Reduced growth due to belowground sink limitation is not explained by reduced photosynthesis

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# Summary

* The difficulty in quantifying all components of plant carbon (C) balance inhibits our ability to interpret growth limitation in woody species. This study manipulated soil volume to test how growth is coupled to physiology, C allocation, and sink activity in *Eucalyptus tereticornis* seedlings.
* Seedlings were grown in a range of container sizes and containers were planted flush to the soil alongside freely-rooted (free) seedlings. We developed a growth model that utilized net leaf photosynthesis rates (*A*n) to allocate daily C uptake towards mass growth of stems, leaves and roots.
* Container volume negatively affected aboveground growth throughout the experiment, yet, mass partitioning to leaves, stems and roots was unchanged after 120 days. Photosynthetic capacity was significantly reduced in containered seedlings, and was related to reduced leaf nitrogen content and starch accumulation. Although belowground sink limitation reduced *A*n, the model concluded that these reductions were too small to explain observed growth responses.
* As *A*n and growth were not tightly coordinated, an unaccounted-for pool of photosynthetic C resulted in seedlings with soil volume restriction. These results highlight the need to utilize mass balance approaches when evaluating plant C allocation and confirm that important feedbacks exist between belowground sink strength and leaf C uptake.

## Keywords

photosynthesis, plant growth, sink regulation, carbon allocation, soil volume

# Introduction

Understanding plant growth and its relationship to carbon (C) assimilation requires knowledge of the mass balance that must be achieved between C uptake and subsequent allocation to growth, storage, and respiration. As woody plants have highly integrated systems of competing carbohydrate sinks (Kozlowski, 1992), growth is driven by the allocation of photosynthate from source leaves among these different tissue sinks. At long enough time scales leaf photosynthesis (*A*n) and respiratory losses together determine net C balance and plant growth. At shorter temporal scales growth can instead be mediated by tissue C storage pools (Chapin *et al.*, 1990), which disrupts the coordination between *A*n and growth. This discrepancy has led to the current debate on how strongly plant growth is controlled by either source or sink activity. As plant growth cannot be simply determined by *A*n, growth models must take into account several simultaneous processes affecting the C balance at any given time (Fourcaud *et al.*, 2008). Whether growth limitation in woody species is driven mostly by *A*n or other components of the C balance remains largely uncertain.

One approach to examine the coordination of *A*n and growth is to manipulate C source activity. Examples include elevated CO2 and partial defoliation experiments. Elevated CO2 has been shown to increase *A*n (Drake *et al.*, 1997; Ainsworth & Rogers, 2007); across four forest Free-Air CO2 Enrichment (FACE) experiments this increased photosynthetic uptake resulted in a stimulation of biomass production by 23 % on average (Norby *et al.*, 2005). Evidence from a wide range of elevated CO2 experiments, however, also reveals that even with an average photosynthetic enhancement of over 30 %, the biomass growth rate only increases by around 10 % (Kirschbaum, 2011). In partial defoliation experiments, increases in *A*n of the remaining foliage are commonly shown, and are attributed to reduction in end-product inhibition (Iglesias *et al.*, 2002; Zhou & Quebedeaux, 2003; Handa *et al.*, 2005), enhanced biochemical activity (Ovaska *et al.*, 1993a; Layne & Flore, 1995; Pinkard *et al.*, 2011), increased stomatal conductance (Layne & Flore, 1995), enhanced leaf nutrient status (Turnbull *et al.*, 2007; Pinkard *et al.*, 2011) and regulatory sugar signaling (Eyles *et al.*, 2013). Similar to elevated CO2 experiments, these increases in *A*n in defoliation experiments did not always produce increased growth due to reductions in meristem sink strength (Palacio *et al.*, 2012), C limitation to mycorrhizal colonization (Markkola *et al.*, 2004), or an overall decrease in whole plant C gain (Ovaska *et al.*, 1993b). These manipulations of C source activity demonstrate that changes in *A*n do not always correspond with proportional responses of growth.

Alternatively, manipulation of plant tissue C sinks is often used to investigate the correlation between *A*n and growth. Plant metabolic signalling networks have the ability to regulate photosythetic activity, according to carbon status of different plant tissues (Paul & Foyer, 2001). If sink inhibition of *A*n occurs, a close coordination between declines in *A*n and growth should be expected. The occurrence of photosynthetic down regulation has been tested through fruit removal and phloem girdling. In these studies, down regulation of *A*n was found to correlate with carbohydrate accumulation resulting from reduced tissue sink strength (Iglesias *et al.*, 2002; Urban & Alphonsout, 2007; Haouari *et al.*, 2013). However, reductions in *A*n were also attributed to biochemical limitations prior to carbohydrate accumulation (Nebauer *et al.*, 2011), irreversible photo-oxidative damage (Duan *et al.*, 2008) and stomatal limitation (Li *et al.*, 2005). This lack of continuity among findings is not surprising, as we still know little about the balance between assimilation, storage and growth across temporal scales in plants (Smith & Stitt, 2007). As these manipulations likely impact source as well as sink activity simultaneously, affect water transport, are very extreme, or are specific to the occurrence of large fruiting sinks, they tell us little about source-sink coordination in typical growing conditions for woody species.

An alternative experimental approach is to reduce belowground C sink strength in tree seedlings by manipulating rooting volume, by varying the container size (Arp, 1991; NeSmith & Duval, 1998; Poorter *et al.*, 2012a). Inadequate rooting volume can decrease C sink strength by progressively restricting root growth in growing plants (Thomas & Strain, 1991). Container size studies frequently exhibit photosynthetic down-regulation, likely as a result of sink limitation (Arp, 1991; McConnaughay & Bazzaz, 1991; Gunderson & Wullschleger, 1994; Sage, 1994; Maina *et al.*, 2002; Ronchi *et al.*, 2006). A meta-analysis by Poorter et al. (2012a) concluded that *A*n is the process likely to be the strongest affected by pot size and may best explain the effects on biomass seen in the large number of studies where containers are used. This conclusion arises because plants grown in small containers are shown to accumulate leaf starch while having lower assimilation rates (Robbins & Pharr, 1988). However, evidence in support for a trade-off between C storage and growth in trees is, to date, inconclusive (Palacio *et al.*, 2014). Whether down regulation of *A*n and subsequent reductions of growth are quantitavely similiar has rarely been tested. Based on these previous studies, using a range of container sizes as a sink-strength manipulation provdies a way to empirically test the extent to which growth and *A*n are coordinated.

This study utilizes a novel field design to investigate the coordination between growth and *A*n in *Eucalyptus tereticornis* Sm. seedlings, by manipulating container size and thus rooting volume. Seedlings were maintained under well watered conditions in order to isolate the effect of restricted soil volume. We used freely-rooted seedlings as a control for the container size treatments. We tracked leaf-level gas exchange, leaf carbohydrate accumulation and seedling allometry over the course of 4 months. Empirical results were combined with a simple plant growth model to simulate seedling growth with a C mass balance approach, which was then compared to observed harvested seedling mass. The model used whole-plant C gain, scaled from instantaneous rates of leaf *A*n, to quantify seedling dry mass production over the 120 day experiment.

Manipulations of container size were expected to induce a belowground sink limitation compared to free seedlings, resulting in growth reductions in the smallest containers. Specifically, reductions in biomass partitioning to root mass, relative to tree size, were predicted to occur with decreasing rooting volume and soil nutrients in container treatments. We also expected a correlation between carbohydrate accumulation and photosynthetic capacity as a function of soil volume, as reduced sink strength would lead to accumulation of leaf non-structural carbohydrates and down regulation of *An*. Taking into account measured rates of photosynthesis, we expected biomass predictions from the growth model to correspond to observed seedling mass.

# Materials and Methods

## Experimental design

This experiment was located at the Hawkesbury Forest Experiment site in Richmond, NSW, Australia. Plots were located in an open cover paddock that was converted from native pasture grasses. Top soils are an alluvial formation of low-fertility sandy loam soils (380 and 108 mg kg-1 total N and phosphorus respectively) with low organic matter (0.7 %) and low water holding capacity. At this site a soil hard layer exists at ~1.0 m with a transition to heavy clay soils. The climate for the region is classified as sub-humid temperate.

Forty-nine *Eucalyptus tereticornis* seedlings, 20 weeks old and approximately 40 cm tall in tube stock, were chosen from a single local Cumberland plain cohort. Six additional seedlings were harvested before planting to measure initial leaf area and dry mass of leaves, stems and roots. Previous container experiments have confirmed that species with tap roots (similar to *E. tereticornis*) use the center of the container as the medium for thick roots, leaving the periphery of the soil as the most active sites for fine root proliferation (Biran & Eliassaf, 1980a,b). By using a species with tap root growth and manipulations of container length rather than width, we believed that a more realistic test of growth inhibition through constrained soil volume would be achieved.

Six container volumes were used ranging from 5 L to 35 L, with a 22.5 cm diameter, and lengths ranging from 15 to 100 cm. Containers were constructed of PVC pipe and were filled with local top soil. Soil in each container was packed to achieve a target soil bulk density that matched local soil conditions of 1.7 g cm-3. An Imidacloprid (BAYER CropScience) insecticide tablet was planted 5 cm below the roots of each seedling. Containers were planted flush with the soil surface inside metal sleeves, designed to minimize excess air space between the container and outside soil while also allowing for container removal. This allowed for soil temperatures in containers to reflect conditions of naturally planted (free) seedlings. Each experimental block (n=7) contained a complete replicate set of six container volumes as well as one free seedling, with 1 m2 spacing. For each free seedling, used as the control, a 1 m2 subplot was excavated to the hard layer and replaced with the same soil used in each container. A border of root exclusion material was buried 0.25 m deep and extended 0.25 m above the ground surface around each subplot to exclude local vegetation, which was further kept out by periodic weeding.

Plants were watered weekly or when needed to maintain soil moisture at field capacity (13-15 %). Drain systems were built into each pot to prevent pooling of water throughout the experiment. Pooling of water could lead to an anaerobic environment around the root that could hinder the uptake of water through reduced root conductance (Poorter *et al.*, 2009), an undesired experimental artifact. A collection compartment in the bottom of containers, containing gravel covered by root exclusion mesh, was used to collect excess water for 20, 25, and 35 l containers. Plastic tubing (6 mm diameter) was inset into the gravel layer and extended through the top of the container. A lysimeter pump was then used to suction excess water, through the tubing, as needed. For small containers (5, 10, and 15 L) a simple bottom plug was used to drain excess water from the gravel compartment. Each container was inspected after every watering and rainfall event to determine if pooling had occurred.

## Growth and morphology metrics

Seedlings were planted in summer (January 21st 2013) and stem height, diameter at 15 cm and leaf count were measured weekly thereafter. After four months, a full biomass harvest was completed and the experiment ended (May 21st 2013). Dry mass of leaves, stems, roots and total leaf area (LI-3100C Area Meter; LI-COR, Lincoln, NE, USA) were measured for each seedling. Mean individual leaf area for each harvested seedling was calculated by dividing total measured leaf area by total leaf count of only fully expanded leaves. Mean individual leaf area was then used to interpolate total seedling leaf area through time with weekly leaf counts. Root mass was collected by removing the roots system and passing soil from each container through a 1 mm sieve, washing, separating into fine and coarse roots (<2 mm and >2 mm diameter, respectively) and then drying to a constant mass. Roots of seedlings in containers were not considered pot bound, as matted roots along the soil-container interface were not observed. Roots from the free seedlings were collected by excavating each 1 m2 subplot to the hard layer and keeping only roots within the subplot. For each seedling, a sub-sample of washed fine roots was analyzed for root length using WhinoRhizo software (Regent Instruments Inc., Quebec, QC, Canada). Specific root length (SRL) is reported as the root length divided by the dry mass of each sub-sample (m g-1). Fine root length density (FRLD) for seedlings in containers is reported as the total fine root length divided by the volume of each container (m dm-3).

## Photosynthetic parameters

Leaf gas exchange measurements were performed fortnightly at saturating light (*A*sat) and saturating light and [CO2] (*A*max) on new fully expanded leaves. Measurements were initiated only after sufficient new leaf growth occurred (March 5th, 2013), approximately 6 weeks following planting, and continued until the biomass harvest. Leaf gas exchange was measured with a standard leaf chamber (2 x 3 cm) equipped with blue-red light emitting diodes using a portable gas exchange system (LI-6400, LI-COR, Lincoln, NE, USA). *A*sat measurements were made at PPFD of 1800 mol m-1 s-1 and [CO2] of 400 l l-1 and *A*max with [CO2] of 1600 l l-1 and PPFD of 1800 mol m-1 s-1. This choice of light level to achieve light saturation is consistent with other studies on *Eucalyptus* species (Kallarackal & Somen, 1997; Pinkard *et al.*, 1998; Crous *et al.*, 2013; Drake *et al.*, 2014). These measurements were conducted during midday (10:00-14:00 h) with leaf temperature maintained at 25 °C. After CO2 and water vapor flux values stabilized in the leaf chamber, net CO2 assimilation rate and stomatal conductance (*g*s) were logged 5 times and averaged for both *A*sat and *A*max.

Photosynthetic CO2 response (ACi) curves were measured at 25 °C on a random subset of each container size (n=3) after new leaves were first produced (March 13-14th, 2013) and prior to the final harvest (May 14-15th, 2013). Each ACi curve was started at the reference [CO2] of 400 l l-1 and then consisted of 12 additional steps from [CO2] of 50 to 1800 l-1 at 25 °C at saturating light. From these curves the photosynthetic parameters, *J*max and *V*cmax, were quantified using the biochemical model of Farquhar *et al.* (1980) and fit with the 'plantecophys' package (Duursma, 2015) in R (R Development Core Team, 2011).

Leaf dark respiration rates (*R*) were measured on each seedling on the same dates as ACi curves. Freshly detached leaves were collected at least 1 hour after sundown and placed inside a conifer chamber attached to the Licor 6400. Measurements were taken at a reference [CO2] of 400 l l-1 while leaf temperature was maintained at current ambient conditions. Reported values of *R* are standardized rates at 25 °C using a *Q*10 value (1.86) developed for these seedlings in a separate experiment (Drake et al. unpublished). Leaf area and dry mass were recorded for each leaf during gas exchange campaigns.

## Leaf water potential

Predawn (pd) and midday (l) leaf water potentials were measured for each seedling using a PMS 1505D pressure chamber (PMS Instruments, Albany, OR, USA) on fully expanded leaves during the same time period as ACi and *R*. Leaves were detached and immediately stored inside foil-covered bags before water potential measurements were performed. pd was measured before sunrise and l at 13:00 h (&pm30 m). These measurements were used as a measure of static water stress on the seedlings (Sellin, 1999) and to ensure that the bulk soil water availability was high enough for plants to avoid water stress as they became larger and roots filled the soil volume.

## Leaf, root and soil chemistry

Leaves used in each gas exchange measurements and subsamples of harvested roots were dried to a constant mass and milled for analysis of nitrogen (N) content, 13C, and total non-structural carbohydrates (TNC). Pre-planting soil samples (n=6) and subsamples of soil from each container following harvest were sieved to remove organic material, air dried and milled for analysis of N. Nitrogen concentrations of leaf and soil samples were determined using a Carlo Erba CE1110 elemental analyzer with thermal conductivity and mass spectromic detection (of N2 and CO2). The percentange of N in samples was calculated by comparison with certified standards. Leaf 13C was analyzed with an Delta V Advantage coupled to a Flash HT and Conflo IV isotope ratio mass spectrometer. Leaf samples were flash combusted at 1000°C to convert to CO2, feed to the mass spectrometer and isotopic signatures are reported relative to the standard Vienna Pee Dee Belemnite scale.

Leaf total non-structural carbohydrate (TNC) concentration was analyzed on dried and milled leaf samples using a total starch assay kit (Megazyme International, Wicklow, Ireland) and includes the starch and soluble sugar concentrations (mg g-1). Starch was quantified using a thermostable -amylase and amyloglucosidase assay (McCleary *et al.*, 1997) and soluble sugars were determined following the anthrone method (Ebell, 1969). Complete methods of the TNC assay are described in Mitchell *et al.* (2013). TNC-free specific leaf area (SLAf, m2 kg-1) for leaves sampled during gas exchange campaigns, was calculated by first subtracting the TNC content from individual dry leaf mass before dividing leaf area by leaf mass. Similarly, TNC-free leaf N content (Nf, %) was calculated on all gas exchange leaves from leaf mass without TNC content.

## Seedling growth model

We developed a simple seedling growth model that utilized leaf *A*n rates to allocate daily C assimilate towards biomass production of stems, leaves, fine roots and coarse roots. The model begins with mean initial tissue component biomass (leaf0, stem0 and root0) and a starting leaf area (L0) measured prior to planting. The initial biomass of roots was divided evenly between fine and coarse roots. The daily net biomass production of seedlings (*G*), from Mäkelä (1997), is then given by

(1)

where *L* is modelled total plant leaf area (m2), *P* is the daily carbon assimilation per unit leaf area (g C m-2 d-1, explained below), is a self-shading parameter (explained below), is a biomass conversion efficiency parameter (g C g mass-1) and *R* is the mass based total respiration of all tissue components (g C d-1). Total respiration was calculated as

(2)

where *R* is published or measured tissue respiration rates (g C g mass-1 d-1) of stems (s), fine roots (fr) and coarse roots (cr) and *M* is the modelled standing biomass for each tissue component (g). Leaf respiration is included in the calculation of *P*. The change in each tissue component biomass (*M*) on daily time steps, including leaves, stems, fine roots and coarse roots, is given by

(3)

where is the component specific biomass partitioning to whole plant biomass (%) and is component specific turnover rate (yr-1). Because we did not observe branch turnover, of stems was assumed to equal 0. Total seedling biomass, per time step, was then equal to the sum of all biomass components; leaves, stems, fine roots and coarse roots.

## Model parameters and simulations

*P* was predicted by using a coupled photosynthesis - stomatal conductance model (Farquhar *et al.*, 1980; Medlyn *et al.*, 2011) with the 'plantecophys' package (Duursma, 2015) in R with the mean photosynthetic parameters (*J*max, *V*cmax, *R* and *g*1) for each treatment and meteorological data from an onsite weather station. Values of *J*max and *V*cmax are mean estimates from ACi curves over two measurement periods (explained above), *R* was empirically measured and the *g*1 parameter was generated by fitting the optimal stomatal conductance model from (Medlyn *et al.*, 2011) to observed *g*s values. Methods of the coupled leaf gas exchange model are also described in Duursma et al (2014). Combined with the meteorological parameters; PPFD, air temperature, and relative humidity, at 15 min intervals, leaf *A*n rates (mol CO2 m-2 s-1) were then predicted for each soil volume treatment. *P* was calculated by converting predicted rates to mass C gain over 15 min time steps (g m-2) and then summed for 24 h. This resulted in 120 unique values of *P* for each soil volume treatment, one value for each day of the experiment. Thus, each daily time step for model runs included a value of *P* that represented both treatment specific photosynthetic parameters and meteorological constraints across the duration of the experiment.

It was further necessary to calculate a self-shading parameter () when scaling leaf *A*n with total plant leaf area. This was accomplished by utilizing 61 previously digitized *Eucalyptus* seedlings, covering 5 total species which include *E. tereticornis*, from Duursma et al. (2012) to run in 'YplantQMC' package (Duursma, 2014) in R to build a 3D plant structure based on digitized metrics of plant allometry and crown structure. Using the same treatment specific physiological parameters listed above, 'YplantQMC' outputs total *A*n, using total leaf area, for seedlings assuming self-shading as well as for a full sun large horizontal leaf. The ratio of total *A*n with self-shading to horizontal leaf was then used to calculate for each of the 61 digitized seedlings, independently for each of the seven soil volume treatments. Next, the linear relationship between and total leaf area was determined across digitized seedlings, within each treatment. For the growth model, was then predicted for each daily time step using the previous days cumulative leaf area and this value was then applied to *P*. All default parameters used in model simulations are reported in Table S1.

We then used this model to test the hypothesis that the effects of belowground sink limitation on rates of leaf *A*n were sufficient to accurately predict overall seedling biomass production after 120 days. First, a default model with mean photosynthetic parameters from the free seedlings was optimized to estimate a leaf mass fraction (LMF) which correctly predicted both the leaf mass and total biomass of the harvested free seedlings (*M*free). This optimized LMF was then used to constrain model runs with treatment-specific *P*, while keeping woody tissue respiration and tissue turnover parameters constant, to determine if changes in leaf *A*n alone could predict biomass of seedlings in containers (*M*pots). Cumulative net leaf C gain for each treatment was equal to the sum of each value of *P* over 120 days and final seedling C was assumed to equal half of the final dry mass for both modeled and observed seedlings. Seedling biomass production was compared between model output and harvested seedlings with treatment-specific mean *P* by first scaling values to the free seedling control.

## Data analysis

Differences in measured parameters with soil volume were analysed by mixed-effects models in R with individual containers and experimental blocks as random effects and soil volume treatment as a categorical fixed effect with seven levels. Tukey's post-hoc tests were performed in conjunction with ANOVA to determine which specific paired comparisons among soil volume treatments were different. A linear mixed effect model of *A*mass and leaf chemistry was performed using the 'nlme' package (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2015) in R. Explained variance (*R*2) of mixed models were computed as in Nakagawa & Schielzeth (2013), in which the marginal *R*2 represents variance explained by fixed factors and the conditional *R*2 by both fixed and random factors. Tests of allometric relationships between log-transformed biomass components were implemented using standardized major axis regression in the 'smatr' package in R (Warton *et al.*, 2012). All tests of statistical significance were conducted at an level of 0.05.

# Results

## Growth and morphology

Plant height, diameter and leaf area diverged between container volumes soon after start of the experiment (Figure 1a-c). First to diverge was seedling leaf area, which significantly differed among soil volumes (*P* < 0.029) during the 5th week of the experiment. Significant differences were then observed in both height (8th week) and then diameter (9th week) significantly among soil volumes (*P* < 0.045 & 0.035, respectively). The large reductions in height gain and total leaf area in smaller compared to larger containers continued throughout the experiment. In this field study, colder temperatures and reductions in total PPFD per day (Figure 2) likely slowed the growth of seedlings in the final weeks of the experiment. Seedlings maintained diameter growth throughout the experiment, although growth was marginal in smaller soil volumes in the final month. Final seedling height significantly increased with increasing soil volume (*P* < 0.001). Increases in both final stem diameter and cumulative leaf area (both *P* < 0.001) were found with increasing soil volume and these differences were driven mainly by the largest container and the free seedling treatments.

Total seedling biomass at harvest was significantly different across container volumes (*P* < 0.001) and between container treatments and free seedlings (*P* < 0.001, Table 1). On average, harvested biomass of free seedlings was 84% higher than that of seedlings in containers. Plant biomass was positively correlated with total leaf area across all treatments (*R*2 = 0.97, *P* < 0.001). Differences in biomass partitioning to leaves, stems and roots were not different across soil volumes after variation in seedling biomass across treatments was factored in the analysis (Figure 3a,b). The final harvest root:shoot biomass ratio and was conserved across all treatments, with a slightly higher shoot than root mass ( = 0.904, 95% CI = [0.846,1.119]). The ratio of leaf to fine root mass was also not different between treatments (Figure 3c).

Overall, SRL was higher in seedlings in containers compared to free seedlings but only in some of the container size treatments (Table 2, *P* = 0.009). Fine root length density was significantly higher in the two smallest container sizes and was the lowest in the largest container size (Table 2, *P* < 0.001). Over the duration of the experiment SLAf was higher in free seedlings, but was not different across container sizes (Table 1, *P* < 0.001) and this pattern was evident beginning in the first gas exchange measurement campaign (*P* < 0.001).

## Leaf and root chemistry

Leaf Nf was significantly higher in free seedlings and the largest container volume compared to the smaller container volumes at the onset of gas exchange measurements (6th week, *P* < 0.001). Throughout the remainder of the experiment the smallest container volume had significantly lower leaf Nf than other soil volumes, while free seedlings maintained the highest leaf Nf (Table 1, *P* < 0.001). Leaf starch content in the smallest container was ca. double that of free seedlings (*P* = 0.039), while leaf soluble sugars did not differ across treatments throughout the experiment (Table 1). Differences in leaf starch between the free seedling and the smallest container were evident during the first gas exchange campaign (*P* = 0.001). Root N was higher in free seedlings compared to seedlings in containers but only for some of the container size treatments (Table 2).

## Gas exchange and photosynthetic parameters

At the first measurement campaign, both *A*sat and *A*max were significantly higher in the free seedling treatment compared to seedlings in containers (both *P* < 0.001). Across all measurement campaigns, mean *A*sat (Figure 4) and *A*max (Table 3) were consistently higher in free seedlings than in containers (26 % and 29 %, respectively). The relationship between leaf starch and leaf Nf on a mass basis was marginally significant (*P* = 0.058), but *A*max on a mass basis was highly correlated with both leaf Nf and leaf starch (both *P* < 0.001). We used predictions from the linear mixed effect model equation to visualize these relationships of *A*max to either leaf Nf or leaf starch at multiple bin levels (n=5) of the co-variate parameter (Figure 5). Across all measurement campaigns and treatments *A*max was higher when leaf Nf was also higher, usually associated with low levels of leaf starch (Figure 5a). *A*max was also lower when leaf starch was high as higher leaf Nf often did not coincide with high leaf starch (Figure 5b). Overall, *A*max was positively correlated with final harvest biomass across all seedlings (*P* < 0.001).

Both *J*max and *V*cmax were significantly higher in free seedlings (30 % and 26 %, respectively) than container-grown seedlings with little variation between container volume treatments (Table 3). Overall, the Jmax:Vcmax ratio was relatively conserved across all treatments (1.6±0.02), which is consistent with findings across many tree species (Medlyn, 1996; Leuning, 1997; Medlyn *et al.*, 1999; Warren *et al.*, 2003; Crous *et al.*, 2008). Leaf dark respiration rates were not significantly different across soil volumes (Table 3). The *g*1 parameter, generated for each seedling from the Medlyn et al (2011) optimal stomatal conductance model, was lowest in the free seedling treatment and was marginally different across soil volume treatments (Table 3).

Neither pd nor l were different across treatments, with mean values of -0.27 and -1.2 MPa across all seedlings, respectively. Although *g*s in free seedlings was generally higher than those in containers (Table 3, *P* < 0.001), the mean rates for all seedlings were high at 0.37 mol m-2 s-1 and did not change throughout the course of the experiment. Additionally, leaf 13C at final harvest was not different across treatments (Table 1). Combined, these indices provide strong evidence that water stress was not apparent on these seedlings throughout the experiment. Soil N at harvest was not different across soil volumes ( = .045 %), with minimal decreases from pre-planting values ( = .049 %). This similarity indicates that nutrient leaching from free seedlings or from draining of containers following natural rainfall events did not differ between treatments.

## Modelling seedling biomass

Optimization of the default model (*M*free) against data yielded an estimate of LMF of 25.7 %; with this LMF, the model predicted mean harvest total biomass of free seedlings within 1.0 %. Using this optimized LMF, the modeled total biomass of seedlings for each soil volume treatment (*M*pots) was on average 11±2.3 g C more than measured seedling biomass when compared against predicted total net leaf C gain (Figure 6a). As a result, seedling C mass was overestimated by an average of 45±6.2 % in modeled seedlings across the soil volume treatments when non-photosynthetic parameters were kept constant (Figure 6b). As a result, the observed reductions in leaf *A* with decreasing soil volume when integrated across the 120 day experiment were not large enough to explain the reduction in observed seedling biomass across the container size treatments.

# Discussion

This study utilized a novel field design to manipulate belowground sink limitation and physically restrict *Eucalyptus tereticornis* seedling biomass production. We addressed questions regarding the coordination of *A*n and growth by complementing empirical results with a C mass balance model. We found that reductions in leaf *A*n across container sizes, when integrated across the 120 day experiment, were alone insufficient to account for observed reductions in total plant biomass production.

## Reductions in growth and physiology under sink limitation

Soon after seedlings became established, both height and diameter growth were negatively affected by decreasing soil volume. Low growth led to large reductions in biomass in small containers, compared to freely rooted seedlings. We analyzed the relationship between biomass growth and soil volume and found an increase of 34 % with a doubling of container volume, consistent with the meta-analysis of Poorter et al. (2012a). These growth reductions were expected, as the impedance of root growth can cause reductions in overall plant growth and activity (McConnaughay & Bazzaz, 1991; Young *et al.*, 1997). It has been shown that roots subjected to environmental stress may send inhibitory signals to the shoots that affect *g*s, cell expansion, cell division and the rate of leaf appearance (Passioura, 2002). Here, we observed a large divergence in leaf area between seedlings in containers and free seedlings through time, with the eventual cessation of new leaf growth in seedlings in small containers.

Decreases in *A*sat occurred simultaneously with reductions growth of seedlings in containers. This observation initially suggests that sink limitation may be driving the down regulation of photosynthesis, and thus growth. However, there are several possible mechanisms that can explain reduced *A*n in small containers including reduced water availability or nutrient content, or reduced sink strength (Poorter *et al.*, 2012a). It was therefore necessary to examine each of these factors to determine if the induced belowground sink limitation actually triggered photosynthetic down regulation.

With high rates of *g*s, non-limiting leaf water potential (pd), and consistent leaf 13C across soil volume treatments, there was little evidence that water stress caused the reduction in *A*n. This finding is consistent with other container size studies without drought treatments. For example, reduced *A*max in cotton seedlings grown at elevated CO2 was attributed to sink-limited feedback inhibition from inadequate rooting volume, not decreased *g*s (Thomas & Strain, 1991). Similarly, severe reductions in *A*n in coffee plants were not attributed to impacts of container size on leaf water potentials or *g*s (Ronchi *et al.*, 2006). It is thus likely that reductions in *A*n of well-watered seedlings observed in our study of *E. tereticornis* seedlings are not the result of limiting soil moisture availability.

With respect to nutrient availability, reductions in *A*n were positively correlated with decreases in leaf Nf and leaf Nf was considerably reduced for seedlings in containers. Since reductions in leaf Nf were detected with TNC-free leaf mass, TNC dilution of leaf N was accounted for in all seedlings. It it possible that either physical root restriction or decreased supply reduced seedling N uptake in small containers. Although root N was on average higher in free seedlings at the end of the experiment, it was not consistently higher than the smallest container volume treatment. Unrestricted mycorrhizal recruitment could have instead facilitated the increases in leaf Nf in free seedlings, but this effect is unknown. Soil N also declined evenly across all treatments, providing no clear evidence for decreased supply between free seedlings and seedlings in containers. In these already low fertility soils, it is possible that seedlings in containers simply grew into increasing N limitation which negatively affected belowground sink strength. Although no clear feedback could be determined between the available soil N pool and decreases in leaf Nf, the effects of belowground sink limitation on *A*n of seedlings in containers was evident throughout the experiment.

As both rooting space and resources were finite in containers, the inability of seedlings to maintain the capacity of the belowground C sink resulted in the buildup of C assimilate in leaves. The feedback inhibition of *A*n from starch accumulation has been proposed, yet it is still not known whether there is a starch threshold that triggers the down-regulation process (Nebauer *et al.*, 2011). Here, declines in *A*max were correlated with higher starch content throughout the experiment. These results agree with a study on a deciduous conifer by Equiza et al. (2006) where photosynthetic downregulation from reduced sink strength was correlated with starch content. As starch content in leaves of plants grown in the smallest containers was nearly double that of free seedlings in our study, this suggests the response of *A*n to sink inhibition was regulated by this accumulation, as hypothesized.

## Biomass partitioning under sink limitation

As biomass partitioning is likely controlled by the source and sink strength of all organs (Poorter *et al.*, 2012b), it was important to determine which tissue components were most affected by the container size treatments. It was necessary to distinguish if growth was affected beyond ontogenetic constraints, by correcting for size, as biomass distribution is strongly size-dependent (Gould, 1966; Lleonart *et al.*, 2000). In this study, there was no significant difference in root, leaf, or stem biomass partitioning with reduced soil volume compared to free seedlings, outside of ontogenetic drift (Figure 3a,b). This result is unexpected as shifts in partitioning have been noted specifically for nutrient limitation (McConnaughay & Coleman, 1999, and references therein). Surprisingly, a constant ratio of fine root mass to leaf mass was observed across all treatments suggesting a functional partitioning response to optimize resource gain did not occur.

The lack of detected shifts in partitioning to fine roots provides evidence against an optimal foraging strategy for seedlings in containers. It is instead possible that lateral root development is affected by inanimate obstacles and avoiding growth towards container walls may improve resource gain (Falik *et al.*, 2005). The sensitivity of roots to their own exudates near obstructions may also prevent further growth (Semchenko *et al.*, 2008). Here, we found that FRLD was highest in smallest containers suggesting that root restriction likely occurred as simple function of available rooting space. Additionally, physical restriction of root proliferation could have impacted root development and morphology prior to shifts in mass partitioning. Here, increases in SRL were detected in several of the soil volume treatments. This is not surprising as plants in containers have been shown to have different root morphology to field grown plants (NeSmith & Duval, 1998). The poor soil quality used in our experiment and root restriction, however, likely decreased the capacity of this morphological response to increase N uptake.

## Do reductions in photosynthesis explain reductions in seedling growth?

Our model used a simple approach to drive seedling growth with measured reductions in leaf *A*n , via soil volume effects, while treating C use efficiency, respiration and C allocation as fixed processes. Contrary to expectation, the model consistently overestimated seedling growth in containers when parameterized with an optimized LMF for free seedlings. Although reductions in both *A*max and biomass were strongly correlated among treatments, as hypothesized by Poorter et al. (2012a), we provide evidence that the negative effects of sink limitation on *A*n do not fully explain reduced seedling growth. These findings are important as this model reflects classical approaches in tree growth and production modelling that are driven by inputs of C assimilation and processes such as respiration are considered proportional to biomass (Le Roux *et al.*, 2001) or growth rate (Tjoelker *et al.*, 1999). It is possible that the overestimation of growth was due to an initial overestimation of *A*n, however, the robust empirical based methods used to generate photosynthetic parameters (*J*max, *Vc*max, *R* and *g*1) make this unlikely. Instead, our results indicate a need to evaluate how oversimplified representations of processes other than *A*n affect models which distinguish the fate of assimilate C within a plant. Doing so will provide valuable input to future models as assimilate allocation is a key component in carbon-balance driven plant growth models (Lacointe, 2000).

Focusing only on empirical results in this study points to *A*n driving reductions in seedling growth. Our modelling results reveal that other components of the C balance, beyond *A*n, are required to explain the observed seedling biomass response to sink manipulation. This discrepancy is noteworty, as partial accounting of the different mechaninsms involved in plant carbon balance can lead to erroneous conclusions (Valentini *et al.*, 2000). For example, the fraction of photosynthate used in respiration is known to vary depending on species and local environmental conditions (Lambers *et al.*, 2008), yet is often considered a static parameter in process based growth models. The use of fixed rates of respiration in our model likely underestimates seedling responses to sink limitation. Thus, our modelling results agree with conclusions from Valentine and Mäkelä (2005) where the problem with predicting tree growth is a problem in forecasting the assimilation and allocation of C and other constituents. Future empirical and modelling studies should focus on how feedbacks from sink activity affect both rates of *A*n and the fate of C allocated to growth, respiration and C storage in leaves. However, the degree to which these mechanisms regulate the C available for growth will undoubtedly shift across different species and environmental conditions.

## Conclusions

With a novel field-based design we detected a massive effect of container volume on seedling growth, when compared with naturally planted seedlings. This finding is important as manipulations of plants grown in containers are often used to draw conclusions about growth and physiological principles, but how these results actually reflect field-grown plants is seldom studied. Although biomass partitioning was conserved, our empirical and model results suggest that the amount of photosynthate allocated to non-biomass pools were likely altered by sink inhibition. The debate over how rates of photosynthesis affect plant growth or to what degree these rates are instead controlled by growth has existed for decades (Sweet & Wareing, 1966). Our combined empirical and modeling approach shows that when non-photosynthetic parameters were kept constant, changes in *A*n were not able to fully to predict changes in growth, an important distinction often missed in studies that manipulate source/sink activity. It has been suggested that tissue sink activity strongly feedbacks onto source activity, causing growth to control *A*n through the demand for C (Körner, 2013, 2015). Although this may be true, our results imply that quantifying the fate of assimilated C into known pools of growth, storage and C loss are needed prior to addressing this debate. The approach used here has the flexibility to account for multiple drivers of C allocation and provides an avenue to address future questions regarding the impact of environmental change on plant growth.

# Tables

**Table 1**.Responses of plant and leaf characteristics of *Eucalyptus tereticornis* seedlings to soil volume treatments. Each value reflects the mean (± 1 standard error) for each treatment. Seedling mass and leaf 13C values are from final harvest. Values of SLAf, leaf starch, leaf sugars and leaf Nf represent overall means across measurement campaigns (n=6). Different letters represent significant differences between treatments. The volume effect *P* value represents the overall difference between seedlings with soil volume restriction and the control seedlings.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Volume (L)** | **Seedling mass (g)** | **SLAf (m2 kg-1)** | **Leaf Starch (%)** | **Leaf Sugars (%)** | **Leaf Nf (%)** | **Leaf 13C (‰)** |
| 5 | 14.8 (1.82) a | 11.8 (0.32) a | 12.7 (0.97) b | 6.4 (0.28) a | 1.3 (0.03) a | -30.1 (0.26) a |
| 10 | 20.0 (2.38) ab | 11.7 (0.31) a | 9.4 (0.75) ab | 6.7 (0.25) a | 1.5 (0.04) ab | -30.2 (0.25) a |
| 15 | 25.4 (2.49) ab | 12.7 (0.48) a | 7.3 (0.73) a | 7.2 (0.28) a | 1.6 (0.07) ab | -30.3 (0.36) a |
| 20 | 23.4 (1.63) ab | 11.8 (0.37) a | 9.5 (0.88) ab | 6.6 (0.26) a | 1.7 (0.06) ab | -29.7 (0.28) a |
| 25 | 30.4 (5.49) ab | 12.4 (0.40) a | 9.8 (0.71) ab | 6.9 (0.24) a | 1.6 (0.07) ab | -29.7 (0.25) a |
| 35 | 52.2 (9.55) b | 13.5 (0.46) ab | 9.8 (0.65) ab | 6.8 (0.22) a | 1.8 (0.08) b | -30.6 (0.38) a |
| Free | 174.5 (18.02) c | 15.1 (0.47) b | 6.8 (0.65) a | 7.4 (0.25) a | 2.7 (0.09) c | -30.0 (0.34) a |
| Volume Effect (P value) | 0.001 | 0.001 | 0.029 | 0.125 | 0.001 | 0.372 |

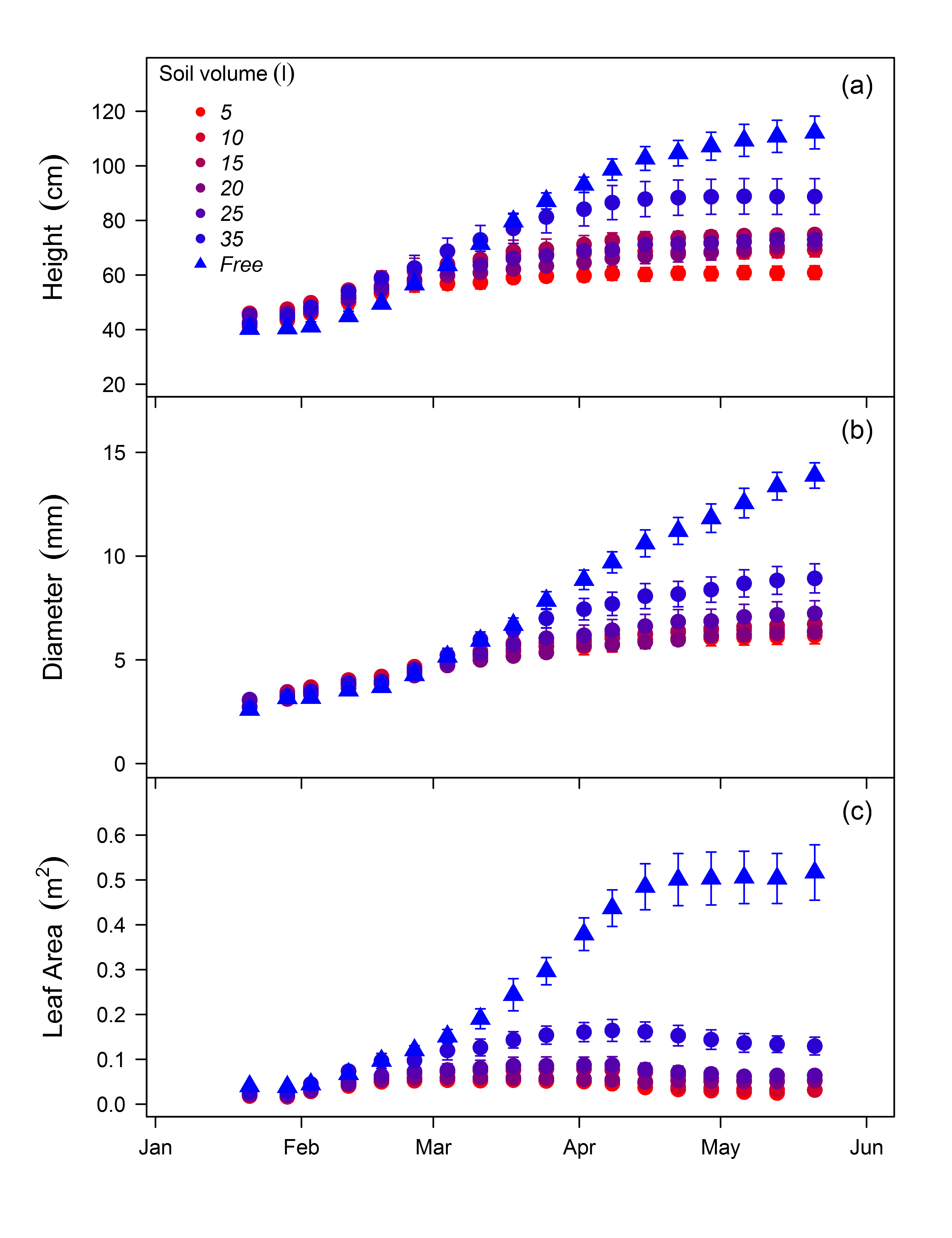
**Table 2**. Responses of root characteristics of *Eucalyptus tereticornis* seedlings to soil volume treatments. Each value reflects the mean (± 1 standard error) for each treatment. All values are from the final harvest. Values for fine root length density (FRLD) were only calculated for seedlings in containers as free seedlings had potentially unlimited soil volume to exploit. Different letters represent significant differences between treatments. The volume effect P value represents the overall difference between seedlings with soil volume restriction and the control seedlings, except for FRLD which represents only differences between seedlings in containers.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Volume (L)** | **Root N (%)** | **SRL (m g-1)** | **FRLD (m dm-3)** |
| 5 | 0.78 (0.04) ab | 73.0 (6.73) ab | 36.4 (5.68) bc |
| 10 | 0.75 (0.02) a | 99.6 (8.70) b | 45.9 (8.68) c |
| 15 | 0.71 (0.02) a | 74.6 (6.98) ab | 20.9 (1.51) ab |
| 20 | 0.76 (0.04) a | 85.8 (7.37) ab | 23.0 (3.09) ab |
| 25 | 0.74 (0.02) a | 82.5 (15.02) ab | 24.7 (7.58) ab |
| 35 | 0.77 (0.03) ab | 63.1 (6.47) a | 13.3 (1.98) a |
| Free | 0.90 (0.03) b | 50.9 (5.00) a |  |
| Volume Effect (P value) | 0.017 | 0.009 | 0.001 |

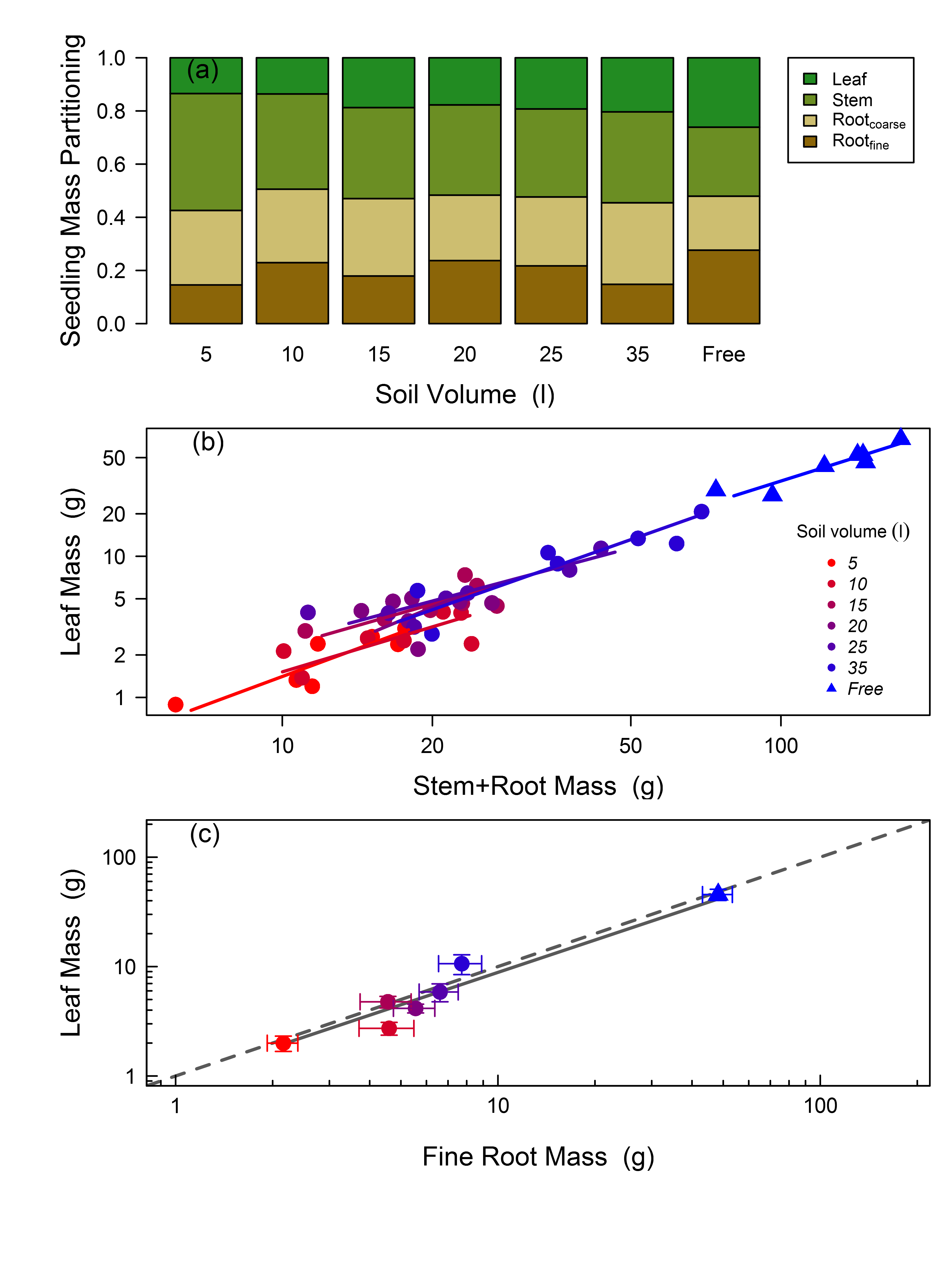
**Table 3**. Responses of leaf level gas exchange parameters of *Eucalyptus tereticornis* seedlings to soil volume treatments. Each value reflects the mean (± 1 standard error) for each treatment. *A*max, *R* and *g*s are each measured at 25 °C. Values of *A*max, *g*s and *g*1 represent overall means across measurement campaigns (n=6). R, *J*max and *V*cmax values are means of two measurement campaigns at beginning and end of gas exchange measurements. Different letters represent significant differences between treatments. The volume effect *P* value represents the overall difference between seedlings with soil volume restriction and the control seedlings.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Volume (L)** | ***A*max (mol m-2 s-1)** | **R (mol m-2 s-1)** | ***J*max (mol m-2 s-1)** | ***V*cmax (mol m-2 s-1)** | ***g*s (mol m-2 s-1)** | ***g*1** |
| 5 | 21.2 (0.9) a | 0.61 (0.04) a | 104.5 (3.3) a | 63.3 (2.5) a | 0.30 (0.009) a | 5.1 (0.14) bc |
| 10 | 22.3 (1.4) ab | 0.79 (0.06) a | 116.5 (7.5) a | 69.4 (4.7) a | 0.36 (0.009) ab | 5.4 (0.10) cd |
| 15 | 23.3 (1.2) ab | 0.70 (0.05) a | 125.4 (7.8) a | 80.8 (5.1) ab | 0.42 (0.010) ab | 5.8 (0.14) d |
| 20 | 26.1 (0.7) b | 0.73 (0.11) a | 131.5 (8.6) a | 82.1 (4.7) ab | 0.37 (0.011) ab | 4.9 (0.12) ac |
| 25 | 23.9 (0.9) ab | 0.53 (0.13) a | 132.8 (13.1) a | 79.0 (8.7) a | 0.30 (0.009) a | 4.5 (0.14) a |
| 35 | 25.0 (1.0) ab | 0.61 (0.04) a | 127.2 (6.1) a | 82.4 (3.6) a | 0.31 (0.011) a | 4.4 (0.15) a |
| Free | 33.1 (0.7) c | 0.64 (0.07) a | 169.0 (8.2) b | 100.4 (3.3) b | 0.44 (0.011) b | 4.5 (0.14) ab |
| Volume Effect (P value) | 0.001 | 0.269 | 0.004 | 0.005 | 0.007 | 0.001 |

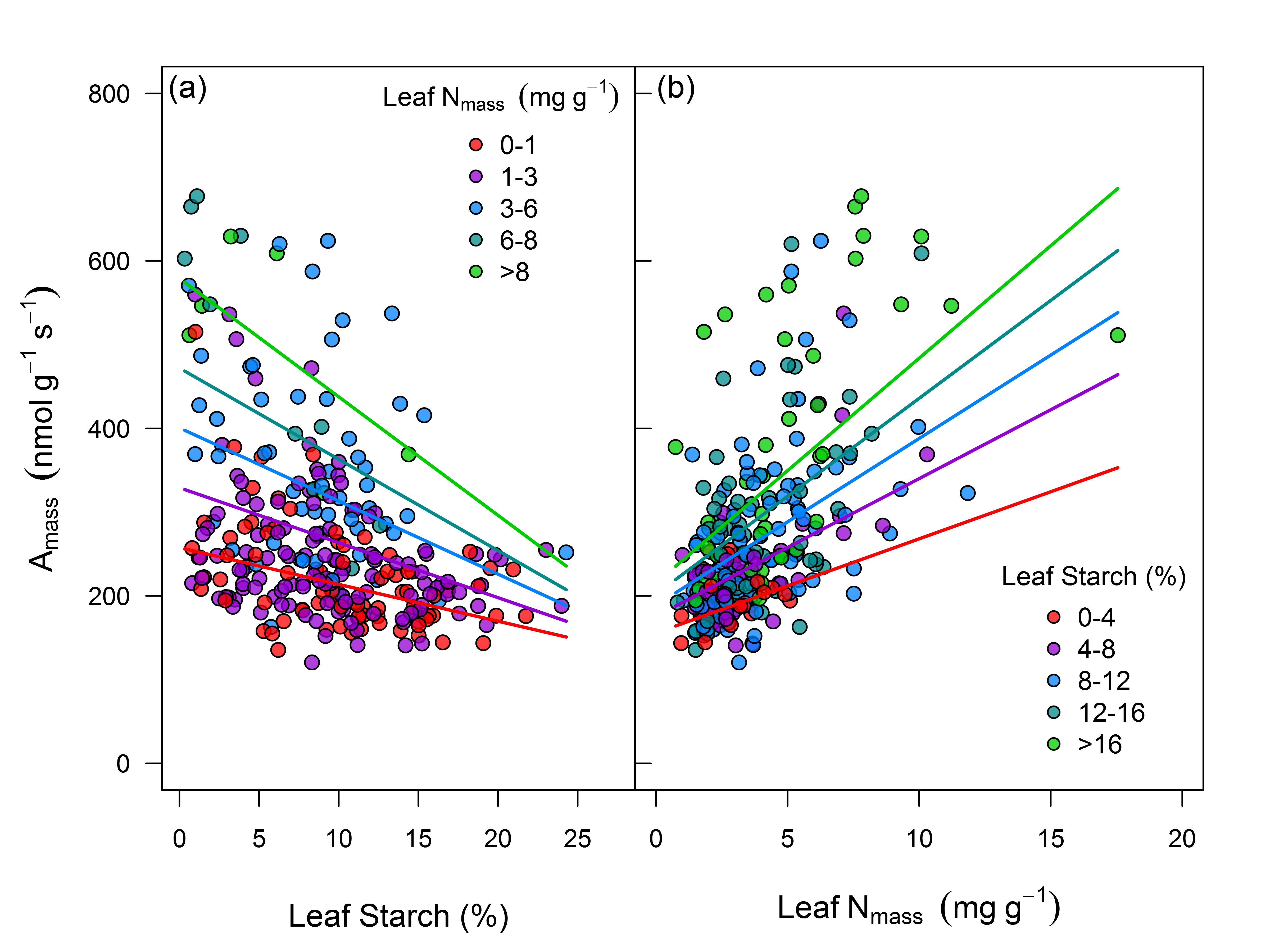
# Figures

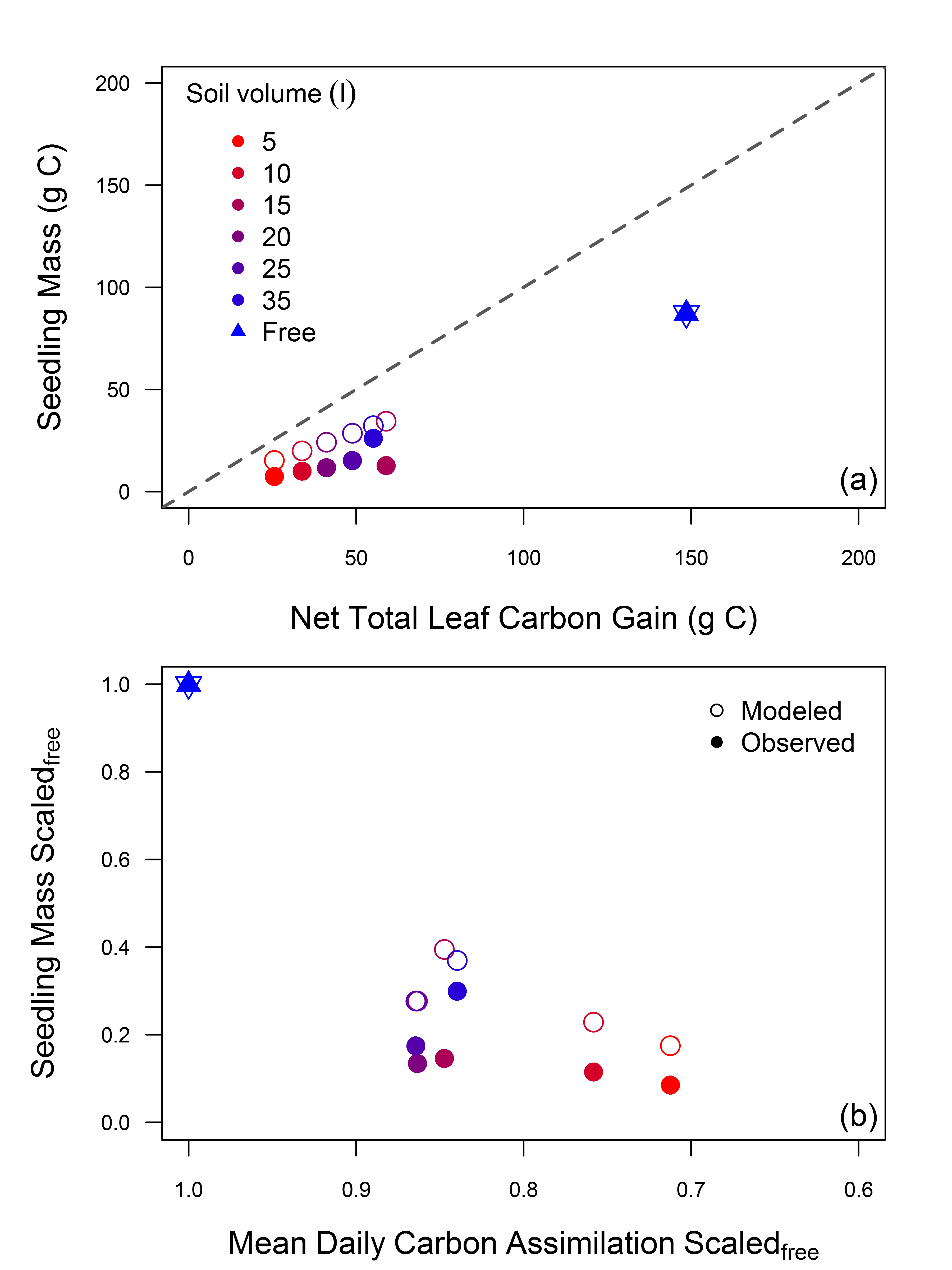
 **Figure 1**. Soil volume treatment means ± standard error of height growth (a), diameter growth (b), and seedling leaf area estimated from leaf counts (c) measured weekly of *Eucalyptus tereticornis* seedlings across the experiment duration in 2013.

 **Figure 2**. Daily maximum and minimum temperature (a), total daily PPFD (b), and daily maximum vapour pressure deficit (c) across the experiment duration in 2013.

 **Figure 3**. Soil volume treatment means of biomass partitioning to leaves, stems, and roots at harvest (a), bi-variate relationships between mass allocation to leaves and stems + roots (b) and leaf mass as a function of fine root biomass with ± standard error (c). For (b) lines represent standardized major axis fitting of the log-transformed allometric relationships of leaf mass fraction by treatment. For (c) the dashed line is the 1:1 relationship and the solid line represents the significant log-log model fit (*R*2 = 0.82) with equation: log(x) = 0.983log(y) - 0.036.

 **Figure 4**. Soil volume treatment means ± standard error, across all measurement campaigns (n = 6), of light saturated rates of photosynthesis at 25 °C. Different letters represent significant differences between treatments.

 **Figure 5**. Photosynthetic capacity, on a leaf mass basis, as a function of accumulation of leaf starch (a) and leaf nitrogen content without TNC (b). Colors represent bins levels (n = 5) of both leaf starch and nitrogen grouped from low to high. Lines represents predictions, for each bin level, from the linear mixed effects model equation of Amass as a function of starch and nitrogen. The marginal *R*2 (fixed effects only) was 0.37 and the conditional *R*2 (fixed and random effects) was 0.48 for the complete model.

 **Figure 6**. Total carbon mass for harvested and modeled seedlings versus predicted total carbon gain after 120 days (a) and reductions in final seedling carbon mass, both modeled and observed, as a function of the reduction in leaf photosynthesis across treatments (b). For (a) the dashed 1:1 identifies the difference between net total leaf carbon gain and gross seedling production. For (b) both seedling carbon mass and daily carbon assimilation were first scaled to the free seedling control.

# Supporting Information

**Table S1**.Seedling growth model default parameters.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | **Description** | **Default.Value** | **Units** | **Source** |
| L0 | initial leaf area | 0.035 | m2 | this study |
| Leaf0 | initial leaf mass | 3.45 | g | this study |
| Stem0 | initial stem mass | 1.51 | g | this study |
| Root0 | initial root mass | 0.99 | g | this study |
|  | biomass conversion efficiency | 0.65 | g C g mass-1 | Mäkelä (1997) |
| *R*coarse root | coarse root respiration | 0.00124 | g C g root-1 d-1 | Marden et al. (2008) |
| *R*fine root | fine root respiration | 0.01037 | g C g root-1 d-1 | Ryan et al. (2010) |
| *R*stem | stem respiration | 0.00187 | g C g stem-1 d-1 | Drake et al. (unpublished) |
| *P* | daily leaf carbon assimilation | 5.4 - 7.6 | g C m-2 d-1 | this study |
|  | leaf or root turnover | 1 | yr-1 | theoretical |

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