

**Chemistry, Phytotoxicity and Remediation of Alkaline
Soils**

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Table of Contents

Table of contents.....	i
Abstract.....	v
Declaration.....	viii
Acknowledgements.....	ix
List of tables/figures.....	x
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
References.....	5
Chapter 2: Review of Literature	8
2.1 Alkalinity	8
2.1.1 Extent of alkaline soils.....	8
2.1.2 Determinants of alkalinity.....	9
2.1.3 Carbonate species and pH.....	10
2.1.4 Agriculture and alkaline soils - phytotoxicity.....	12
2.1.5 A new constraint in alkaline soils? Aluminium phytotoxicity.....	12
2.2 Aluminium phytotoxicity.....	12
2.2.1 Aluminium in soils.....	12
2.2.2 Traditional paradigm of Al toxicity.....	13
2.2.3 Al toxicity in high pH soils.....	13
2.2.4 Sources and speciation of aluminium in soils.....	14
2.2.5 Aluminium speciation.....	15
2.2.5.1 Aluminium speciation and pH.....	15
2.2.6 Polymer species	16
2.2.7 Entry of aluminium into the plant.....	17
2.2.7.1 Mechanisms of aluminium phytotoxicity.....	17
2.2.7.2 Phytotoxicity in the apoplasm.....	17
2.2.7.3 Phytotoxicity in the symplasm.....	17
2.2.8 Symptoms of aluminium toxicity.....	18
2.3 Ameliorating aluminium phytotoxicity.....	19
2.3.1 Methods of amelioration.....	19
2.3.2 Alkaline buffering intensity	19
2.3.3 Lowering soil pH	20

2.3.3.1 Chemically lowering soil pH	20
2.3.3.2 Organically lowering soil pH.....	21
2.3.3.3 Micro-organisms and soil pH.....	22
2.3.3.4 Plant roots and soil pH.....	22
2.3.4 Al complexation methods	23
2.4 Further research	24
2.5 References.....	26
Chapter 3: Soil Characterisation.....	36
3.1 Soil selection and classification	36
3.2 Soil Characterisation.....	37
3.3 References.....	39
Chapter 4: Aluminium Phytotoxicity and Speciation	40
4.1 Introduction.....	40
4.2 Methods.....	42
4.2.1 Experiment 1: Aluminium charge and pH.....	42
4.2.2 Experiment 2: Al speciation determined using NMR analysis.....	43
4.2.3 Experiment 3: Aluminium speciation determined using precipitation	43
4.2.4 Experiment 4: Aluminium speciation determined using electrical conductivity....	44
4.2.5 Experiment 5: Aluminium entry into plants.....	44
4.2.6 Experiment 6: Pot experiment to verify aluminium phytotoxicity at high pH.	45
4.3 Results/Discussion	47
4.3.1 Experiment 1: Aluminium charge and pH.....	47
4.3.2 Experiment 2: Aluminium speciation determined using NMR analysis	48
4.3.3 Experiment 3: Aluminium speciation determined using precipitation	50
4.3.4 Experiment 4: Aluminium speciation determined using electrical conductivity....	51
4.3.5 Experiment 5: Aluminium entry into plants.....	52
4.3.6 Experiment 6: Pot experiment to verify aluminium phytotoxicity at high pH.	53
4.4 Conclusion	59
4.5 References.....	61
Chapter 5: The role of carbonates in determining soil pH and alkaline buffering capacity	63
5.1 Introduction.....	63
5.2 Methods.....	65
5.2.1 Experiment 1: Mineral composition of soils.....	65
5.2.2 Experiment 2: Carbonate composition of soils.....	65

5.2.3 Experiment 3: Carbonate chemistry and soil pH	67
5.2.4 Experiment 4: Carbonate sorption to clays	68
5.2.5 Experiment 5: Clay adsorbed carbonate and alkaline buffering intensity	68
5.2.6 Experiment 6: Titration of six alkaline soils to determine soil alkaline buffering intensity.....	69
5.3 Results/Discussion	69
5.3.1 Experiment 1: Mineral composition of soils.....	69
5.3.2 Experiment 2: Carbonate composition of soils.....	71
5.3.3 Experiment 3: Carbonate content and soil pH	72
5.3.4 Experiment 4: Carbonate sorption to clay	74
5.3.5 Experiment 5: Clay adsorbed carbonate and buffering intensity.....	75
5.3.6 Experiment 6: Titration of six alkaline soils to determine soil alkaline buffering intensity.....	76
5.4 Conclusion	79
5.5 References.....	81
Appendix.....	83
Whole soil X-ray diffraction graphs	83
Monarto.....	83
Ardrossan	83
Paskerville.....	84
Minlaton.....	84
Keilira 1	85
Keilira 2	85
Chapter 6: Amelioration of aluminium phytotoxicity in alkaline soils.....	86
6.1 Introduction.....	86
6.2 Methods.....	88
6.2.1 Experiment 1: Use of gypsum to modify soil pH	88
6.2.2 Experiment 2: Use of plant root exudates to modify soil pH.	89
6.2.3 Experiment 3: Plant root exudates used in conjunction with gypsum	90
6.2.4 Experiment 4: Use of organic additives to modify soil pH.	91
6.2.5 Experiment 5: Use of earthworms to modify soil pH.....	92
6.2.6 Experiment 6: Complexation of aluminium to ameliorate Al phytotoxicity	92
6.3 Results and Discussion	93
6.3.1 Experiment 1: Use of gypsum to modify soil pH	93
6.3.2 Experiment 2: Use of plant root exudates to modify soil pH	94
6.3.3 Experiment 3: Plant root exudates used in conjunction with gypsum	96
6.3.4 Experiment 4: Use of organic amendments to lower soil pH	98

6.3.5 Experiment 5: Use of worms to modify soil pH.....	105
6.3.6 Experiment 6 Complexation of aluminium: a preliminary study.....	107
6.4 Conclusion	107
6.5 References.....	111
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	115
References.....	119

Abstract

Highly alkaline soils are known to adversely affect agricultural crop productivity. Problems commonly attributed to such soils include poor structure and nutrient deficiency. Research based on solution cultures suggests that aluminium phytotoxicity may also occur at alkaline pH, however little research has been done in actual soils under controlled conditions. This new constraint needs to be verified and the nature of the aluminium responsible determined.

A potential method of remediating alkaline soils is to use acid to lower soil pH to a more neutral value. This requires an understanding of the role of carbonates in causing and maintaining high pH. Whereas the acid buffering intensity of soils has been well documented, comparatively little work has been carried out on alkaline buffering intensity. While research has been carried out on soil treatments that may be used to lower soil pH, a systematic comparison of their relative effectiveness is needed.

This study has shown that aluminium is indeed phytotoxic at high pH, significantly reducing the stem and root development of field pea test plants over and above that caused by alkalinity alone. The effects of both alkalinity in general and aluminium in particular became noticeable at a pH of 9.0 and debilitating at a pH of 9.2 or higher. As the quantity of aluminium found in test plants at neutral and high pH was similar, it is likely that it is the speciation of aluminium at high pH that is responsible for this toxicity rather than the quantity entering the plant.

Techniques including electrophoretic mobility analysis, NMR and use of aluminium precipitation characteristics and electrical conductivity were used to determine that anionic

species of aluminium are most likely responsible for aluminium phytotoxicity at high pH. At pH 9.2, negatively charged sodium aluminate became the dominant form of aluminium.

Analysis of carbonate speciation with varying pH identified that carbonate adsorbed to soil clays via exchangeable Na was responsible for soil pH greater than 8.0. Between pH 8.0 and 9.0, most of the soluble carbonates were adsorbed to clays; above pH 9.0 carbonate species dominated in solution phase.

As the effects of alkaline and aluminium toxicity diminish at a pH of less than 9.0, alkaline soils need only be lowered to less than this value to be remediated. Titration of alkaline soils showed that they had low buffering capacity against acid induced pH decrease until pH 8.0.

At pH less than 8.0, the predominance of calcite minerals and their faster dissolution rate meant that buffering intensity was very high and large amounts of acid would be needed to lower pH below this value. However at a pH of more than 8.0, the slower dissolution rate of carbonate containing minerals provides little buffering intensity. Remediating alkaline soils via the use of acid to lower soil pH to 8.0 was deemed achievable because of the lower buffering capacity of soils in this pH range.

The effectiveness of gypsum, various organic amendments (glucose, molasses, animal manure, green manure, humus) and leguminous plants were trialled as a means of lowering soil pH. Plants were also trialled in conjunction with gypsum to determine if any additive benefits were evident when combining remediation methods.

Glucose, molasses, green manure and all plant root exudates proved effective at lowering soil pH to less than 9.0. The decrease in pH achieved using the additives was highly

correlated with increased populations of acid-producing microbes. The effect was not long lasting however, with pH returning to pre-application levels within 6 months.

Gypsum proved most effective at lowering soil pH and, crucially, the effect was long lasting, with low soil pH maintained over the 6 month study period. When gypsum was used in conjunction with plant root exudates, the decrease in soil pH was not greater than that achieved using gypsum alone, however it was again maintained over the whole study period. It is suggested that using plant root exudates to economically lower soil pH (the plant itself can be a viable crop) and smaller quantities of gypsum (compared to gypsum used as a standalone ameliorant) to maintain the lowered pH may be an optimal method of ameliorating alkaline soils.

It is hoped that by confirming aluminium phytotoxicity in alkaline soils, determining the critical pH where aluminium and alkaline toxicity become debilitating to crops and providing a potential remediation method, the results and conclusions presented in this thesis will help improve agricultural production in alkaline soils.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text.

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David John Brautigan

Date

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List of Tables

Table 3.1 Soil characteristics.....	38
Table 4.1 Average percentage decrease in growth of SANTI variety field pea with increasing pH.....	57
Table 4.2. Average percentage decrease in growth of SANTI field pea grown in Al treated soil compared to no Al soil.....	57
Table 4.3 Aluminium content of SARDI field peas at varying pH and soil Al content.....	58
Table 5.1 Mineralogy of whole soils as determined by X-ray diffraction %	70
Table 5.2 Mineralogy of clay component as determined by X-ray diffraction %	70
Table 5.3 Soil carbonate content and mineralogy.....	71
Table 5.4 Effect of filtering/leaching on soil suspension pH.....	73
Table 6.1 Effect of organic amendments on soil microbial population and corresponding change in soil pH.	104

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Extent of the world's alkaline soils.....	1
Figure 2.1 Extent of Australia's alkaline soils.....	8
Figure 2.2 Relationship between carbonate/bicarbonate and proton/hydroxide concentrations.....	9
Figure 2.3 Relative proportions of carbonate species with changing pH.....	11
Figure 2.4 Increase in carbonate and bicarbonate with increasing pH.....	11
Figure 2.5 Relative activity of Al species with changing pH.....	16
Figure 2.6 Typical binding sites for aluminium ions.....	23

Figure 3.1 Locations within South Australia soils used in this thesis were selected from.....	36
Figure 4.1 The relationship between soil pH sampled between 30-40cm and grain yield of Tamaroi (wheat).....	40
Figure 4.2 Zeta potential of 0.1 molar sodium aluminate solution at varying pH.....	48
Figure 4.3 Chemical shift associated with tetrahedrally coordinated negatively charged Al species.....	49
Figure 4.4 Chemical shift associated with octahedrally coordinated positively charged Al species.....	49
Figure 4.5. Percentage of Al in solution and zeta potential at varying pH.....	50
Figure 4.6. Electrical conductivity of Al solution at varying pH.....	51
Figure 4.7 Summary of speciation of aluminium with varying pH.....	52
Figure 4.8/4.9/4.10 Effect of pH and Al on growth of SANTI variety field pea.....	56
Figure 4.11/4.12 Effect of pH and Al concentration on SARDI variety field pea.....	58
Figure 5.1 Mechanism for the sorption of carbonate to clay particles.....	74
Figure 5.2 Relationship between pH and sorption of carbonate to a bentonite clay.....	75
Figure 5.3: Comparison of buffering intensity of carbonate and carbonate/bentonite solutions.....	76
Figure 5.4 pH change for 6 alkaline soils when titrated with H ⁺	77
Figure 6.1 Effect of varying concentrations of gypsum on soil pH after 12 weeks.....	94
Figure 6.2 and 6.3 Effect of varying plant types on soil pH after 12 weeks for Monarto and Minlaton soils.....	97
Figure 6.4 Effect of plant roots (A) and plant roots + gypsum (B) on soil pH over time.....	97
Figure 6.5 Effect of varying concentrations of gypsum used in conjunction with plant roots on soil pH after 12 weeks.....	98
Figure 6.6 – 6.9 Effect of organic amendments on soil pH over time.....	103

Figure 6.10. Effect of manure and red worms on soil pH over time. 106

Figures 6.11 and 6:12 Photos showing distribution of organic matter through the soil by worms..... 106

Figure 6.13 Decrease in average soil pH achieved via application of various ameliorants... 107