

ENGINEERING

Crystal orientation dictated epitaxy of ultrawide-bandgap 5.4- to 8.6-eV α -(AlGa)₂O₃ on m-plane sapphire

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Ultrawide-bandgap semiconductors are ushering in the next generation of high-power electronics. The correct crystal orientation can make or break successful epitaxy of such semiconductors. Here, it is found that single-crystalline layers of α -(AlGa)₂O₃ alloys spanning bandgaps of 5.4 to 8.6 eV can be grown by molecular beam epitaxy. The key step is found to be the use of m-plane sapphire crystal. The phase transition of the epitaxial layers from the α - to the narrower bandgap β -phase is catalyzed by the c-plane of the crystal. Because the c-plane is orthogonal to the growth front of the m-plane surface of the crystal, the narrower bandgap pathways are eliminated, revealing a route to much wider bandgap materials with structural purity. The resulting energy bandgaps of the epitaxial layers span a broad range, heralding the successful epitaxial stabilization of the largest bandgap materials family to date.

INTRODUCTION

Since the middle of the last century, semiconductor materials have made a steady climb to the top of the periodic table to wider energy bandgaps. Starting from the early days of Ge to the Si revolution and the current wide-bandgap SiC and GaN materials, each new generation of semiconductors has enabled electronic, photonic, and sensing and actuation functions in regimes that were considered impossible before. Next-generation electronics and photonics need much larger bandgaps beyond the established material families. Ultrawide-bandgap (UWBG) semiconductor materials for power and microwave electronics and deep-ultraviolet (UV) photonics include Aluminum Nitride (AlN), Boron Nitride (BN), diamond, and Ga₂O₃ (1–4). The recent availability of single-crystal β -Ga₂O₃ substrates has generated substantial interest in this wide-bandgap semiconductor material family for high-voltage electronics and UV photonics (5, 6). However, efforts to create β -(AlGa)₂O₃ with high Al contents to obtain UWBGs to exceed the bandgap of ~6 eV available in the nitride material family in AlN have met a roadblock. Because β -(AlGa)₂O₃ is not the energetically favored crystalline phase for large Al compositions, the crystal converts to competing structural phases when grown on β -Ga₂O₃ substrates (7–10).

This leads to the intriguing question: Can single-phase and highly crystalline α -Al₂O₃ of bandgap $E_g \sim 8.8$ eV (11) and its alloys and heterostructures with α -Ga₂O₃ of bandgap $E_g \sim 5.3$ eV (12–14) be grown directly by molecular beam epitaxy (MBE) on α -Al₂O₃ (sapphire) substrates? If this can be done, and if these layers can be con-

trollably doped, it will open new application arenas. The UWBG energies (~5.3 to 8.8 eV), a large portion of which is unachievable in the nitride semiconductor family, and the attractive dielectric constants (~11 for || *c* axis and ~9 for \perp *c* axis for α -Al₂O₃) (15, 16) offer the possibility to take semiconductor electronics and photonics into regimes that currently remain out of reach. In this work, we report that the first of these challenges can be met: High-crystalline quality, single-phase α -(AlGa)₂O₃ can be grown by MBE directly on m-plane sapphire, spanning bandgaps of ~5.3 to 8.8 eV, i.e., the entire Al composition of the alloy from 0 to 1. Although the conductivity control of all compositions is not achieved over the entire range of bandgaps yet, experimental evidence of n-type α -Ga₂O₃ and theoretical prediction for (AlGa)₂O₃ indicate that this may be feasible (17–19). The bandgaps and sharp heterostructures achieved by MBE put this material family beyond those that are available today, and the cost-effective, large-area substrates for achieving this are already available.

Significance of crystal orientation

The orientation of the substrate crystal determines the subsequent crystal phases in unique ways in this UWBG material family. Homo-epitaxial growth of α -Al₂O₃ films has been reported on *c*-, *a*-, and *r*-plane substrates using MBE (20, 21) and pulsed laser deposition (PLD) (22, 23), but no study of their optical properties exist. On the other end of the α -(Al_{*x*}Ga_{1–*x*})₂O₃ alloy system, single-crystalline α -Ga₂O₃ films and conductive, n-type doped films are successfully grown on *c*- and m-plane sapphire substrates by mist chemical vapor deposition (CVD) (12, 17) and halide vapor-phase epitaxy (HVPE) (24, 25). α -(AlGa)₂O₃ alloys have also been grown using MBE on a-plane ($0 \leq x \leq 1$) (26), mist-CVD on *c*-plane ($0 \leq x \leq 0.81$) (27–30), and PLD on *r*-plane sapphire substrates ($0.92 \leq x \leq 1$) (23). Among the growth methods, MBE and MOCVD offer the capability to maintain sharp interfaces across layers in quantum heterostructures of different alloy compositions (8, 21, 31, 32), as well as sharply controlled doping profiles, which are problematic with HVPE or mist-CVD techniques. MBE growth of α -(Al_{*x*}Ga_{1–*x*})₂O₃ of high Ga content is

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hampered because metastable α -Ga₂O₃ in the rhombohedral corundum structure has a propensity to revert to the thermodynamically most stable monoclinic β -Ga₂O₃, especially whenever a corundum c-plane becomes available. This can occur either on the sapphire substrate itself or in the underlying corundum structure of the epitaxial layers. The growth of β -Ga₂O₃ on c-plane sapphire has been obtained using MOVCD and PLD (33), while mist-CVD and HVPE (12, 24, 30) have been used for the growth of pure α -(AlGa)₂O₃ on c-plane sapphire. However, as described below, the stability of the α -phase grown by MBE, MOCVD, and PLD differs significantly from those grown by mist-CVD and HVPE (12, 24, 33), which currently is a scientifically intriguing phenomena. In addition, preventing this phase transformation in MBE and MOCVD holds the key to access desired abrupt heterostructures and sharp doping profiles in this UWBG family, as indicated in Fig. 1.

The growth of β -Ga₂O₃ on c-plane sapphire substrates by MBE, MOCVD, and PLD has been found to have the epitaxial relationship of $(\bar{2}01) \beta\text{-Ga}_2\text{O}_3 \parallel (0001)$ sapphire (33, 34). Recent studies by scanning transmission electron microscopy (STEM) have revealed that when grown on c-plane sapphire, a three-monolayer-thick coherent α -Ga₂O₃ first forms, and the subsequent epitaxial layers undergo a crystalline phase transition to the β -phase (33), as shown in Fig. 1A. Also shown in the figure are the planes $(\bar{2}01) \beta\text{-Ga}_2\text{O}_3 \parallel (0001)$ sapphire, which cause this transition. As shown in Fig. 1A, if the hexagonal sapphire crystal plane is rotated from the c-plane to the r-plane, the c-plane is now at an angle and can potentially stabilize the growth of α -Ga₂O₃ by avoiding the crystalline phase transition.

In 2018, Kracht *et al.* attempted this strategy: They reported the growth of α -Ga₂O₃ on r-plane sapphire substrate with a film thickness of 217 nm (14). They observed that after c-plane facets were formed on the surface of the α -Ga₂O₃ film, the β -Ga₂O₃ appeared with the same epitaxial relationship of $(\bar{2}01) \beta\text{-Ga}_2\text{O}_3 \parallel (0001) \alpha\text{-Ga}_2\text{O}_3/\text{sapphire}$, as shown in Fig. 1B, indicating that the c-plane facet enhanced the growth of β -Ga₂O₃ in MBE. These results suggest that a sapphire crystal plane perpendicular to the c-plane, such as a- or m-planes, could potentially allow the growth of phase-pure α -Ga₂O₃ by avoiding facets, as shown in Fig. 1C. Nd-doped α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ and α -Ga₂O₃ with a film thickness of 14 nm have been reported on a-plane sapphire in previous studies (26, 34). These prior studies provided x-ray diffraction (XRD) study of the layers, but the atomic crystal structure and optical properties remain unknown.

The MBE growth of α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ material family on m-plane sapphire has not been investigated in detail. However, Sn-doped α -Ga₂O₃ of bandgap ~ 5.3 eV on m-plane sapphire grown by mist-CVD exhibits a room temperature electron mobility of 65 cm²/V·s at a high carrier density of $n = 1.2 \times 10^{18}$ cm⁻³ (18), suggesting promising electronic properties of α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ on m-plane sapphire. High room temperature electron mobility of ~ 600 cm²/V·s was concluded for optically generated electrons in α -Al₂O₃, increasing to ~ 4000 cm²/V·s at low temperatures (35). A recent first-principles study predicts that Si can be an efficient shallow donor for high-Al content (Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ (19), to achieve n-type conductivity of (Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃.

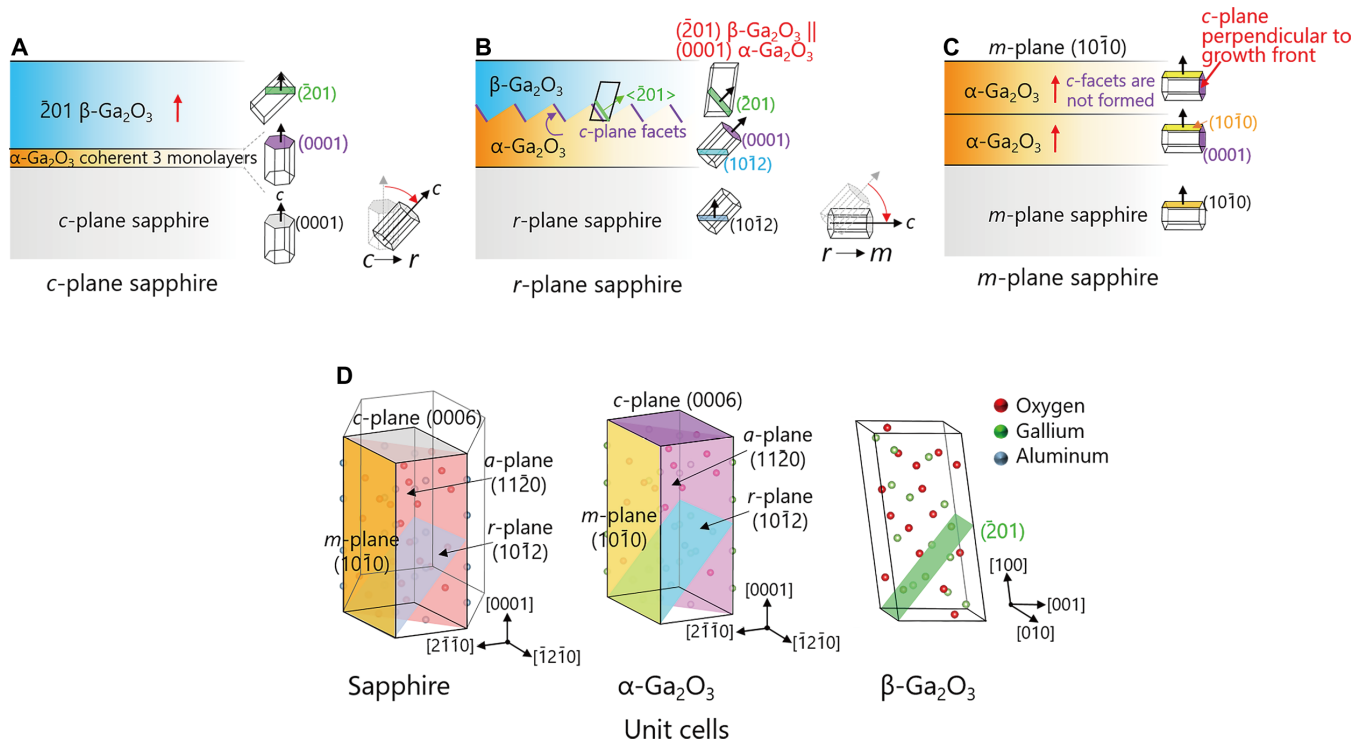


Fig. 1. Schematics of growth behaviors of Ga₂O₃ grown on sapphire. Schematics of growth behaviors of Ga₂O₃ grown on (A) c-plane, (B) r-plane, and (C) m-plane sapphire substrates by MBE and (D) unit cells of sapphire, α -Ga₂O₃, and β -Ga₂O₃. β -Ga₂O₃ is grown on c-plane sapphire substrates with the coherent α -Ga₂O₃ interlayer. (33) The epitaxial relationship is $(\bar{2}01) \beta\text{-Ga}_2\text{O}_3 \parallel (0001) \alpha\text{-Ga}_2\text{O}_3/\text{sapphire}$. On r-plane sapphire, after c-plane facets are formed on the surface of the α -Ga₂O₃ layer, β -Ga₂O₃ appears with the same epitaxial relationship of $(\bar{2}01) \beta\text{-Ga}_2\text{O}_3 \parallel (0001) \alpha\text{-Ga}_2\text{O}_3$ (14). On the other hand, m-plane, which is perpendicular to the c-plane, is expected to have less chance to form the c-plane facets and allow the growth of phase-pure α -Ga₂O₃.

Motivated by the above reasons, in this study, we explore growth of this UWBG semiconductor family on *m*-plane sapphire substrates. We find that the MBE growth of α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ on *m*-plane sapphire solves the faceting problem completely, allowing its bandgap engineering over the entire composition range to be achieved. A series of epitaxial layers of α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ with $x = 0.0$ to 1.0 and thicknesses ranging from ~50 to 85 nm were grown by oxygen plasma-assisted MBE on *m*-plane sapphire substrates. The growth and subsequent structural, chemical, and optical characterization methods are described in Materials and Methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Single-crystal UWBG epitaxial layers

Symmetric XRD $2\theta/\omega$ scans of the samples are displayed in a logarithmic intensity scale in Fig. 2A. The profiles reveal that the diffraction peak is from the α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ 30 $\bar{3}$ 0 reflection at angles slightly lower than that of the sapphire substrate. There are no peaks originating from other crystal phases or other planes. With decreasing Al composition x , the peaks from α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ 30 $\bar{3}$ 0 monotonically shift to lower angles without any compositional segregation, suggesting a higher Ga composition in the film. No additional peaks or fringes are observed for the MBE-grown α -Al₂O₃ epitaxial layer, which is identical to the substrate despite the ~60-nm thickness, as verified by secondary ion mass spectrometry (SIMS) discussed later. From these results, we conclude that single-phase α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films are epitaxially stabilized successfully on *m*-plane sapphire substrates for the entire range of Al compositions without phase or composition separation/segregation.

Figure 2B shows the SIMS profiles measured on the homoepitaxial 100% α -Al₂O₃ layer grown on *m*-plane sapphire. The atomic concentrations of typical impurities (H, B, C, Na, and Si) are indicated by the axis on the left, while secondary intensities of Al and O are shown on the axis on the right. The intensities of Al and O in the epitaxial layer are observed to be identical to that in the *m*-plane sapphire substrate, suggesting growth of stoichiometric Al₂O₃. Compared to the sapphire substrate, a large B peak is seen at the growth

interface, which is a marker indicating that the film thickness of the MBE-grown α -Al₂O₃ epitaxial layer is ~60 nm. There is an increase in the Si concentration at the growth interface, whereas the H and C concentrations in the epitaxial layer remain identical to the *m*-plane sapphire bulk substrate. The profiles for H and C represent the background levels of the measurements since densities of ~10¹⁸ cm⁻³ are not expected in sapphire substrates. The Na concentration is ~10¹⁶ cm⁻³. At present, we assume that the source of B is the pBN crucibles used for the MBE source materials, that of Si is from the quartz tube used as a component of the O plasma source, and that of Na is from the sapphire substrate. Si could accumulate during the substrate treatment using O plasma before growth as discussed in Materials and Methods.

To evaluate the strain in the epitaxial films, asymmetrical reciprocal space maps (RSMs) for 22 $\bar{4}$ 0 reflections were taken. Figure 3A shows the relation between the (22 $\bar{4}$ 0) and (10 $\bar{1}$ 0) *m*-plane of the corundum structure. These results indicate that the α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films (0.37 ≤ x ≤ 0.74) consist of coherent and relaxed layers, and the relaxed layers are subject to slight in-plane compressive strain (Fig. 3, C to F). On the other hand, the α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films ($x < 0.37$) were completely lattice-relaxed because of the lattice mismatch with the sapphire substrate (fig. S1). Because 22 $\bar{4}$ 0 decomposes into 30 $\bar{3}$ 0 + $\bar{1}2\bar{1}$ 0, the directions of Q_z and Q_x are along 10 $\bar{1}$ 0 (the growth direction) and $\bar{1}2\bar{1}$ 0 (one of the *a* axes), respectively. The dashed red line intersects the theoretical positions of sapphire [(Q_x, Q_z) = (-0.420, 0.728)] and α -Ga₂O₃ 22 $\bar{4}$ 0 reflection [(Q_x, Q_z) = (-0.401, 0.695)]. The α -Al₂O₃ homoepitaxial film shows a streak along $Q_x = -0.42 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ (Fig. 3B), which is also observed for the reflections at $Q_x = -0.42 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ in the samples whose x is larger than 0.37. The vertical streak arises from a small film thickness. Two reflection peaks of α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ are obtained at x between 0.37 and 0.74: One is on the same Q_x line ($Q_x = -0.42$) as that of the sapphire substrate and the other is located between the dashed line and $Q_x = -0.42 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ (Fig. 3, C to F).

Figure 4 shows the surface atomic force microscopy (AFM) images of the *m*-plane sapphire substrate and the epitaxial α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films. The surface morphology of the as-received

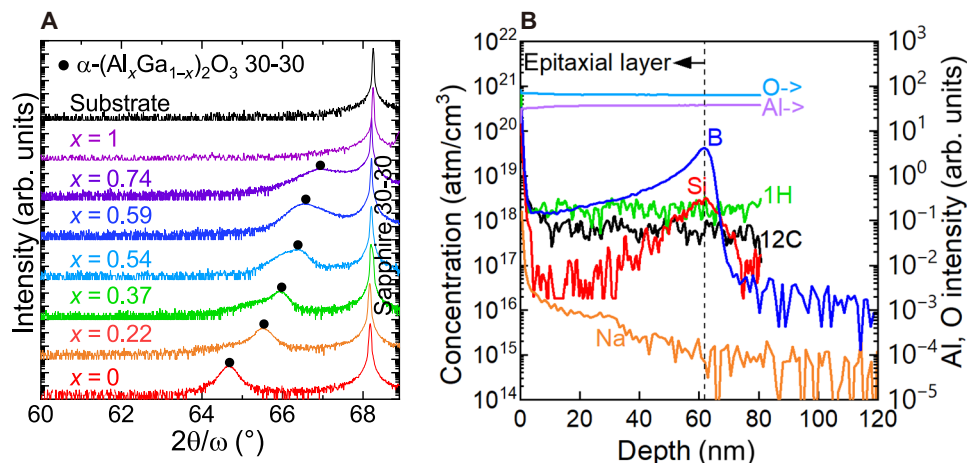


Fig. 2. XRD scans of α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films and SIMS profiles of the α -Al₂O₃ epitaxial film. (A) Symmetric XRD $2\theta/\omega$ scans of α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films grown on *m*-plane sapphire substrates by plasma-assisted MBE. Diffraction peaks from the α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ are denoted by the filled circles. Note that no diffraction peaks from other phases are observed. **(B)** Atomic densities of typical impurities in the α -Al₂O₃ epitaxial film grown on *m*-plane sapphire measured by SIMS. The film/substrate interface is marked by the clear peak in the B profile, indicating that the epitaxial film thickness is ~60 nm. The concentrations of H and C are at background levels. Secondary ion intensities of Al and O are also shown on the side axis on the right, indicating stoichiometric epitaxial growth.

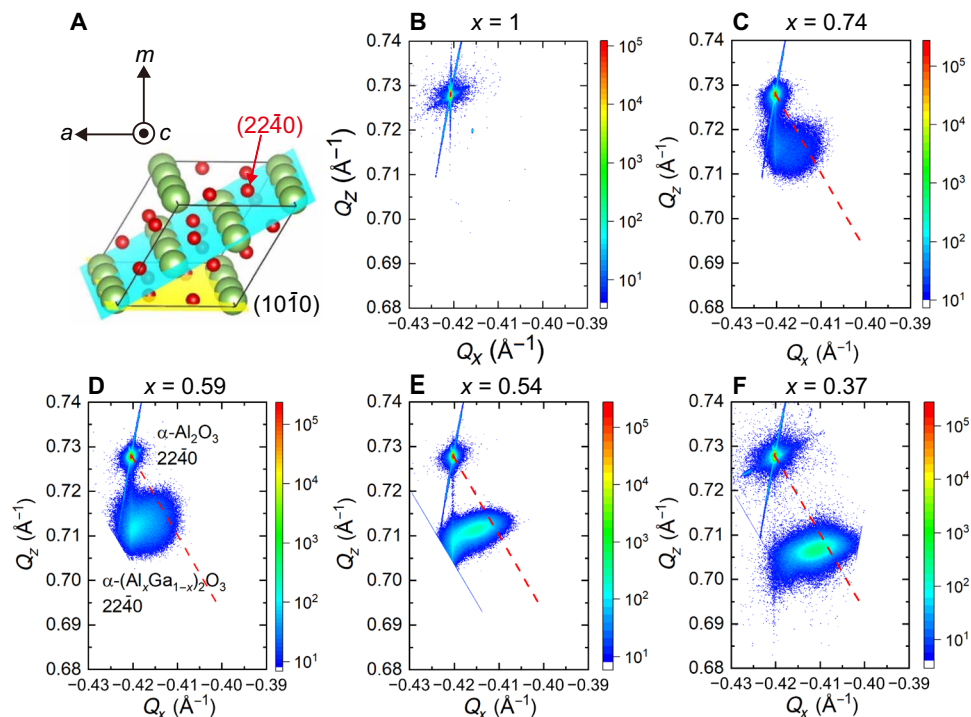


Fig. 3. RSMs (Q_x , Q_z) around the $22\bar{4}0$ reflections of the α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ epitaxial films. (A) The relation between the $22\bar{4}0$ and $(10\bar{1}0)$ m -plane of the corundum structure. The directions of Q_z and Q_x are along $10\bar{1}0$ and $\bar{1}2\bar{1}0$, respectively. RSMs for $x =$ (B) 0, (C) 0.74, (D) 0.59, (E) 0.54, and (F) 0.37.

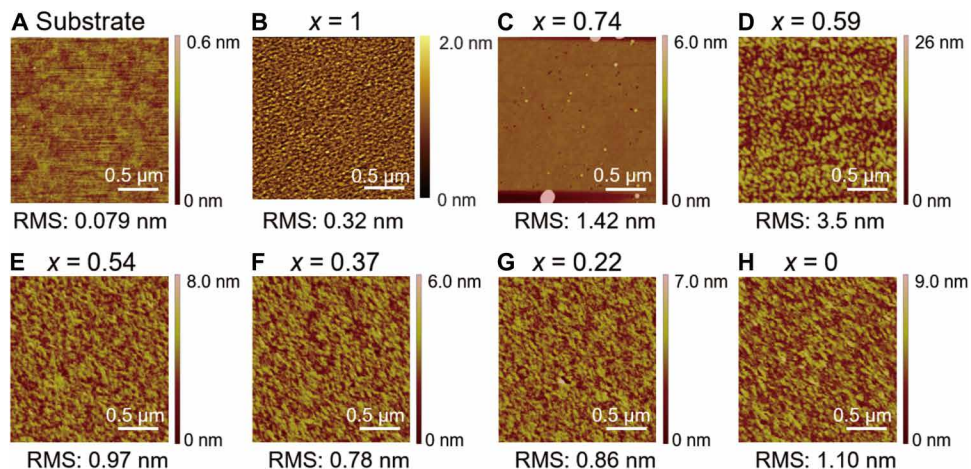


Fig. 4. Surface morphology of α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films on m -plane sapphire substrates. (A) Sapphire substrate. (B) to (H) are α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films with $x =$ 1, 0.74, 0.59, 0.54, 0.37, 0.22, and 0, respectively. The RMS roughness of the α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films for $x \leq 0.54$ is less than 1.1 nm.

substrate was extremely smooth with a root mean square (RMS) roughness as small as 0.079 nm (Fig. 4A). The α - Al_2O_3 epitaxial film shows a small RMS roughness of 0.32 nm (Fig. 4B) but does not exhibit atomic steps, which are not observed on the starting substrate either. Curiotto *et al.* reported a step-terrace morphology for m -plane sapphire substrates by annealing under Ar-O_2 at 1235 K for 78 hours (36), suggesting thermal treatment for potential improvement of the surface morphology of α - Al_2O_3 films in the future. When the Al mole fraction x is smaller than 0.54, the RMS roughness remains smaller than 1.1 nm (Fig. 4, E to H). For $x = 0.59$

and $x = 0.74$, α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films have rougher surface morphologies of 3.5 and 1.42 nm RMS values (Fig. 4, C and D), probably due to the low substrate temperature of 650°C.

Electron microscopy reveals single-crystalline UWBG layers

The XRD spectra showed the growth of single-phase α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films on m -plane sapphire substrates. To investigate the atomic details of the crystal structures of the epitaxial layers, high-angle annular dark-field STEM (HAADF-STEM) images were taken on the cross-sectional α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ samples for $x = 1$, $x = 0.37$, $x = 0.22$,

and $x = 0$. All the images were viewed along the (0001) zone axis. Figure 5 shows the cross-sectional images of the α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ film series grown on m-plane sapphire substrates and the corresponding enlarged images at the interfaces. As shown in Fig. 5A, since the epitaxial α -Al₂O₃ layer and the substrate have the same contrast, the exact location of the interface is invisible. On the basis of the corroborating SIMS measurement of Fig. 2B, an enlarged image was taken at the interface that was formed 60 nm below the surface. The uniformity of the crystal structure indicates that epitaxial α -Al₂O₃ films grow homoepitaxially on m-plane sapphire substrate with no visible structural defects.

On the other hand, a clear contrast between the epitaxial film and the substrate is seen for the images of the α -(Al_{0.37}Ga_{0.63})₂O₃, α -(Al_{0.22}Ga_{0.78})₂O₃, and α -Ga₂O₃ samples (Fig. 5, B to D). The low-magnification images reveal that these films grow uniformly on m-plane sapphire substrates. Contrast variations inside the film are due to strain relaxation by misfit dislocations near the substrate interface. The edge dislocation density is estimated at $\sim 5 \times 10^5 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ (or $\sim 10^{11} \text{ cm}^{-2}$) from the cross-sectional TEM sample of α -(Al_{0.37}Ga_{0.63})₂O₃, in the range also corroborated by x-ray rocking curves as shown in fig. S2 and table S2 discussed in the Supplementary Materials. This is consistent with the incoherent nature of the α -(Al_{0.37}Ga_{0.63})₂O₃ epitaxial layer indicated by RSM of Fig. 3F compared to the coherent α -Al₂O₃ epitaxial layer in Fig. 3B. No notable

phase separation or compositional segregation is observed in the epitaxial layers: They are phase pure. The film thicknesses of the α -(Al_{0.37}Ga_{0.63})₂O₃, α -(Al_{0.22}Ga_{0.78})₂O₃, and α -Ga₂O₃ films are measured to be 66, 57, and 60 nm, respectively, which agree well with the thicknesses (d) estimated from x-ray reflectivity (XRR) measurements (table S1). The enlarged images show that sharp hetero-junction interfaces are formed between the epitaxial films and the substrates and that the α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ ($x \leq 0.37$) films have an identical crystal structure and orientation to the substrate. α -Ga₂O₃ films show dislocations at the interface due to lattice mismatch (Fig. 5D and fig. S3); however, no secondary phases were observed. The combination of the STEM images with XRD thus indicates that single-crystalline, single-phase epitaxial films are successfully grown on the m-plane sapphire substrate over the full $0 \leq x \leq 1$ composition range.

Deep-UV spectroscopy reveals UWBGs

Figure 6A shows the optical transmittance spectra of the α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films (T) and a bare m-plane sapphire substrate control sample (T_s) as a function of the photon energy ($h\nu$). Each epitaxial film shows the same high transparency in the visible and UV spectral ranges as the substrate. The bandgaps of the epitaxial α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ layers are clearly observed despite their small thicknesses, indicating strong photon absorption. Note that the transmittance of

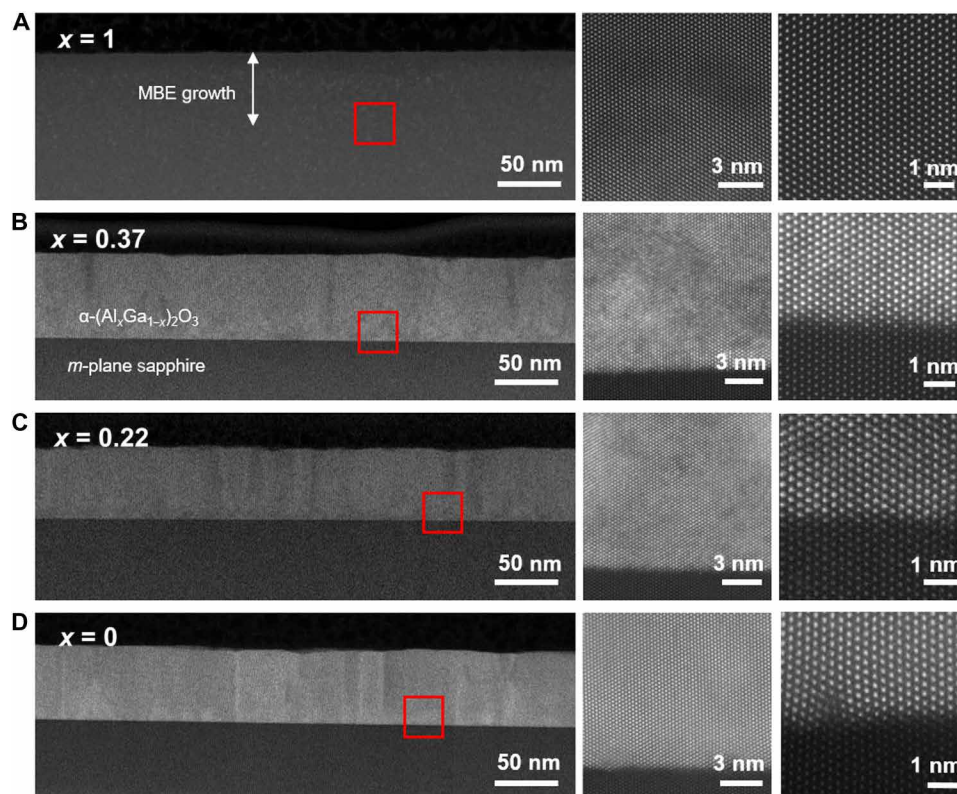


Fig. 5. HAADF-STEM images showing an overview of α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ film grown on m-plane sapphire and the sequentially enlarged interfaces from the boxes in the overview images. (A) to (D) correspond to $x = 1$, $x = 0.37$, $x = 0.22$, and $x = 0$, respectively. (A) The film and the substrate show identical contrast, as expected for a homoepitaxial film. The enlarged area shows no differences in contrast and lattice structure. (B) to (D) show film thickness of 66, 55, and 60 nm, respectively. They all show sharp interfaces, while the films show contrast variations from strain relaxation resulting from misfit dislocations near the interface. Further details of the defects are explained in the Supplementary Materials. Enlarged atomic resolution image in (D) shows that α -Ga₂O₃ film is relaxed at the interface; however, no other phases are observed.

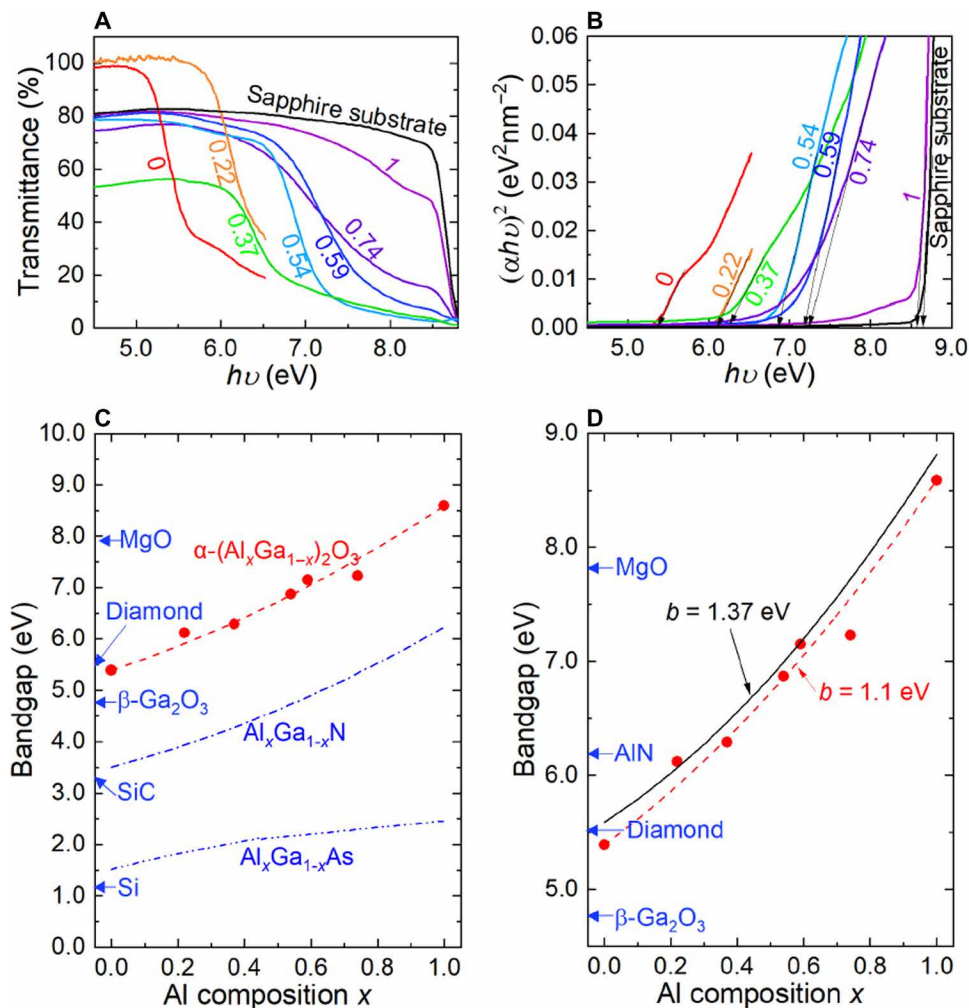


Fig. 6. Optical transmittance spectra and bandgap energies of the α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films. (A) Optical transmittance of the α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films and substrate. (B) $(\alpha h\nu)^2$ - $h\nu$ plot as a function of the Al composition. The α -($\text{Al}_{0.37}\text{Ga}_{0.63}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ film exhibited a lower transmittance than the other samples since the sample was smaller than the aperture for the transmittance measurement. The appearance of higher transparency of the samples with $x=0$ and $x=0.22$ is due to different measurement systems. Compared to the absorption spectra of the bulk α - Al_2O_3 substrate, the transmittance and absorption spectra of the α - Al_2O_3 epitaxial sample shows absorption around 7 to 8.5 eV and what appears as a slight red shift in the fundamental absorption edge. Both are attributed to absorption by sub-bandgap defect states (likely O and/or Al interstitials or vacancies) since the TEM image in Fig. 5A does not show extended defects, nor does the SIMS profile (Fig. 2B). Direct bandgaps (solid symbols) for the α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films as a function of the Al composition are shown in (C) the wide range from 0 to 10 eV and (D) the UWBG region ($E_g > 4$ eV). The red dashed line is a quadratic fit to the direct bandgaps. The black solid line is a quadratic fit to the computed direct bandgap for the corundum structure as reported in (37). The bandgaps for AlGaN and AlGaAs are also shown for comparison in (C) (38).

α -($\text{Al}_{0.37}\text{Ga}_{0.63}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ appears lower than the other samples because of a smaller sample size of this particular sample than the optical aperture. Each absorption coefficient (α) was calculated using the equation $T/T_s = \exp(-\alpha d)$, and $(\alpha h\nu)^2$ is plotted as a function of $h\nu$ in Fig. 6B. When $x=0$ and 0.22, the absorption edge exhibits a double step-like onset, while the α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ ($x \geq 0.37$) has a single step onset. The observation of double step-like onset in α - Ga_2O_3 thin films has been reported earlier, suggesting two allowed direct optical interband transitions (13, 14). The Ga-rich α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films ($0 \leq x \leq 0.37$) show broader absorption onsets than the Al-rich samples, which is related to the slightly indirect bandgap character of α - Ga_2O_3 (13).

Direct optical bandgap energies of the α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ films were estimated from the relationship of $(\alpha h\nu)^2$ versus $(h\nu - E_g)$. As

shown by the red filled circles in Fig. 6C, the experimental direct bandgaps monotonically increase as the Al composition x increases. In Fig. 6D, the black solid line shows the theoretical direct bandgap energies calculated by Peelaers *et al.* (37) using hybrid density functional theory. The experimentally measured bandgaps of the α -($\text{Al}_x\text{Ga}_{1-x}$) $_2\text{O}_3$ epitaxial layers are, for the most part, in excellent agreement. A ~ 0.2 eV lower than the predicted values from the simple Tauc plots of $(\alpha h\nu)^2$ versus $(h\nu - E_g)$ may be due to an underestimation of the bandgap energy owing to excitonic absorption with low-energy tails, related to the slightly indirect character of α - Ga_2O_3 and to as-yet unknown defects (13). The bowing parameter (b) is obtained from $E_g(x) = (1-x)E_g[\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3] + xE_g[\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3] - bx(1-x)$, where $E_g[\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3]$ and $E_g[\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3]$ are the bandgap energies of α - Ga_2O_3 and α - Al_2O_3 , respectively, by fitting the plot as depicted by the red

dashed line. The value of b is estimated to be 1.1 eV. This experimental value agrees well with the theoretically calculated value of 1.37 eV and proves the UWBG nature of the epitaxial layers available for bandgap engineering from 5.4 to 8.6 eV.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated the successful epitaxial stabilization of UWBG single-phase α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films over the entire composition range on m-plane sapphire substrates by MBE by avoiding phase transformation with the choice of crystal orientation for epitaxy. Cross-sectional HAADF-STEM images reveal that single-phase, single-crystalline α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ epitaxial films are formed, by avoiding the formation of c-plane facets. By varying the alloy composition, bandgap energies from ~5.4 eV up to 8.6 eV with a bowing parameter of 1.1 eV are achieved, making α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ the largest bandgap epitaxial material family to date. If these layers can be controllably doped, it would pave the way for α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃-based high-power heterostructure electronic and photonic devices at bandgaps far beyond all materials available today.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

All films reported in this work were grown on double-side polished m-plane (10 $\bar{1}$ 0) sapphire substrates in the Veeco Gen930 MBE System equipped with standard effusion cells for elemental Ga and Al and a radio frequency (RF) plasma source for active oxygen species. The pressure in the growth chamber was $\sim 10^{-5}$ to 10^{-6} torr during the growth runs. For the growth of α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films ($x \geq 0.37$), the input RF power and oxygen flow rate were fixed at 250 W and 0.50 sccm (standard cubic centimeters per minute), respectively. The α -Al₂O₃ and α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ films ($1 > x \geq 0.37$) were grown for 2 hours at thermocouple substrate temperatures (T_{sub}) of 750°C and 650°C, respectively. The α -(Al_xGa_{1-x})₂O₃ ($x = 0.22$ and 0) samples were grown at $T_{\text{sub}} = 650^\circ\text{C}$ using the input RF power of 260 W and the oxygen flow rate of 0.23 sccm. The growth times of α -(Al_{0.22}Ga_{0.78})₂O₃ and α -Ga₂O₃ were 3 hours and 3 hours 13 min, respectively. The Al concentration (x) in the films was varied from 0 to 1 by regulating the beam equivalent pressures (BEPs) of Ga [(0 to 1.1) $\times 10^{-8}$ torr] and Al [(0 to 1.6) $\times 10^{-8}$ torr]. Before each growth, the m-plane sapphire substrates were subjected to an oxygen plasma treatment in the growth chamber for 10 min at $T_{\text{sub}} = 800^\circ\text{C}$.

Characterization of materials

Structural properties and surface morphology of the samples were characterized by XRD measurements, AFM, and STEM. The film thicknesses of the samples ($x < 1$) were determined by XRR measurements, while SIMS was used to determine the chemical impurity species as well as the thickness of the α -Al₂O₃ epitaxial layer, since there were no thickness fringes observed from the XRR profile for the α -Al₂O₃ film due to homoepitaxial growth. The film thicknesses were in the range of 56 to 84.3 nm. Table S1 summarizes the Al and Ga BEPs and film thicknesses (d) of the samples. The Al composition was estimated by XRD and x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS). Optical bandgaps of the films were estimated by analyzing the optical transmission spectra; an m-plane sapphire substrate was used as a reference sample. The optical transmittance spectra were measured at room temperature using a Varian Cary 50 UV-Vis spectrometer with a wavelength range of 190 to 800 nm for $x \leq 0.22$ and using a Bunkoukeiki KV-201 vacuum UV spectrophotometer with a wavelength range of 140 to 300 nm for $x \geq 0.37$. The

Bunkoukeiki KV-201 unit had a 20-cm focal-length Czerny-Turner monochromator equipped with a 1200 groove/mm grating and a 30-W deuterium lamp that were purged with nitrogen gas during operation. A separate α -Al₂O₃ sample used for transmittance measurement was grown at $T_{\text{sub}} = 750^\circ\text{C}$ for 2 hours using an input RF power of 250 W, an oxygen flow rate of 0.50 sccm, and an Al BEP of 1.5×10^{-8} torr. By inserting a thin α -Ga₂O₃ layer to intentionally introduce thickness fringes, the film thickness of 78.2 nm was measured by XRR. We used the sample directly grown on sapphire in the same growth condition for the transmittance measurement.

Transmission electron microscopy measurement

Cross-sectional TEM specimens were prepared using a FEI Strata 400 Focused Ion Beam with a final milling step of 5 keV to reduce damage. Carbon and platinum protective layers were deposited before milling to minimize ion-beam damage. The samples were then examined by STEM, using an aberration-corrected Titan Themis operating at 300 keV.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Supplementary material for this article is available at <http://advances.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/7/2/eabd5891/DC1>

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Acknowledgments: We acknowledge useful discussions with M. Thompson, F. Rana, J. McCandless, Y.-T. Shao, and N. Tanen of Cornell University and K. Chabak, A. Neal, A. Green, S. Mou, and T. Asel of the Air Force Research Laboratories. **Funding:** This work was, in part, supported by JSPS Overseas Challenge Program for Young Researchers 1080033 and by the Air-Force/Cornell Center for Epitaxial Solutions (ACCESS) center of excellence monitored by A. Sayir. C.S.C. acknowledges support from the Air Force Office of Scientific Research (FA9550-18-1-0529). **Author contributions:** R.J., Y.C., and D.J. conceived the study and designed the experimental study. R.J., C.S.C., T.O., S.-T.H., D.R., M.C.C., and K.L. performed the experiments. R.J., C.S.C., T.O., and Y.C. conducted the subsequent data analysis. R.J., C.S.C., and D.J. wrote the manuscript. V.P., D.G.S., D.A.M., and H.G.X. contributed ideas and feedback on the analysis and edited the manuscript. All authors edited the manuscript and approved its final version. **Competing interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests. **Data and materials availability:** All data needed to evaluate the conclusions in the paper are present in the paper and/or the Supplementary Materials. Additional data related to this paper may be requested from the authors.

Submitted 30 June 2020

Accepted 16 November 2020

Published 8 January 2021

10.1126/sciadv.abd5891

Citation: R. Jinno, C. S. Chang, T. Onuma, Y. Cho, S.-T. Ho, D. Rowe, M. C. Cao, K. Lee, V. Protasenko, D. G. Schlom, D. A. Muller, H. G. Xing, D. Jena, Crystal orientation dictated epitaxy of ultrawide-bandgap 5.4- to 8.6-eV α -(AlGa)₂O₃ on m-plane sapphire. *Sci. Adv.* **7**, eabd5891 (2021).