



The effects of temperature on growth  
and nitrogen fixation in Trifolium  
subterraneum L. communities.

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page.
Chapter 1.	General introduction.	1
Chapter 2.	Literature review.	4
2.1.0.	Symbiotic interaction.	4
2.2.0.	The effects of temperature on the growth of legumes.	7
2.2.1.	CO <sub>2</sub> fixation, and dry matter production.	7
2.2.2.	Dark respiration.	11
2.2.3.	Translocation.	14
2.2.4.	Root growth.	14
2.3.0.	The effects of temperature on N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	15
2.3.1.	Responses of whole plants to temperature.	15
2.3.2.	Effects of temperature on different <u>Rhizobium</u> strains, and on bacteriod development.	17
2.3.3.	Responses of excised roots and nodules to temperature.	18
2.3.4.	Temperature and the relationship between AR and N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	19
2.3.5.	Temperature and the relationship between nodule respiration and AR.	20
2.4.0.	Growth, N <sub>2</sub> fixation, and PPFD.	21
2.4.1.	Effects of PPFD on photosynthesis, and evidence for adaptation to PPFD.	21
2.4.2.	Effects of PPFD on dark respiration and photorespiration.	22
2.4.3.	Effects of PPFD on carbon partitioning and on N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	23
2.4.4.	Effects of PPFD on young legumes.	27

	Page.	
2.4.5.	Effects of PPFD on the relationship between AR and N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	27
2.5.0.	Ontogenetic variations in CO <sub>2</sub> fixation and N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	27
2.5.1.	Ontogenetic developments in leaves.	28
2.5.2.	Ontogenetic variation in N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	29
2.5.3.	Ontogenetic variation in the relationship of AR to N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	30
2.6.0.	H <sub>2</sub> evolution and H <sub>2</sub> uptake.	31
2.7.0.	Diurnal variation in N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	33
2.7.1.	Important elements of technique in diurnal assays.	33
2.7.2.	Environmental factors which influence nitrogenase diurnally.	35
2.7.3.	Diurnal studies of N <sub>2</sub> fixation in the field, the glasshouse, and the controlled environment.	37
2.8.0.	Combined nitrogen and N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	40
2.8.1.	Use of combined nitrogen in legume growth.	41
2.8.2.	The effect of combined nitrogen on N <sub>2</sub> fixation.	42
2.9.0.	The programme of investigation.	42
Chapter 3.	General methods.	44
3.1.0.	Plant culture and harvesting.	44
3.2.0.	Assay technique and post-assay procedures.	47

	Page.
3.3.0. Measurement of growth rates and transpiration rates.	50
3.4.0. Procedural experiments.	53
3.4.1. Introduction.	53
3.4.2. $p$ $C_2H_2$ and AR rate.	54
3.4.3. Linearity of AR with time.	55
3.4.4. Gaseous losses during assays.	60
3.4.5. Assays for HE and AR on the same plants.	62
3.4.6. Effect of assay temperature on nitrogenase activity.	63
3.4.7. Purity of $C_2H_2$ and nitrogenase activity.	64
3.4.8. Time of day for nitrogenase assays.	65
3.4.9. Watering regimen, CER, and nitrogenase activity.	66
3.4.10. Residual effects of an AR assay on HE.	68
3.4.11. Amperometric $H_2$ measurement and linearity of HE with time.	69
3.4.12. The expression of nitrogenase activity.	71
Chapter 4. Community growth.	73
4.1.0. Effect of temperature on community growth.	73
4.1.1. Results.	73
4.1.2. Discussion.	85
4.2.0. Amount of photosynthate used to support nitrogenase activity.	91
4.2.1. Methods.	91
4.2.2. Results.	92
4.2.3. Discussion.	92
4.3.0. Community growth during the nascence of $N_2$ fixation.	94
4.3.1. Introduction.	94
4.3.2. Methods.	95

	Page.	
4.3.3.	Results.	95
4.3.4.	Discussion.	98
Chapter 5.	Relations between $N_2$ fixation and temperature.	101
5.1.0.	Introduction.	101
5.2.0.	Methods.	102
5.3.0.	Results.	104
5.3.1.	Relations between nitrogen accumulation, the AR assay, and HE.	104
5.3.2.	The existence of Hup.	115
5.3.3.	Induction of Hup, and calculation of the $K_m$ of Hup for $H_2$ .	116
5.3.4.	Interaction of temperature with inhibition of $N_2$ fixation by combined nitrogen.	118
5.4.0.	Discussion.	120
5.4.1.	$N_2$ fixation and temperature.	120
5.4.2.	$N_2$ fixation in relation to community growth.	126
5.4.3.	Temperature and the effect of combined nitrogen on $N_2$ fixation.	130
Chapter 6.	Diurnal variation in $N_2$ fixation.	132
6.1.0.	Introduction.	132
6.2.0.	Nitrogenase activities and nodulated root respiration during a normal 12 hour day and 12 hour night.	133
6.2.1.	Methods.	133

	Page.
6.2.2. Results.	134
6.3.0. Variation in nitrogenase activities induced by change in night length.	141
6.3.1. Introduction.	141
6.3.2. Methods.	142
6.3.3. Results.	143
6.4.0. Variation in nitrogenase activities induced by change in the rate of transpiration.	145
6.4.1. Introduction.	145
6.4.2. Methods.	146
6.4.3. Results.	146
6.5.0. Discussion.	149
Chapter 7. General discussion.	157
Appendices.	
Bibliography.	

## SUMMARY

Survey of the literature showed there to be much information on the effects of temperature on nitrogen fixation. However, most of this was derived from short-term exposure of single plants, or nodulated roots, to different temperatures. Also, much of this research involved the acetylene reduction assay without consideration of associated evolution of hydrogen. It appears to have been assumed that the relationships between acetylene reduction, hydrogen evolution, and nitrogen fixation are not influenced by the environment nor do they change during ontogeny. Little information was available concerning the response of nitrogen fixation by legumes to temperature when plants are grown as swards at densities comparable with those experienced under commercial conditions. The aim of this investigation was to assess the responses to temperature of swards of Trifolium subterraneum between seedling establishment and dry matter yields regarded as economic in the field.

Swards of T. subterraneum (2,300 plants  $m^{-2}$ ) were grown at temperatures of 10°C, 15°C, 20°C and 25°C at photosynthetic photon flux densities (PPFD) of 500 or 1000  $\mu\text{mol quanta } m^{-2} s^{-1}$ . Growth rates were measured by infra-red analysis of  $\text{CO}_2$  exchange, and by increment in biomass with time. Nitrogen fixation was estimated by hydrogen evolution and acetylene reduction assays, and also by increment in organic nitrogen with time.

The growth rates of nitrogen-fixing swards, of 190-475 g dry matter  $m^{-2}$ , were inversely related to temperature, and in this respect their response was very similar to that of swards assimilating combined nitrogen. However, swards fixing nitrogen grew more slowly than the latter. This was reckoned to result from the high energy costs of nitrogenase activity, and a lower growth efficiency (g carbon respired

g dry matter retained  $24 \text{ h}^{-1}$ ) for nitrogen-fixing plants. The effect of temperature on the nitrogen fixation rate was similar to that on the growth rate.

Acetylene reduction accurately reflected the response of nitrogen fixation to temperature between  $10^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , but above  $20^{\circ}\text{C}$  there was a temperature-induced disruption of this relationship. The difference between acetylene reduction and hydrogen evolution is theoretically equivalent to nitrogen fixation, but in long-term experiments the development of hydrogen uptake made this difference an unreliable index of nitrogen fixation.

Hydrogen uptake occurred at high amounts of biomass (greater than  $380 \text{ g dry matter m}^{-2}$ ) at  $15^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and also at lower amounts of biomass (greater than  $190 \text{ g dry matter m}^{-2}$ ) at  $25^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Appearance of hydrogen uptake was not quickened when plants were treated with hydrogen. It is suggested that hydrogen uptake developed as a normal event in the physiological ageing of nodules, which was accelerated at high temperature and served in protecting nitrogenase from damage by oxygen.

There was substantial diurnal variation in nitrogen fixation in all environments except  $25^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The data supported a model in which a diurnal change in the transpiration rate resulted in a diurnal rhythm of accumulation of nitrogen in nodules at night and release of nitrogen during the day, and this rhythm affected the nitrogen fixation rate. Nitrogen fixation was finely regulated in the short term through proton reduction.

The hydrogen evolution and acetylene reduction techniques were useful in measuring nitrogen fixation when consistently employed.