

ggpedigree: Visualizing Pedigrees with ‘ggplot2’ and ‘plotly’

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Summary

Pedigree diagrams underpin research and practice across genetics, animal breeding, genealogy, forensics, and counseling. They help medical geneticists trace the inheritance of Mendelian diseases and identify at-risk relatives; enable dairy breeders to plan matings that improve milk yield; support genealogists in reconstructing ancestry; assist forensic scientists in establishing familial connections in criminal investigations; and facilitate family therapists and counselors in understanding their clients’ relationships (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2020). Early R tools such as kinship2 (Sinnwell, Therneau, & Schaid, 2014) plot simple nuclear families effectively, but they do not scale to today’s pedigrees that can exceed 1,000s of individuals. As datasets have grown, researchers now work with increasingly complex family structures, including large-scale plant breeding pedigrees (Shaw, Graham, Kennedy, Milne, & Marshall, 2014), web-based pedigree management systems (Ranaweera, Makalic, Hopper, & Bickerstaffe, 2018), interactive pedigree editors (Carver et al., 2018), and behavior genetic studies of extended family structures (Garrison et al., 2023; Hunter, Garrison, Burt, & Rodgers, 2021). That complexity exposes the limitations of existing tools, which often struggle with large and complex datasets. ggpedigree addresses this need by combining a vectorised layout algorithm, ggplot2 output, and optional plotly interactivity.

Statement of need

Pedigree visualization has traditionally relied on proprietary software (e.g., Progeny, GenoPro, Pedigree Viewer) or R packages like kinship2 (Sinnwell et al., 2014), pedtools (Vigeland, 2021a), or pedtricks (J. Martin, Wolak, Johnston, & Morrissey, 2025). While these tools are functional for many use cases, their limitations become pronounced when working with complex, modern pedigree datasets or when more detailed customization is required. Most R packages focus on base graphics or simple ggplot2 implementations.

Existing R solutions face three main challenges. First, current solutions are often poorly integrated with tidyverse workflows and do not expose the full theming and layering capabilities familiar to ggplot2 users (Wickham, 2016). In animal-focused workflows, rapid rendering seems to take precedence over aesthetic flexibility. I suspect that this is because users tend to work with more uniform data and fewer phenotypes. By contrast, human-focused workflows—particularly in behavior genetics and genetic epidemiology (Garrison et al., 2023; Lyu et al., 2025; McArdle & McDonald, 1984)—require closer integration with tidyverse pipelines and more flexible plotting systems to accommodate complex pedigree structures and harmonization of phenotypes across data sources. In other words, the needs are different.

Second, most R-based tools offer no interactivity. Static graphics are often sufficient for publication, but interactivity improves exploration and communication during model development or data cleaning. A notable exception is pedtools (Vigeland, 2021b), which offers a sister shiny

41 app, QuickPed (Vigeland, 2022). While the R ecosystem includes libraries, like plotly, that
 42 support interactive plotting, these features have yet to be integrated into pedigree functions.

43 Third, scalability and extensibility remain limited across existing tools. Several R packages
 44 attempt to address these challenges with built-in pedigree plotting functions. kinship2
 45 (Sinnwell et al., 2014) remains widely used but produces static base graphics and relies on non-
 46 vectorized recursive layout functions that do not scale well to large families. A partial ggplot2
 47 implementation exists in a modernized kinship2 (called Pedexplorer, Le Nézet, Sinnwell,
 48 Letko, André, & Quignon, 2025), but is non-vectorized and incompatible with other ggplot2
 49 layers. pedtricks, a revival of pedantics (Morrissey & Wilson, 2010), provides a ggplot2-
 50 based implementation for large animal pedigrees but lacks extensibility and interactivity. The
 51 geneHapR (Zhang, Jia, & Diao, 2023) package focuses on haplotype visualization rather than
 52 general pedigree structure. The pedgene package (Schaid & Sinnwell, 2024) offers some
 53 plotting functions but is primarily designed for association testing. The pedigreejs package
 54 (Carver et al., 2018) provides an interactive pedigree editor but does not integrate with R or
 55 ggplot2, limiting its utility for R users.

56 None of these packages offers the combination of modern ggplot2 integration, interactive
 57 capabilities, and extensibility that ggpedigree provides. ggpedigree addresses these limitations
 58 by providing a comprehensive visualization framework built on modern R graphics infrastructure.
 59 It leverages the extensive customization capabilities of ggplot2 while adding specialized
 60 functionality for pedigree-specific visualization challenges.

61 Software Architecture

62 ggpedigree is built on a modular architecture that separates data processing, layout calculation,
 63 and visualization layers. The core workflow involves: (1) data standardization and family
 64 structure analysis using BGmisc functions, (2) coordinate calculation using algorithms adapted
 65 from kinship2, (3) relationship connection mapping, and (4) layer-based plot construction
 66 using ggplot2 geometry functions. This design allows users to customize any aspect of the
 67 visualization while maintaining computational efficiency for large pedigrees. The package
 68 integrates tightly with the broader R ecosystem, particularly the tidyverse (Wickham et al.,
 69 2019) and BGmisc (Garrison, S. M., Hunter, Michael D., Lyu, X., Trattner, J. D., & Burt,
 70 S. A., 2024). All functions return standard R objects (ggplot or plotly) that can be further
 71 customized.

72 Features

73 I describe the main features of the ggpedigree package below. More detailed descriptions of
 74 features and usage are available in the [package vignettes](#), including examples of how to create
 75 static and interactive pedigree plots, customize aesthetics, and visualize relatedness matrices.
 76 Additional example data include squirrel data from the Kluane Red Squirrel Project (McFarlane
 77 et al., 2014, 2015) and Targaryen family data from the Song of Ice and Fire universe (G. R. R.
 78 Martin, 1997, 2018).

- 79 ■ Data Standardization and Family Structure Analysis: ggPedigree() integrates with
 80 BGmisc functions like ped2fam() to organize individuals by family, recodeSex() to
 81 standardize sex coding, and checkParentIDs() to validate pedigree structures. The
 82 function handles consanguineous relationships and individuals appearing in multiple
 83 pedigree positions.
- 84 ■ Coordinate Calculation: calculateCoordinates() computes optimal positioning for indi-
 85 viduals using algorithms adapted from kinship2::align.pedigree, with enhancements
 86 for large multi-generational pedigrees and complex family structures. These steps are
 87 vectorized as much as possible to ensure computational efficiency and compatibility with
 88 ggplot2.

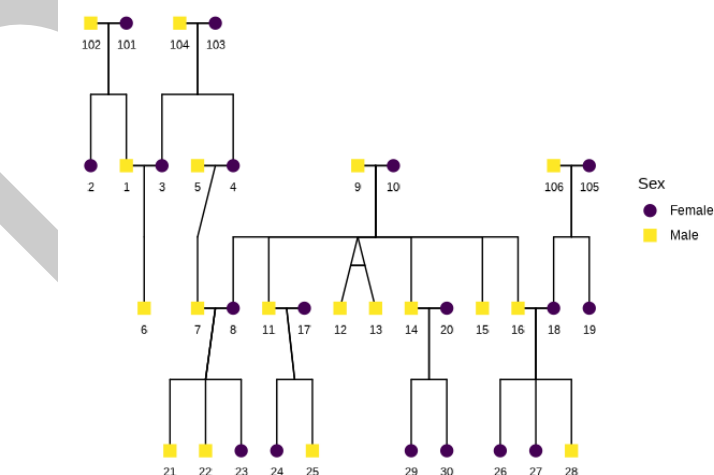
- 89 ■ Relationship Connection Mapping: `calculateConnections()` generates connection paths
90 between family members, mapping parent-child, sibling, spousal, and twin relationships.
91 The function determines midpoints for line intersections and handles overlapping con-
92 nections with specialized curved segments. These calculations are optimized for large
93 datasets by using vectorized operations rather than the loop-based approaches used in
94 `kinship2`.
- 95 ■ Layer-based Plot Construction: `ggPedigree()` constructs plots using `ggplot2` geometry
96 functions, returning standard `ggplot2` objects that integrate with existing R workflows.
97 `ggPedigreeInteractive()` extends plots into interactive `plotly` widgets. A config system
98 allows customization of over 100 aesthetic and layout parameters.
- 99 ■ Individual Highlighting: Advanced functionality to highlight specific individuals and their
100 relatives based on additive genetic, mitochondrial, or other relationship matrices.
- 101 ■ Specific Visualization Functions: `ggPedigree()` creates static pedigree plots using
102 `ggplot2`. `ggPedigreeInteractive()` generates interactive pedigree plots using `plotly`.
103 `ggRelatednessMatrix()` creates customizable heatmaps for relatedness matrices with
104 support for hierarchical clustering, and seamless integration with `BGmisc` relatedness
105 calculations. `ggPhenotypeByDegree()` visualizes phenotypic correlations as a function
106 of genetic relatedness, including confidence intervals and statistical summaries for
107 quantitative genetic analysis.

108 Code example

109 This example shows how to use `ggpedigree` to visualize a pedigree. The potter dataset
110 includes several wizarding families from the Harry Potter series.

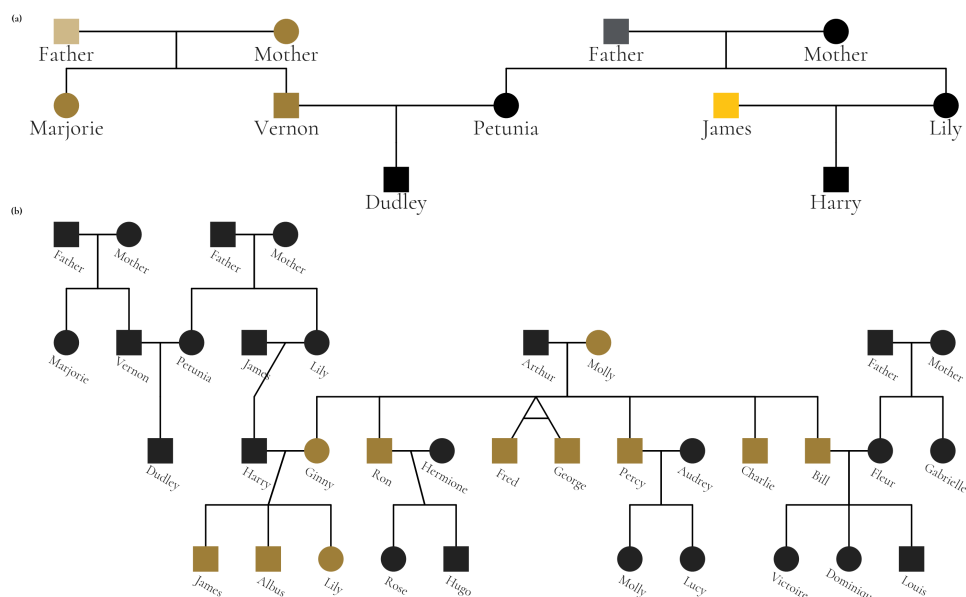
```
ggPedigree(potter,  
  famID = "famID",  
  personID = "personID"  
)
```

111 This code produces the following pedigree plot:



112
113 The package supports extensive customization of visual aesthetics. The following example
114 is a figure from Hunter et al. (2025) that used the Potter pedigree data. The figure has
115 been restyled according to Wake Forest University brand identity guidelines to demonstrate
116 `ggpedigree`'s customization capabilities. The figure combines two panels: panel (a) highlights

unique mitochondrial lines in the Dursley and Evans families, while panel (b) shows the full pedigree with Molly Weasley's mitochondrial descendants in gold.



The complete source code for this example is available in the package documentation at https://r-computing-lab.github.io/ggpedigree/articles/v01_plots_extended.html.

Collectively, these tools provide a valuable resource for behavior geneticists and others who work with extended family data. They were developed as part of a grant and have been used in several ongoing projects, presentations (Garrison, 2024; Hunter, Garrison, Lyu, Good, & Burt, 2024), and forthcoming papers (Burt et al., 2025; Hunter et al., 2025; Lyu et al., 2025).

Availability

The ggpedigree package is open-source and available on both GitHub at <https://github.com/R-Computing-Lab/ggpedigree> and the Comprehensive R Archive Network (CRAN) at <https://cran.r-project.org/package=ggpedigree>. It is licensed under the GNU General Public License.

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