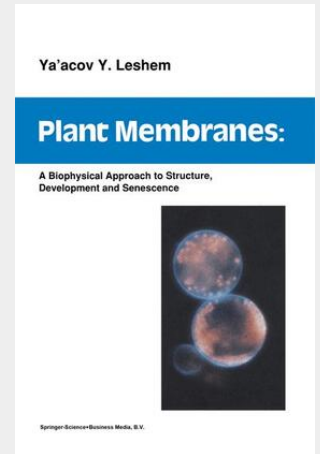
Leshem

Plant Membranes

A biophysical approach to structure, development and senescence

The plasma membrane is at once the window through which the cell senses the environment and the portal through which the environment influences the structure and activities of the cell. Its importance in cellular physiology can thus hardly be overestimated, since constant flow of materials between cell and environment is essential to the well-being of any biological system. The nature of the materials moving into the cell is also critical, since some substances are required for maintenance and growth, while others, because of their toxicity, must either be rigorously excluded or permitted to enter only after chemical alteration. Such alteration frequently permits the compounds to be sequestered in special cellular compartments having different types of membranes. This type of homogeneity, plus the fact that the wear and tear of transmembrane molecular traffic compels the system to be constantly monitored and repaired, means that the membrane system of any organism must be both structurally complex and dynamic. Membranes have been traditionally difficult to study because of their fragility and small diameter. In the last several decades, however, remarkable advances have been made because of techniques permitting the bulk isolation of membranes from homogenized cells. From such isolated membranes have come detailed physical and chemical analyses that have given us a detailed working model of membrane. We now can make intelligent guesses about the structural and functional interactions of membrane lipids, phospholipids, proteins, sterols and water.

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