



Leaf Nutrient Concentrations and Dry Biomass of Fig Plants as Modified by the Application of NPK: A Preliminary Study

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Authors SYMG and UFV designed and performed the study. Authors JAZ, SYMG and UFV performed the statistical analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author JGAA got the research funding. Authors JGAA, JACW, and RTC managed the analyses of the study and managed the literature searches. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/AJAHR/2020/v7i430102

Editor(s):

(1) Dr. Magdaléna Valšíková, Slovak University of Agriculture (SUA), Slovakia.

Reviewers:

(1) Jairo Osvaldo Cazetta, UNESP - Universidade Estadual Paulista, Brasil.

(2) Barlin Orlando Olivares Campos, University of Cordoba, Spain.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/64968>

Short Research Article

Received 17 November 2020

Accepted 24 January 2021

Published 10 February 2021

ABSTRACT

Aims: The effect of a complete NPK matrix on leaf nutrient concentrations and dry biomass of 'Black Mission' fig plant organs was tested under an intensive culture system and protected environment.

Study Design: A randomized complete block design with four blocks was employed.

Place and Duration of Study: The experiment was conducted from April to November 2016 at the Campo Experimental La Laguna, located in Matamoros, Coahuila, Mexico. This research station

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belongs to the Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Agrícolas y Pecuarias (INIFAP) of Mexico. The experiment was set up under a macro tunnel equipped with a shade mesh with 50% sunlight attenuation.

Methodology: Two-year-old fig plants (cv. 'Black Mission') previously propagated from stem cuttings were used. There were three application rates each for N (0, 80, and 160 kg ha⁻¹), P (0, 40 and 80 kg ha⁻¹), and K (0, 80, and 160 kg ha⁻¹) arranged in a balanced factorial matrix of 27 treatments. After harvest, leaf samples were collected to determine nutrient concentrations and they were split into roots, shoots, leaves, and fruit

Results: The greatest total dry biomass was produced by the interaction of 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 40 kg ha⁻¹ P and yielded the following leaf nutrient concentrations (mean ± SD): N 2.9 ± 0.3%, P 0.11 ± 0.01%, K 2.1 ± 0.4%, Ca 1.4 ± 0.7%, Mg 0.34 ± 0.03%, Fe 166.4 ± 49.5 mg kg⁻¹, Cu 6.3 ± 1.7 mg kg⁻¹, Mn 83.3 ± 20.9 mg kg⁻¹, and Zn 22.6 ± 3.8 mg kg⁻¹. Application of 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 40 kg ha⁻¹ P could be suggested for commercial fig production.

Conclusion: Application of 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 40 kg ha⁻¹ P could be tested under similar commercial production systems; however, the addition of supplemental K deserves further study.

Keywords: *Ficus carica* L.; macronutrients; micronutrients; synergism-antagonism; nutrient use efficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fig tree (*Ficus carica* L.) is one of the oldest crops in the Mediterranean basin, where its fruit is consumed either fresh or dry [1]. Fig fruits are an excellent source of nutrients and antioxidants for human health [2,3]. In 2018, fresh fig production was 1.17 million tons (t) worldwide. Turkey accounted for 26.2% of the total production followed by Egypt (15.2%), Morocco (11.8%), Algeria (11%), and Iran (6.1%). These five countries collectively yielded 70.2% of the total world production [4].

Fig, carob, olive, and almond trees are cultivated extensively in Mediterranean countries, typically without irrigation [1]. Fig tree hardiness has allowed it to be grown extensively in different soil types in warm climates [5]. This fruit crop has been gaining commercial interest around the world, and under intensive cultivation under soil-less and glasshouse culture yields reach from 81 t ha⁻¹ [6] up to 109.5 t ha⁻¹ [7]. Under this production system and other, more conventional systems [8,9], organic or combined fertilization is required to enhance fig productivity, regardless of plant guiding, pruning, pest, disease and weed control, irrigation [10], and plant nutrition [3,9,11,12]. The seasonal variation of macro- and micronutrients in high- and low-vigor fig tree orchards in California was studied [11], but no production values were offered. In contrast, a four-year field study concluded that the best fig yield and optimal macronutrients were achieved by applying 200 kg ha⁻¹ NH₄NO₃, 250 kg ha⁻¹ Ca(H₂PO₄)₂, 200 kg ha⁻¹ KCl, and 1 t ha⁻¹ organic

matter [13]. Another field experiment studied the effect of an intensive fertigation program with K and Ca plus N in 'Black Mission' and 'Sierra' fig trees [14]. This study suggested that fig plants treated with K and Ca had the greatest fruit size and marketable yields, but fruit quality, measured as total soluble solids concentration and titratable acidity, remained unchanged. To our best knowledge, no previous studies tested a full fertilization matrix of N, P, and K in fig trees, neither under field conditions nor under intensive culture, to determine the effects on leaf nutrient concentrations, fruit yield, and dry biomass of fig plants. Therefore, this research focused on evaluating the effect of a complete matrix of N, P, and K on the leaf concentration of macro- and micronutrients and dry biomass of 'Black Mission' fig plant organs under an intensive culture system and protected environment. It is expected that this study may reorient the mineral fertilization for this valuable fruit plant.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Experimental Site

The experiment was conducted from April to November 2016 at the Campo Experimental La Laguna, located in Matamoros, Coahuila, Mexico (25°31'56.8" NL y 103°14'29.9" WL). This research station belongs to the Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Agrícolas y Pecuarias of Mexico. The experiment was set up under a macro tunnel equipped with a shade mesh with 50% sunlight attenuation.

2.2 Plant Material and Experimental Design

Two-year-old fig plants (cv. 'Black Mission') previously propagated from stem cuttings were used. Stem cuttings 20 cm long were collected from a mature tree and embedded in a solution with 2,000 mg L⁻¹ of indoleacetic acid. Then, they were placed in a warm bed containing perlite as a substrate. Once rooted and foliated, the vegetative material was transplanted in pots (20 L volume) with inert sand substrate as growing media previously washed. There were three application rates each for N (0, 80, and 160 kg ha⁻¹), P (0, 40 and 80 kg ha⁻¹), and K (0, 80, and 160 kg ha⁻¹) arranged in a balanced factorial matrix of treatments 3³. The 27 mineral nutrient treatments were strictly randomized in each block and there were four replicates. The experimental unit comprised one plant per replicate (four replicates) per treatment.

2.3 Nutrient Solution and Fertigation Program

The nutritive mineral solutions were designed from three mother nutrient solutions, with the following chemical fertilizers: solution 1: 4% Fe⁺³, 3% Mn⁺², 0.5% Cu⁺², 4% Zn⁺², 1.5% B⁺³, and 0.05% Mo⁺⁶; solution 2: 98 g L⁻¹ H₃PO₄; and solution 3: 132 g L⁻¹ (NH₄)₂SO₄, 236 g L⁻¹ Ca(NO₃)₂, 74.5 g L⁻¹ KCl, 65 g L⁻¹ CaSO₄, and 246.5 g L⁻¹ MgSO₄.

Irrigation was applied twice weekly based on Class-A pan evaporimeter readings. Starting in May, the fertigation program was carried out once weekly, splitting the nutrients through the growing season. Solution 1 was applied equally to all treatments; while solutions 2 and 3 were divided into three solutions for P and nine solutions for N and K depending on the treatment. The electrical conductivity of the irrigation water used was 1.15 dS m⁻¹.

2.4 Biomass, Leaf Sampling, Nutrient Analysis

After harvest in November, each plant was separated into roots, stems, leaves, and fruit and oven-dried at 60°C for a week to constant mass. The dry mass of all plant organs was added and expressed as total dry biomass.

To determine macro- and micronutrient concentrations, four mature leaves per

experimental plant were taken to the local soil and plant analysis lab. The leaves were washed individually with demineralized water twice, oven-dried at 65°C for a week to constant mass, and the dried samples were ground. N was analyzed by the calcination method (Flash 2000 organic element analyzer). P was determined by the colorimetric method with molybdate-vanadate, while K, Ca, Mg, Fe, Cu, Mn, and Zn were determined by calcination in muffle and wet-digestion with 37% HCl in a Perkin Elmer AA-700 atomic absorption analyzer [15].

2.5 Nutrient Use Efficiency

The nutrient efficiency, in terms of agronomic efficiency (AE), was estimated as the additional economic yield per nutrient applied:

$$AE = \frac{(TBF(g) - TBNF(g))}{\text{Amount of fertilizer applied (g)}} = g\ g^{-1}$$

Where, TBF and TBNF are the total biomass of fertilized or non-fertilized plants, respectively [16,17].

2.6 Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed in a randomized complete block model with three factors (N, P, and K) using the general linear model (GLM) procedure. Treatment means were grouped by the Fisher's test at $P = 0.05$. All calculations were performed in the statistical analysis system (SAS version 9.3; SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Leaf Nutrient Concentrations

In addition to the significant influence of the main effects of N, P, and K over the foliar concentrations of almost all nutrients, the analysis found some significant interactions. For instance, the N x P x K and P x K interactions affected the foliar concentration of N, the N x K interaction affected the foliar concentrations of Ca and Mg, and the N x P interaction influenced all nutrient foliar concentrations except for Fe and Zn (Table 1). Therefore, the N x P interaction was the most important one to be explained.

At the end of the growing season, the leaf concentrations of N (Fig. 1A), P (Fig. 1B), and Mn (Fig. 2B) were greatest with N and P at 160 and 40 kg ha⁻¹, respectively. Applying > 40 kg ha⁻¹ P did not enhance leaf N, P, and Mn

concentrations. In contrast, supplementary N and P at any level reduced the foliar concentrations of K, Ca, and Mg (Fig. 1C, 1D, and 1E, respectively). Foliar Cu was greatest with 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 0 kg ha⁻¹ P, followed by 160 kg ha⁻¹ N and 80 kg ha⁻¹ P (Fig. 2A).

The main effect of N was to reduce leaf Fe concentrations. Mean values for Fe (least significant difference, LSD = 21.2 mg kg⁻¹) were 186.0, 172.1, or 137.5 with application of 0, 80, or 160 kg ha⁻¹ N, respectively. The greatest leaf Fe concentration was produced by 80 kg ha⁻¹ P. The mean values of leaf Fe with application of 0, 40 or 80 kg ha⁻¹ P were, 168.4, 149.5 or 177.8 mg kg⁻¹ (LSD = 21.2 mg kg⁻¹), respectively. Neither the interaction nor the main effect of N, P, and K altered leaf Zn concentration. Consequently, the interpretation of the interactions P x K and N x P x K on leaf N concentration and N x K on leaf Ca and Mg foliar concentrations were considered redundant. However, in the last interaction, supplementary K, at any rate, reduced leaf Ca and Mg concentrations (data not shown).

3.2 Association Among Leaf Nutrient Concentrations

Leaf N concentration correlated moderately and positively (synergism) with leaf P and Mn concentrations, but correlated from low to moderately and negatively (antagonism) with leaf Fe, Ca, and Mg concentrations. Similar antagonism was found between leaf P concentration and leaf Fe, K, Ca, and Mg concentrations, but a weak and significant synergism with leaf Cu concentration occurred.

Leaf K concentration had a low synergism with leaf Mg and Cu concentrations, while leaf Ca concentration had low synergism and antagonism with leaf Mg, Cu, and Mn concentrations, respectively. Leaf Fe concentration correlated weakly and negatively with leaf Mn concentration, but there was weak synergism and moderate antagonism between leaf Mg concentration and leaf Fe, and Mn concentrations, respectively (Table 2).

3.3 Dry Biomass Components

The main effect of N or K altered root dry mass, while N or P affected fruit dry mass. The other fig plant organs, including total dry biomass, were modified ($P < 0.01$) by the interaction of N x P or N x K on shoot dry mass only (Table 3).

Root dry biomass improved from 0 to 80 kg ha⁻¹ N, but 160 kg ha⁻¹ N tended to reduce the dry mass accumulation of this plant organ (Fig. 3A). In contrast, the addition of K, at any rate, consistently reduced root dry mass (Fig. 3B).

The interaction N x P, at 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 40 kg ha⁻¹ P, produced the most shoot dry mass (Fig. 4A); in contrast, the highest shoot dry mass with the interaction N x K occurred at 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 0 kg ha⁻¹ K (Fig. 4B). Similar leaf dry mass was observed with the interaction N x P, either at 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 40 kg ha⁻¹ P or at 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 80 kg ha⁻¹ P (Fig. 4C). Increasing N and P beyond these rates limited dry mass accumulation in shoots and leaves; while adding K harmed shoot dry mass accumulation at any rate (Fig 4).

Table 1. Summary of the analysis of variance of the NPK influence on the macro and micronutrient foliar concentrations of 'Black Mission' figs

Source of variation	Macronutrients					Micronutrients			
	N	P	K	Ca	Mg	Fe	Cu	Mn	Zn
N	0.0001	0.0001	0.01	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	0.38	0.0001	0.34
P	0.0002	0.0001	0.001	0.0001	0.0001	0.03	0.03	0.0001	0.08
K	0.58	0.66	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.12	0.26	0.80	0.35
N x P	0.03	0.0001	0.01	0.0001	0.0001	0.56	0.001	0.0002	0.37
N x K	0.95	0.38	0.24	0.001	0.05	0.58	0.90	0.27	0.33
P x K	0.0002	0.33	0.74	0.49	0.59	0.42	0.96	0.19	0.29
N x P x K	0.03	0.32	0.34	0.10	0.97	0.28	0.89	0.31	0.21
CV (%)	16.3	21.6	26.3	25.4	12.5	27.3	41.4	31.5	56.5

CV: is the coefficient of variation

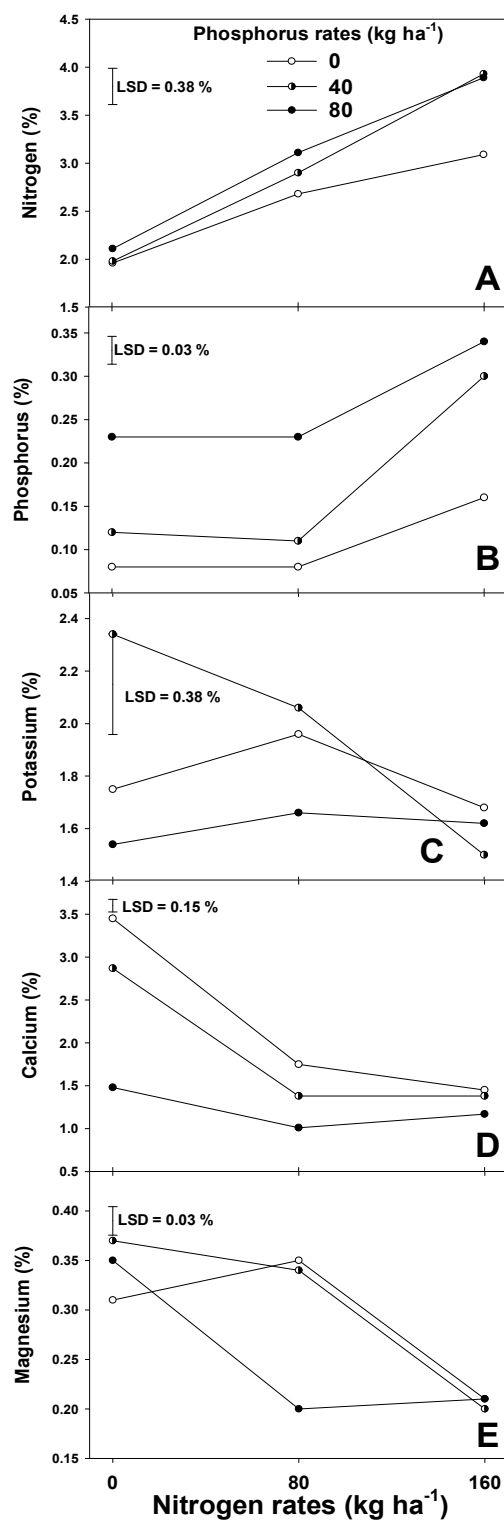


Fig. 1. Effect of the interaction nitrogen x phosphorus on nitrogen (A), phosphorus (B), potassium (C), calcium (D), and magnesium (E) concentrations (% dry mass) of 'Black Mission' fig leaves sampled after harvest in November. At each plot, the vertical bar is the Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) test at $P = 0.05$.

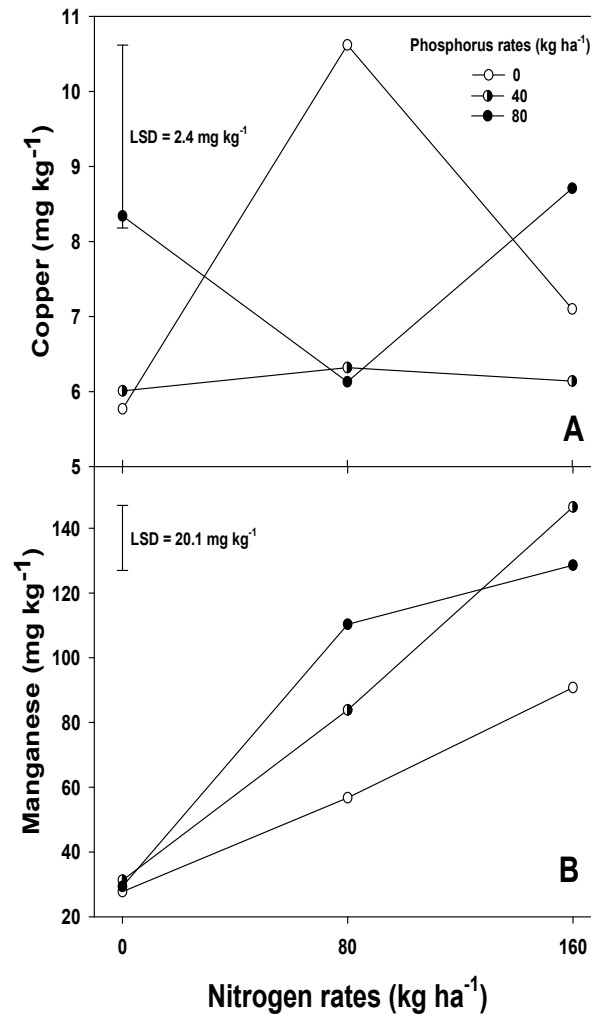


Fig. 2. Effect of the interaction nitrogen x phosphorus on copper (A) and manganese (B) concentrations (% dry mass) of 'Black Mission' fig leaves sampled after harvest in November. At each plot, the vertical bar is the Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) test at P = 0.05.

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficients among leaf nutrient concentrations of fig plants cv. 'Black Mission'.

	N	P	K	Ca	Mg	Fe	Cu	Mn	Zn
N	1								
P	0.59***	1							
K	-0.09	-0.35***	1						
Ca	-0.55***	-0.53***	0.18	1					
Mg	-0.57***	-0.62***	0.47***	0.49***	1				
Fe	-0.34***	-0.24**	-0.04	0.20	0.30***	1			
Cu	0.15	0.01	0.32***	-0.25**	0.14	0.14	1		
Mn	0.70***	0.56***	-0.18	-0.47***	-0.63***	-0.24**	-0.05	1	
Zn	0.02	-0.00	-0.01	-0.12	-0.04	0.04	0.03	0.07	1

Correlation coefficients were significant at ** = 0.01 or *** = 0.0001; otherwise, non-significant

Table 3. Summary of the analysis of variance of the NPK influence on the dry mass of fig plants organs cv. 'Black Mission'.

Source of variation	Dry mass (g)				
	Root	Shoot	Leaves	Fruit	Total biomass
N	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	0.006	0.0001
P	0.20	0.0001	0.0001	0.005	0.0001
K	0.02	0.0004	0.15	0.32	0.01
N x P	0.42	0.0001	0.01	0.08	0.004
N x K	0.46	0.02	0.15	0.40	0.23
P x K	0.19	0.90	0.33	0.53	0.18
N x P x K	0.26	0.06	0.59	0.68	0.17
CV (%)	28.6	38.7	41.9	78.8	27.7

CV: is the coefficient of variation

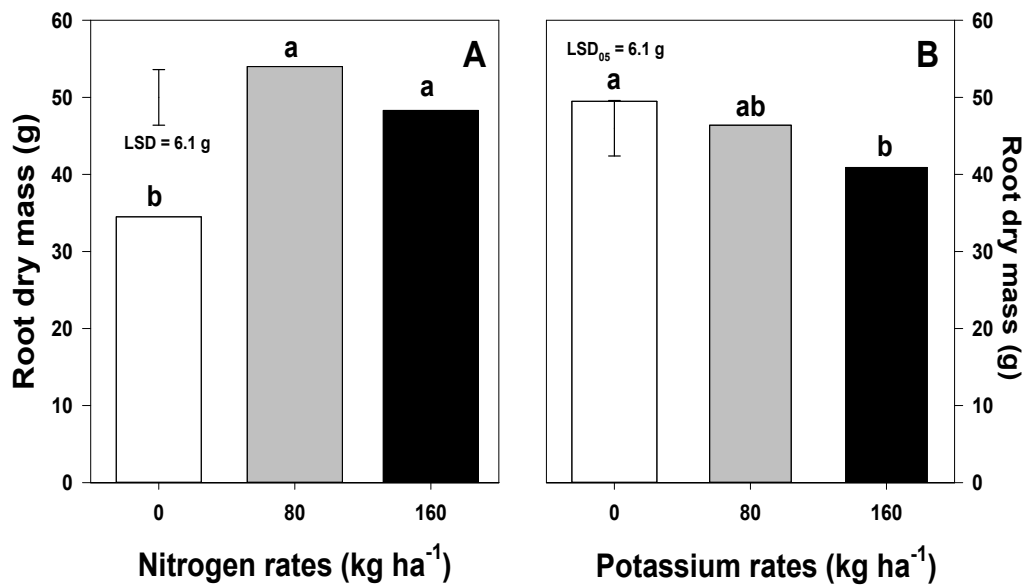


Fig. 3. Influence of the main effect of nitrogen (A) and potassium (B) rates on root dry mass of 'Black Mission' fig plants. At each plot, the vertical bar is the Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) test at $P = 0.05$.

Fruit dry biomass increased from 0 to 80 kg ha⁻¹ N, while 160 kg ha⁻¹ N tended to reduce dry mass accumulation in this plant organ (Fig. 5A). In contrast, fruit dry mass was greatest at 160 kg ha⁻¹ P. However, total dry mass responded positively to the interaction N x P at the rates of 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 40 kg ha⁻¹ P and of 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 80 kg ha⁻¹ P. Total dry mass accumulation was reduced at the highest application rates of N and P (Fig. 5C).

3.4 Agronomic Use Efficiency of Mineral Nutrients

Analysis of the agronomic efficiency of nutrient applications suggested that applying K, at any

rate, reduced total biomass, as did applying more than 80 kg N ha⁻¹ and 40 kg P ha⁻¹ (Table 4).

4. DISCUSSION

In crop plants, an interaction between nutrients takes place when application of one nutrient stimulates or suppresses absorption and use of other nutrients [18]. Here, when N and P were supplied at any rate, both mineral fertilizers increased leaf N, P, and Mn concentrations, but decreased leaf K, Mg, Ca, Cu, and Fe concentrations (Fig. 1 and 2, Table 2). This last behavior was reinforced by correlating the N and P rates with leaf K, Mg, Ca, Fe and Cu concentrations, which for N were: - 0.21 ($P = 0.03$), -0.70 ($P = 0.0001$), -0.56 ($P = 0.0001$), -

0.39 ($P = 0.0001$), and 0.08 ($P = 0.42$), respectively. The values for P rates with K, Mg, Ca, and Cu were: -0.14 ($P = 0.14$), -0.20 ($P = 0.03$), -0.44 ($P = 0.0001$), and -0.01 ($P = 0.89$), respectively. Nevertheless, at 80 kg ha^{-1} N and 40 kg ha^{-1} P, the synergisms and antagonisms allowed similar leaf nutrient concentrations to those reported in leaves postharvest collected (October) from high-vigor mature fig trees [11]. Our mean ($\pm$ SD) leaf nutrient concentration values (percentage of dry weight) for N, P, K, Ca, and Mg were 2.9 ± 0.3 , $0.11 \pm$

0.01 , 2.1 ± 0.4 , 1.4 ± 0.7 , and $0.34 \pm 0.03\%$, respectively; and concentrations of Fe, Cu, Mn, and Zn were 166 ± 49 , 6.3 ± 1.7 , 83 ± 21 , and $22 \pm 4 \text{ mg kg}^{-1}$, respectively. These leaf nutrient concentration values are consistent with previously reported in vigorous and healthy fig trees [19,20]. The discrepancies in some macro- and micronutrient concentrations compared to those reported previously could be attributed to the plant vigor, fertilization program (fig plants received N only), and genetic material [11,21].

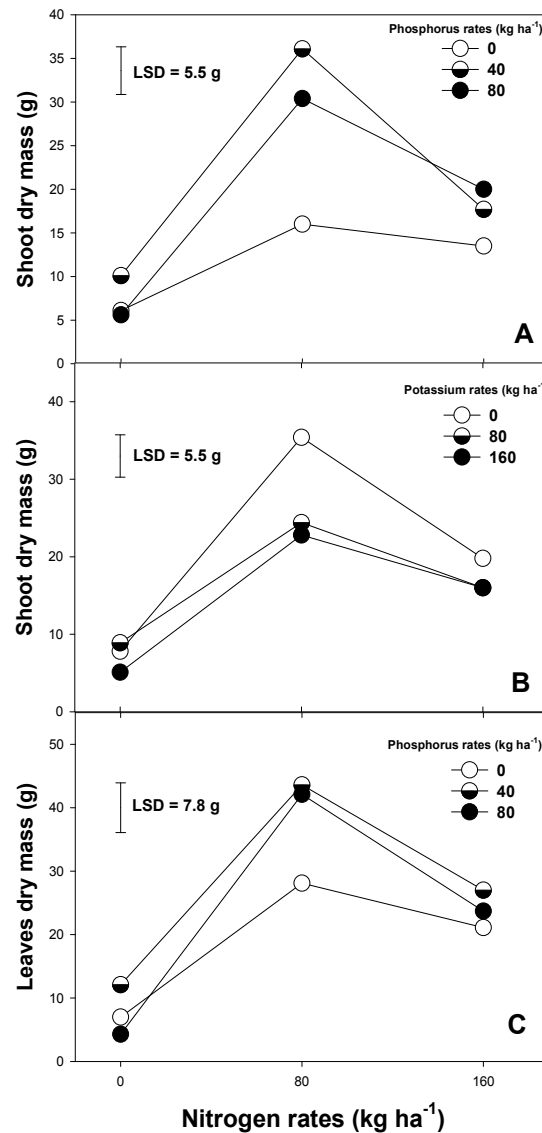


Fig. 4. Effect of the interaction nitrogen x phosphorus on the dry mass of shoots (A) and leaves (C) and effect of the interaction nitrogen x potassium on shoot dry mass (B) of 'Black Mission' fig plants. At each plot, the vertical bar is the Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) test at $P = 0.05$.

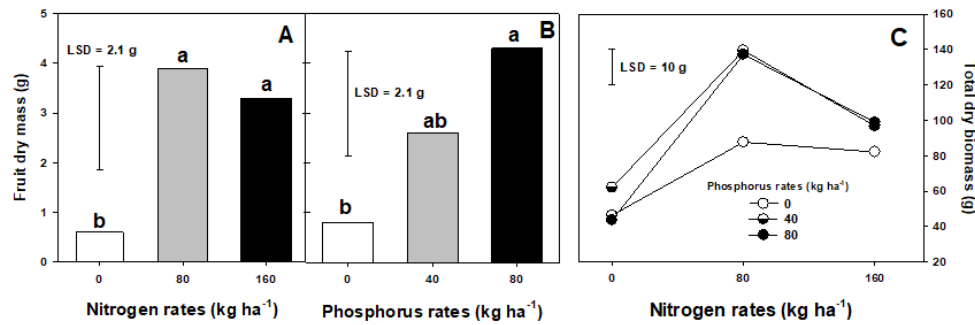


Fig. 5. Main effect of nitrogen (A) and phosphorus (B) rates on fruit dry mass and effect of the interaction nitrogen x phosphorus (C) on total dry biomass of 'Black Mission' fig plants. At each plot, the vertical bar is the Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) test at $P = 0.05$.

Table 4. Agronomic efficiency in the use of N, P, and K in 'Black Mission' fig plants

NPK rates (kg ha ⁻¹)	Agronomic efficiency in the use of nutrients (g g ⁻¹)
Nitrogen	
0	—
80	159.6a*
160	40.3b
Significance ($P > F$)	0.0001
Least significant difference	32.0
Phosphorous	
0	—
40	196.8a
80	81.8b
Significance ($P > F$)	0.002
Least significant difference	71.4
Potassium	
0	—
80	71.5a
160	34.3b
Significance ($P > F$)	0.03
Least significant difference	33.6

*Mean separations within the column per nutrient was by Fisher's test ($P = 0.05$); Mean values followed by different lower-case letter were significantly different

The interaction of 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 40 kg ha⁻¹ P enhanced the dry mass of shoots (Fig. 4A), leaves (Fig. 4C), and total biomass (Fig. 5C); while the main effect of 80 kg ha⁻¹ N also improved dry mass of roots (Fig. 3A) and the main effects of 80 kg ha⁻¹ N and 40 kg ha⁻¹ P enhanced fruit dry mass (Fig. 5B). Both mineral nutrients are important components in photosynthesis. Nitrogen is part of many carbon compounds [22] and phosphorus is used in energy storage and transfer [23]. Our data suggest that this level of interaction can maintain leaf Mg concentrations adequately, as the main component of the chlorophyll molecule, and favor of greater dry mass in all fig plant organs. Higher rates of N and P negatively affected leaf concentrations of some nutrients (antagonism)

(Fig. 1 and 2, Table 2 and 4) [24] and dry mass of all plant organs (Fig. 3-5) due to superfluous consumption (phytotoxic effect) of these nutrients during fig plant growth [18].

In leaf tissue, K⁺ is necessary for osmoregulation and cell turgor maintenance [25]. However, leaf Ca and Mg concentrations were reduced when K was supplied at any level (data not shown). Therefore, even when non-significant, both Ca and Mg correlated negatively with K⁺ (Ca, $r = -0.14$ and Mg, $r = -0.10$). This antagonism was reflected in both root dry mass (Fig. 3B) and shoot dry mass (Fig. 4B). This was possible because Ca and Mg are basic nutrients in plant cell growth (middle lamella and wall of cells) and photosynthesis (chlorophyll molecule),

respectively [22]. This suggests that K^+ contained in the irrigation water (electrical conductivity = 1.15 dS m^{-1}) was enough to meet the fig plants' requirements and additional supplementation induced a phytotoxic effect in these fig plants [16,17]. Thus, K addition to our growing media had an opposite effect to those in previous reports where K was supplied to fig plants [13,14,26,27]. It has been argued that a leaf K concentration between one and three % is adequate for good plant performance during the growing season [22,28,29]. However, specifically in 'Calimyrna' fig plants, the postharvest leaf K concentration (October) was between $0.25 (\pm 0.2\%)$ and $0.7 (\pm 0.3\%)$ in low-vigor and high-vigor plants, respectively [11]. Leaf K concentrations in 'Sierra' plants in September, non- or fertigated with $12.6 \text{ units of K ha}^{-1}$, ranged between 1.66% and 1.52% , respectively, and the corresponding values for 'Black Mission' leaf K concentrations were 1.08% and 1.42% , respectively [14]. Here, in the interaction N x P, leaf K and Ca concentrations (mean $\pm$ SD) were $2.1 \pm 0.4\%$ and $1.4 \pm 0.7\%$, respectively. These values were within the normal range of leaf K ($2.1 \pm 0.5 \%$) and Ca ($1.9 \pm 0.4\%$) concentrations reported for mature fig plants sampled in October [19] and to leaf K and Ca concentrations reported in other deciduous fruit trees sampled during late July and August [30].

Additionally, if nitrogen levels are high, an imbalance between the canopy and root area may occur [31]. A greater leaf area increases transpiration rate than so does water absorption. Therefore, the plant may develop a kind of water stress, hence physiological disorders on leaf and fruit may be observed [22]. On the other hand, soil potassium levels should be monitored periodically [32].

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the N x P interaction at 80 kg ha^{-1} N and 40 kg ha^{-1} P produced the most total dry biomass and its components. At higher applications of N and P, a phytotoxic effect occurred and total dry biomass was reduced, which was corroborated by the analysis of the agronomic efficiency of N and P applications. The rate of 80 kg ha^{-1} N and 40 kg ha^{-1} P induced both synergism and antagonism among leaf nutrient concentrations resulting in final postharvest leaf nutrient concentrations of 2.9% N, 0.11% P, 2.1% K, 1.4% Ca, 0.34% Mg, 166 mg kg^{-1} Fe, 6.3 mg kg^{-1} Cu, 83 mg kg^{-1} Mn, and

22 mg kg^{-1} Zn. The addition of supplemental K deserves further study.

CONSENT

It is not applicable..

ETHICAL APPROVAL

It is not applicable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first author thanks to the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo, Unidad Regional Universitaria de Zonas Áridas, and Campo Experimental la Laguna for their support during my doctoral program (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología; CONACYT grant No. Ref.:1413184-6). We thank Dra Mary Lou Mendum (University of California at Davis) and the Editor and the two Revisors for improving the presentation of this document.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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