Effects of Organic Soil Amendments on Soil Physiochemical and Crop Physiological Properties of Field Grown Corn (*Zea mays*) and Soybean (*Glycine Max*)

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

In

Crop and Soil Environmental Sciences

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April 28, 2006
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Humic acid, Fulvic acid, Superoxide dismutase, Ascorbate peroxidase, Catalase, Malondiadehyde, Compost, Poultry litter, Nitrogen mineralization
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**Abstract**

Water stress is the most critical environmental factor limiting crop production in the US Piedmont. The presence of humic substances in composted organic amendments may increase crop tolerance to water stress through their hormone-like effects on plant metabolism. The objectives of this study were to calculate N mineralization rates of composted and non-composted organic materials used in this long-term field study, and to determine differences in soil physiochemical properties, corn and soybean leaf physical and biochemical properties yield and seed quality between organically amended and inorganically fertilized treatments. Nitrogen mineralization rates were greatest in the poultry litter (21%) and Panorama yard waste compost (4.5%) amended plots. Nitrogen uptake (120 mg/pot, 133 mg/pot, respectively) in these treatments were greater than that in the control (0N) (91.3 mg/pot) treatment. Wolf Creek biosolids compost and Huck’s Hen Blend yard waste compost induced N immobilization (-5.0% and 0.18%, respectively), and had N uptake values similar to the control (92.6 mg/pot and 95.7 mg/pot). Rivanna biosolids compost immobilized N (-14.8%) but N uptake (136 mg/pot) was greater than that in the control due to the relatively high inorganic N content in the amendment. The total N concentration and C:N values were less reliable variables in predicting N mineralization when a significant portion of the total N was in the inorganic form.

The annual application of poultry litter, Rivanna biosolids compost, and Panorama yard waste compost at 100% agronomic nitrogen and 30 % agronomic nitrogen rates in the field study improved soil fertility and increased total organic and humified carbon contents relative to the inorganically fertilized and control treatments. The amended treatments had slightly greater plant available water contents (average 10.0 cm/15 cm) than the control (8.38 cm/15 cm). Leaf water potential measurements revealed that neither crop experienced water stress during the sampling season. Treatment differences in leaf antioxidant activity were only observed in corn. All corn plants that were fertilized
with amendments supplying the crop’s nitrogen needs, regardless of the source, had greater leaf nitrogen (+29%), chlorophyll (+33%), and protein contents (+37%), lower superoxide dismutase (-29%) and ascorbate peroxidase (-17%) activities, and lower malondialdehyde (-33%) contents relative to the control and low nitrogen treatments. There were no observed differences in catalase activity, which was likely due to the evolutionary advantage of C4 metabolism. Yield was strongly related to midseason leaf nitrogen contents ($R^2=0.87$, $p<0.0001$) and not soil humified carbon ($R^2=0.02$, $p=0.0543$). There were no observed treatment differences in soybean leaf physiology and metabolism. Differences, however, were observed over time. As the leaves senesced, leaf chlorophyll, protein, superoxide dismutase and catalase activities decreased, and the malondialdehyde content increased. Ascorbate peroxidase activity slightly increased with time. Catalase activity in soybean was primarily driven by the oxidation of glycolate, a product of photorespiration, and not the formation of reactive oxygen species in the chloroplasts. The organically amended treatments had higher yields (9-21% increase), greater protein contents (4-9% increase), and seed weights (5-14% increase) relative to the fertilizer and control treatments. It was concluded that differences in soybean yield and seed quality were due to non-nutritive benefits of the organic amendments and not available water or plant nutrition.
This study was partially funded by the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Graduate Student grant program
This work is dedicated to my mother who raised me, my father who chose to love me, and to all those who came before— thank you for your sacrifice!
Author’s Acknowledgments

This work could not have been completed without the assistance and support of my mentors, colleagues, friends, and family. I’d like to thank my committee members: Greg Evanylo, Erik Ervin, and John Seiler. Greg concerning you, I have so much to be grateful for. Suffice it to say that under your direction, I know first hand how a graduate student should be treated. To Dr. Ervin, thank you for allowing me free use of your lab space and for being available whenever I needed assistance. To Dr. Seiler, thank you for your instruction in Plant and Water Relations, and for sharing your insight on how to critique scientific journals. Thank you, Dr. Mark Ally for your support as graduate coordinator of CSES. Dr. Xunzhong Zhang, thank you for your analytical expertise and patience with me as learned research techniques. To Dr. Nielsen—thank you for being an awesome professor who challenged me in Plant Stress Physiology. Thank you also for free use of your field equipment. I could not have completed this project without you!

I must extend thanks to the staff of the Northern Piedmont Agriculture Research and Extension Center: Dave Steiner, Alvin Hood, Steve Gulick, and Jan Hazen. Thank you for your assistance during the course of my study. It was always a pleasure to visit you. To Dr. Beshr Sukkariyah—you are my favorite soil chemist. Thank you for sharing your scientific expertise and being a great friend.

To John Spargo, I’m glad we were able to work together at Orange and in the greenhouse. Thank you for your mentorship. To Katie Hearing, thank you for always offering assistance whenever I was short a pair of hands. To Dylan Evanylo, Paul Parker-Clever, Luke Martinkosky, and Nikkida Budrant—thank you for your assistance in the field and lab. Many thanks to the graduate students of CSES, particularly to those of 417 Smyth Hall, whose company kept science motivating and light.

Thank you to the Multicultural Academic Opportunities Program for providing an opportunity to conduct research at Virginia Tech while I was an undergraduate at NC State, and to Dr. John Fike who volunteered to mentor me during that time.

To my parents Linda and Odell Bowden: Thank You for your love and support. To my brother Daniel, I love you.

Peace!
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