

Benefits of Intercropping Legumes with Cereals

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Abstract

Reducing use of mineral nitrogen (N) fertilizer is one of the potential ways to reverse land degradation and ultimately increase the productivity of degrading soils of Egypt. We found that intercropping legume with cereal species in the same row can increase efficiency of photosynthetic process in legumes and reduce mineral N fertilizer inputs in cereals. Hence, intercropping culture can maintain agro-ecosystem without air, soil and water pollution.

Keywords: Intercropping; Ecosystem; Legumes; Cereals; Mineral N fertilization

Introduction

Special attention has been directed towards increasing crop productivity per unit area in Egypt. There is some legumes such as peanut (*Arachis hypogaea* L), soybean (*Glycine max* L) and cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata* L) are grown in the summer. These legumes lack chlorophylls in vascular bundle sheath cells, while cereals such as maize (*Zea mays* L), sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor* L) or sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum* L) does. These cereals have a higher photosynthetic rate than legumes, especially under high temperature and light intensity during summer season. Several studies reported that C₄ crops have higher competitive ability over plants possessing the common C₃ carbon fixation pathway under intercropping conditions (Sayed Galal et al., 1984; El-Habbak, 1985; Sayed Galal and Metwally, 1986; Zohry, 1994; El-Gergawy et al., 1995; El-Douby et al., 1996; Abou-Kresha et al. 1997; Hussein et al., 2000; Metwally et al., 2003 and 2009; Abdel-Galil et al., 2014; Abdel-Wahab and Abdel-Rahman, 2016; Hefny et al., 2017; Morsy et al., 2017 and Metwally et al., 2018). [1-19].

This is because these cereals lack photo-respiratory carbon dioxide (CO₂) loss. CO₂ is the gas that plants need for photosynthesis where photosynthesis of these legumes is limited by CO₂. Certainly, adenosine tri phosphate (ATP) and nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate (NADPH) formed in the light reactions of photosynthesis are used to convert CO₂ into hexoses and another organic compound. The cereals use a biochemical pump to concentrate CO₂ at the locations within the leaf where the ribulose 1.5-bisphosphate carboxylase/oxygenase (RUBISCO) enzyme mediates incorporation of CO₂ by the Calvin-Benson photosynthetic cycle. Since CO₂ concentrations are already high within the bundle sheath cells, increasing atmospheric CO₂ concentrations above current levels has little direct effect on photosynthetic rates for these cereals. Accordingly, shading of the cereals can contribute largely in increase the capacity of the Calvin cycle and the thylakoid reactions to regenerate ribulose bisphosphate (RuBP) that consumed by RUBISCO in leaves of intercropped legumes under hot summer season where temperature reaches 40-45 °C. Naturally, legumes have the unique reaction sequences for CO₂ reduction to triose phosphates and the associated reductive pentose phosphate pathway-all of which must be coordinately regulated to avoid wasteful futile cycling and to ensure proper allocation of carbon to energy production and synthesis of starch and sucrose (Figure 1). Consequently, it is possible to say that intercropping legumes with cereals in the same row could increase the capacity of starch and sucrose synthesis to consume triose phosphates and regenerate inorganic phosphate for photo-phosphorylation.

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Submission:  March 01, 2019

Published:  April 16, 2019

Volume 1 - Issue 2

How to cite this article: Tamer I Abdel-Wahab, Sherif I Abdel-Wahab, Eman I Abdel-Wahab.. Benefits of Intercropping Legumes with Cereals. Int J Conf Proc.1(2). ICP.000510.2019.

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At saturating light intensity, moderate temperature (25-30 °C) and elevated CO₂, the capacity of RuBP regeneration or the phosphorylation regeneration capacity limits the rate of net CO₂ assimilation in C₃ plants [18].

On the other hand, the legumes participate with bacteria that live in their nodules by fixing atmospheric N, chemically reducing it to a form that can be taken up and used by plants. Under elevated CO₂ conditions, legumes may be able to shunt excess carbon to root nodules where it can serve as a carbon and energy source for the bacterial symbionts. Therefore, legumes could be able to exchange the excess carbon for N and thereby maximizing the benefits of elevated atmospheric CO₂. Hence, intercropping such legumes with cereals is the commonest type of intercropping that the presence of legumes must provide a net N benefit to agro-ecosystem. It is important to mention that there is two points should be considered when growing legumes with cereals in the same row to obligate cereals to take advantage of fixed N by the legumes. The first point is planting date of the intercrops where the legumes should be grown three weeks earlier before the cereals that using fixed

N in their metabolic process later. The second point is mineral N fertilizer rate of cereals through adding two-thirds of recommended mineral N fertilizer to the cereals for encouraging cereal roots to more penetrate into soil layers and absorbing more N from the rhizosphere of intercrops. Particularly, low mineral N fertilizer of cereals is enhancing nodulation of adjacent legume roots and leading to promotion of N-fixing bacteria growth nearer to rhizosphere of cereal roots. Plant growth promoting bacteria especially rhizobia can play an important role in growth promotion of cereals [3,8]. Accordingly, it is expected that intercropping legumes with cereals in the same row will minimize mineral N fertilizer rates and in turn small losses of reactive N to the environment will move nitrate to ground water or surface waters and emissions of nitrous gases to the atmosphere.

Conclusion

Intercropping N-fixing crops with cereals in the same row increased the capacity of starch and sucrose synthesis in cereals with reducing N leaching and gas emissions.

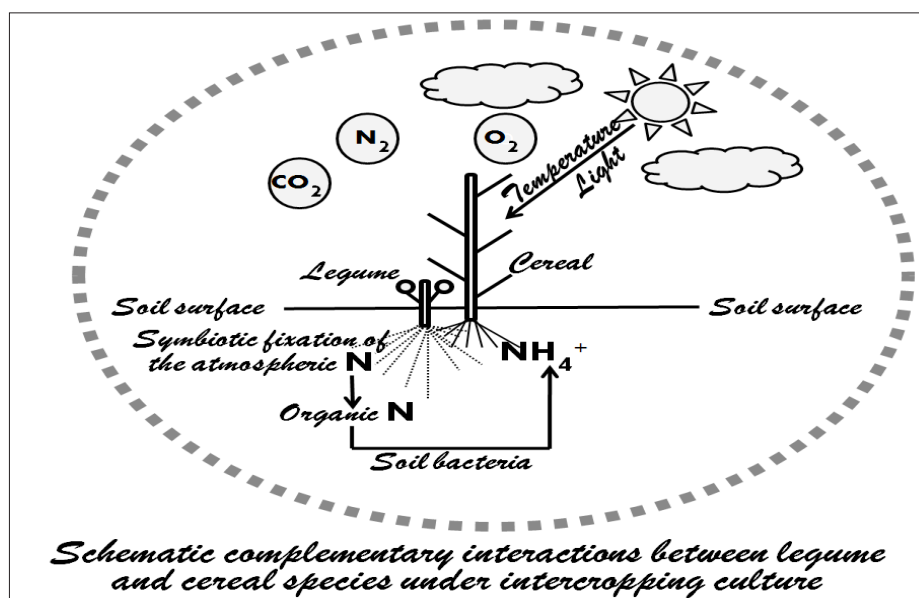


Figure 1: Schematic complementary interactions between legume and cereal species under intercropping culture.

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