

**THE EFFECT OF THE ARBUSCULAR MYCORRHIZAL SYMBIOSIS  
ON THE PRODUCTION OF PHYTOCHEMICALS IN BASIL**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

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Discipline of Soil and Land Systems  
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**May 2008**

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## Summary

The overall objective of this thesis was to investigate how the arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) symbiosis can affect the production of phytochemicals (antioxidants; rosmarinic and caffeic acid, RA & CA) in the shoots of basil (*Ocimum basilicum* L.). As a result of an increasing interest in natural/herbal medicines, more effort is now needed to produce herbal products of better quality, *i.e.* higher and standardised phytochemical concentrations. Thus, it was hypothesised that the naturally occurring AM fungi (AMF) could play an important role in improving the growth and phytochemical concentrations in medicinal herbs such as basil, as organic methods of cultivation are increasingly sought after to grow such plants.

Despite a reasonable amount of information available in the literature on the changes of phytochemical concentrations in the roots of host plants following AM colonisation, very little is known about such processes in the aerial part of such plants. Furthermore, basil has hardly been studied as a host plant in AM research, and very little is known of its responsiveness to AM colonisation. As AMF are well known to improve phosphorus (P) uptake in their host plant, the first objective of this work was to obtain AM and non-mycorrhizal (NM) plants matched for tissue P concentrations and growth rates. Only under such conditions would it then be possible to separate benefits derived from improved plant P uptake from non-nutritional benefits.

It was found that basil is highly responsive to P, and that under low or little P supply it is quite dependent on the AM symbiosis in order to grow. However,

growth depressions were observed when growing basil in winter with *Glomus intraradices*, suggesting that the fungal symbiont can act as a strong sink of carbon (C) under such conditions. Thus, in order to obtain AM and NM plants with matched growth rates and tissue P concentrations, it was found that basil needed to be cultivated in summer in a soil/sand mixture with a ratio of 1:3 (w/w), along with 0.2 g/kg CaHPO<sub>4</sub> and 25% of AM inoculum (AM plants). Under these conditions, AM plants grew as well as NM plants and *G. caledonium* and *G. mosseae* were shown to increase the concentrations of RA and CA in the shoots of basil, but not in roots. Such results were not an indirect effect of improved P uptake.

In order to understand the mechanisms by which AMF increased RA and CA concentrations in basil, further experiments were set up to investigate the effect of 1) AM developmental stages, 2) nitrogen (N) supply and 3) phytohormone changes on the production of RA and CA in the shoots. None of these factors was found to contribute to increases in antioxidants in basil under AM symbiosis. Therefore, the mechanisms by which AMF affect RA and CA concentrations in basil still remain unknown. A final experiment was carried out to investigate the potential of an AM fungus to improve the growth of basil when challenged with a specific pathogen *Fusarium oxysporum* f.sp. *basilici* (*Fob*), which causes significant production losses. The results showed that inoculation of basil with *G. mosseae* not only improved plant growth compared to NM plants, but also conferred a protective effect against *Fob*. However, shoot antioxidant concentrations (RA, CA, total phenolics and essential oils) were not increased in

AM plants compared to NM plants, and the mechanism of protection against *Fob* could not be elucidated.

Due to the high variability of RA and CA concentrations obtained in AM plants in different experiments, it cannot be concluded that AMF confer an absolute advantage over uninoculated plants if the main concern is to obtain standardised concentrations of phytochemical in basil. On the other hand, the key results presented in this thesis do indicate that inoculating basil with AMF can be beneficial to improve its growth as well as antioxidant concentrations, compared to NM plants grown under similar conditions. Such results could be of potential interest to basil growers who wish to cultivate this medicinal herb organically (*i.e.* low P supply and no chemical fertilisers added).



## **Publications and presentations from the thesis**

### **Journal papers**

**Toussaint JP**, Kraml M, Nell M, Smith SE, Smith FA, Steinkellner S, Schmiderer C, Vierheilig H and Novak J. **2008**. Effect of *Glomus mosseae* on the concentrations of rosmarinic and caffeic acids and essential oil compounds in basil inoculated with *Fusarium oxysporum* f.sp. *basilici*. Accepted in *Plant Pathology*.

**Toussaint JP**. **2007**. Investigating physiological changes in the aerial parts of AM plants: what do we know and where should we be heading? *Mycorrhiza* **17**: 349-353.

**Toussaint JP**, Smith FA and Smith SE. **2007**. Arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi can induce the production of phytochemicals in sweet basil irrespective of phosphorus nutrition. *Mycorrhiza* **14**: 291-297.

### **Conference talks and posters**

**Toussaint JP**, Smith FA, Smith SE. **2006**. The influence of AM on the production of phytochemicals in sweet basil\*. *5<sup>th</sup> International Conference On Mycorrhizas (ICOM5)*, Granada, Spain.

\*BIOTISA student award for best presentation in biotechnology

[http://www.mycorrhizas.org/files/NEWSLETTER\\_2006\\_NOVEMBER.PDF](http://www.mycorrhizas.org/files/NEWSLETTER_2006_NOVEMBER.PDF)

**Toussaint JP**, Smith FA, Smith SE. **2006**. Investigating the effects of AM fungi on phytochemical production in sweet basil. *Centre for Soil and Plant Interaction workshop (CSPI)*, Adelaide, Australia.

**Toussaint JP**, Smith FA, Smith SE. **2005**. Improving the yield of active compounds in medicinal plants through the arbuscular mycorrhizal symbiosis. *CSPI workshop*, Adelaide, Australia.

**Toussaint JP**, Smith FA, Smith SE. **2005**. Can the AM symbiosis improve the yield of active compounds in medicinal plants? *Australian Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology meeting (COMBIO)*, Adelaide, Australia. (poster)

## **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.*

*I give consent to this copy of my thesis being made available in the University Library.*

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*Jean-Patrick Toussaint*

*May 2008*

### **Acknowledgments**

Doing a Ph.D. is not an easy dish to prepare. Although the recipe might vary from one person to the next, I would say that it takes 1 cup of commitment, 1 cup of perseverance and approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of wits. To this, you can add some fun-times, according to your taste...though not too much, otherwise the whole thing might turn sour. However, one key ingredient that does not always appear in the cook book is the people that you meet during this journey. They are the “secret ingredient” that will make the difference in creating a “Chef-d’oeuvre” (or so to speak)! Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank all of those who made this thesis possible – I would not dare say it is a “Chef-d’oeuvre”, but hopefully good enough to be a “Main dish”.

First, I would like to deeply thank Professors Sally and Andrew Smith, my principal supervisors. Their knowledge, wisdom, dedication and support have been outstanding and of great inspiration to me. They are the reason that made me decide to come to Adelaide to pursue my Ph.D., and, without a doubt, I would have gone astray many times during my project if not for them. They have always respected my opinions, and my “stubbornness” at times, to lead this project to completion. Thank you for all your tremendous help and friendship. I am also very grateful to Dr Horst Vierheilig who became a co-supervisor during the course of my candidature. Dr Vierheilig has been very inspiring, as well as being open-minded to the ideas that were tossed his way, which led to research projects that we conducted together. He has also been truly generous of his time as well as being supportive. Thank you!

I am grateful to everyone in Vienna, who welcomed me during my short stay in Dr Vierheilig’s lab and made my stay even more enjoyable. I would also like to thank Dr Eloise Foo and Dr John Ross from the University of Tasmania who have helped me tremendously during the last part of my project.

I am thankful to the University of Adelaide for providing me with financial support during my candidature through an International Postgraduate Research Scholarship (IPRS).

## Acknowledgments

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Many thanks have to go to the people with whom I've worked and who have helped me countless times in the lab here in Adelaide, namely: Debbie Miller, Colin Rivers, Rebecca Stonor and Michael Karkkainen. I couldn't have done all this work without your generous help and knowledge. You guys are simply the best! I am also very appreciative of the whole Soil-Biology group, with whom I have interacted countless times from lab meetings, to simple one-on-one discussion. To all of you, thank you. I could not have asked for a better working environment!

Of course, building up towards a Ph.D. is not an easy task in itself. Doing it overseas, away from most of your bearings and familiar faces can greatly add to the challenge. I was lucky enough to make up a whole new family here in Adelaide, who has sustained and carried me through some of the most difficult times of the Ph.D. Laurence, Em, Clayton, Gabe, Kris and Pete, I love you all, and thank you so much for all that you have brought me. You are definitely that "secret ingredient" that made my Ph.D. a wonderful experience!

I also wish to thank Ryan Farquharson: you were a great flat-mate, friend and inspiration to me; Dr Patrick O'Connor: for allowing me to explore other avenues of research and keeping me "afloat" financially speaking; and last but not least, Jodie Duffield: I cannot thank you enough for all that you brought me: you added colour, spice and creativity to my life. Thank you for all your support during those last months of the thesis and for helping me keeping up with Bill Gates complicated tools. I love you very much and wish nothing but the best for you... keep those Kung-Fu moves grooving!

Finally, I cannot finish without paying my deepest regards to my parents, Claire and Jacques. You have always been and still are a great source of inspiration, perseverance and generosity to me. I cannot put into words how much I love you – and missed you during my time away. Thank you for your support, encouragement, patience and faith in me. I wish that one day I become as wise and inspiring to others as you were to me.

*Le Nord est devant toi...*