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Mixing cultivars reduces early root competition between wheat seedlings under resource limited conditions

Germain Montazeaud1,†, Pierre Roumet1, Mickaël Lamboeuf2, Christian Jeudy2, Martin Ecarnot1, Lise Malicet-Chebbah1, Christophe Salon2, Hélène Fréville1

1AGAP, Université de Montpellier, CIRAD, INRAE, L'institut Agro, Montpellier, France

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†corresponding author: [g.montazeaud@gmail.com](mailto:g.montazeaud@gmail.com)

# Keywords

Cultivar mixtures, relative yield, stress-gradient hypothesis, agroecology, selection effect, root phenotyping, …

# Abstract

# Introduction

Decades of experimental ecology have established a general positive relationship between plant diversity and ecosystem functioning (Tilman et al. 1996, 2001; Hector et al. 1999). That is, ecosystems with a higher number of species tend to be more productive, more efficient at regulating pathogens, at recycling nutrients, or at buffering abiotic stresses (Hooper et al. 2005; Hector and Bagchi 2007; Tilman et al. 2014). Species diversity is generally thought to improve ecosystem functioning via two main effects: the complementarity effect, and the selection effect (Loreau and Hector 2001). The complementarity effect results from differences in ecological niches between species that have different resource requirements and hence experience less competition, which ultimately translates into a more efficient conversion of resources into ecosystem functions (e.g., Roscher et al. 2008; Mueller et al. 2013). Communities with more species are also more likely to contain species which are the most efficient at performing a given function, and such “efficient” species might be even more efficient in a diverse community than in a monoculture (e.g., highly competitive species often benefit from relaxed competition in a mixture compared to a monoculture), which corresponds to the selection effect (e.g., Fargione et al. 2007; Li et al. 2018).

Similar ecological effects can be exploited in crops by mixing different species at the same time within the same field (i.e., intercropping, Vandermeer 1992). For example, one of the most ancient intercrop known as the “three-sisters” (maize, bean, squash) combines species with different root foraging strategies that complement each other and achieve greater yield in mixture than grown separately (Zhang et al. 2014), which is commonly referred to as overyielding. Mixing species that get their nitrogen from the soil (e.g., cereals) with species that can fix nitrogen from the atmosphere (e.g., legumes) is another way to achieve complementarity effects and ultimately overyielding (Bedoussac et al. 2015). However, intercropping also raises several challenges because the components of the intercrop can differ in many aspects of their life cycle (germination, growth rate, phenology, plant architecture, etc) which complicates agronomic management (Lemken et al. 2017; Huss et al. 2022). Moreover, they often have different harvest products that need to be separated from each other.

Cultivar mixtures, that is the sowing of a mixture of genotypes of the same species in the same field, allows to address most of these challenge by mobilizing plant diversity at the intra-specific level (Smithson and Lenné 1996). Historically, cultivar mixtures have been shown to be very efficient at limiting pathogen spread and disease severity compared to monogenotypic cultivars, especially in grain cereals (Wolfe 1985; Mundt et al. 1995; Zhu et al. 2000; Finckh and Wolfe 2006). This advantage has recently renewed the interest in cultivar mixtures as they could help reduce the use of pesticides and as such support the agroecological transition (Barot et al. 2017; Borg et al. 2018; Snyder et al. 2020; Wuest et al. 2021). Extensive research in phytopathology has helped identify the different epidemiological and evolutionary mechanisms that underly the protective effect of cultivar mixtures against pathogens (Finckh and Mundt 1992; Mundt et al. 1995; Finckh et al. 2000; Vidal et al. 2017). For example, recent results suggest that some cultivars might be able to improve the basal immunity of their neighbors, a phenomenon referred to as neighbor-modulated susceptibility (NMS, Pélissier et al. 2021, 2023).

In addition to their beneficial effects on pathogen control, cultivar mixtures could also help optimize resource use and ultimately increase crop yield (Hajjar et al. 2008; Barot et al. 2017; Snyder et al. 2020). Ecological mechanisms at play in natural ecosystems or in intercropping such as niche complementarity could similarly improve resource use efficiency by reducing competition intensity between the different cultivars. Moreover, ecological theory predicts that such positive effects of plant diversity should strengthen as the environment becomes harsher, which is known as the stress-gradient hypothesis (SGH, Bertness and Callaway 1994; Maestre et al. 2009). According to the SGH, cultivar mixture could thus help maintain high productivity under low-input farming practices and more variable and extreme climates. In line with these theoretical expectations, most meta-analysis report slight yield increases in cultivar mixtures compared to monogenotypic cultivars (on average 2-5%, Kiær et al. 2009; Reiss and Drinkwater 2018; Borg et al. 2018). However, contrary to their beneficial effect on pathogen control, the positive effect of varietal mixtures on productivity and its interaction with resource availability are highly variable and remains poorly understood (Reiss and Drinkwater 2018; Alsabbagh et al. 2022).

In nature, plant functional traits can be used to better understand and predict the effect of plant diversity on ecosystem processes, notably productivity (McGill et al. 2006; Garnier et al. 2015). These traits are defined as any morphological, physiological or phenological feature measurable at the individual level […] without reference to the environment or any other level of organization (Violle et al. 2007). They capture how individuals interact with their abiotic and biotic environment, and ultimately how they contribute to processes occurring at higher levels of organization (community, ecosystem). For example, the leaf functional traits of dominant species can be used to predict primary productivity or litter decomposition rates at the community level (Garnier et al. 2004). Similarly, differences in functional traits between species can capture differences in ecological niche (Violle and Jiang 2009) or in competitive ability (Wagg et al. 2017; Cadotte 2017), and in turn inform us on the ecological effects that drive productivity at the community level (e.g., complementarity or selection effects).

Even if plant traits are commonly used in agriculture, for example to adapt management practices or to conduct selection in plant breeding programs, very few studies have applied trait-based approaches to cultivar mixtures (Montazeaud et al. 2018, 2020; Kong and Zhao 2023). Preliminary results from these studies suggest that the traits with the strongest effect on mixture performance are not necessarily the ones commonly measured in agricultural applications. In particular, morphological and architectural root traits have been shown to determine multiple facets of mixture performance (Montazeaud et al. 2018, 2020), which echoes recent findings on the central role of root traits in natural ecosystems (Bardgett et al. 2014). However, the relationship between root traits and mixture performance remains poorly understood, notably because root traits are difficult to measure and highly plastic in response to both biotic and abiotic factors. A better understanding of this relationship could help us identify the mechanisms underlying the variability of mixing effects on productivity, as well as provide us with measurable features that could be used to guide mixture assembly.

In the present study, we used durum wheat (*Triticum turgidum* ssp*. durum*) as a crop model to investigate the effect of root trait diversity on mixture performance. We grew 54 binary mixtures obtained from 36 contrasted cultivars in a highly controlled high throughput root phenotyping platform under both non-limiting and limiting water and nutrient conditions. Based on ecological theory, we hypothesized that (i) mixtures would produce more biomass than their monoculture counterparts (i.e., overyielding) (ii) overyielding would be higher under resource-limited conditions, (ii) resource-use complementarity would be the main effect driving overyielding, (iii) complementarity effects would arise from differences in root traits between cultivars.

# Material and Methods

## Cultivars

We first screened 250 durum wheat genotypes from different research programs in Europe in the field in 2018 (Southern France, INRAE – UE DIASCOPE – 43°360N, 3°590E). Each genotype was grown under two conditions: no water and nitrogen limitation vs water and nitrogen limitation. We then selected a subset of 36 genotypes with contrasted responses to resource availability (going from very stable to very unstable genotypes). Information on the 36 genotypes can be found in Supplementary Table 1.

## Experimental design

Based on the 36 genotypes, we designed a set of 54 binary mixtures such that each genotype was observed in three different mixtures. Monocultures (here refereeing to groups of a single genotype, n = 36) and mixtures (here referring to groups of two genotypes, n = 54) were grown in RhizoTubes®, transparent pots designed for high-throughput root phenotyping (Figure 1), with six plants per RhizoTube. The six plants were the same genotype in monocultures, whereas two genotypes were grown in alternate positions in the mixtures (Figure 1). The 36 monocultures and the 54 mixtures were grown under a combined water and nutrient stress (S treatment) or without stress (C treatment). All monocultures and mixtures where replicated three times within each treatment following a randomized complete block design within treatment (Figure 1).

## Growth conditions

Seeds were sown into XXX media on the 22nd of June 2019 and kept at XX °C during two days. Seedlings were then transferred into the RhizoTubes on the 24th and harvested about three weeks later between the 16th and the 19th of July. Temperatures were maintained around 20-25°C, relative humidity around 70-80%, and photoperiod was set to 16h with an average PAR of 330 µmol.m-².s-1 during the day. Seedlings were daily provided with a liquid nutrient solution that contained water, N, P, K and all micronutrients required for plant growth (see the description of the solution in Supplementary Table 2). The water content of each RhizoTube was monitored each day, and the amounts of nutrient solution were adjusted to maintain the RhizoTubes at 100% of their water storage capacity (Supplementary Figure 1). In the S treatment, the provision of nutritive solution was stopped on the 28th of June (four days after seedling transfer) such that the water content progressively decreased to reach 55% of the full storage capacity by the end of the experiment (Supplementary Figure 1).

## Phenotyping

Architectural root traits

Architectural aboveground traits

Leaf nitrogen content

Biomass

## Statistical analysis

# Results

## Effect of the stress on plant growth and architecture

The limitation of water and nutrients strongly reduced the total biomass of the seedlings (1947.35 mg in the S treatment vs 2364.71 in the C treatment, *F*1,87.77 = 144.49, *p* < 0.001,Figure 2f). This biomass reduction was accompanied by a reallocation of resources from the above-ground to the below-ground compartment: while the seedlings produced less leaves (Figure 2a), less tillers (Figure 2b), and less above-ground biomass (Figure 2d) in the stressed treatment compared to the control, they also had longer roots (Figure 2h), higher root surfaces (Figure 2i), and higher root biomass (Figure 2e). Consequently, the Root:Shoot Ratio went from 0.48 in the control to 0.82 in the stressed treatment (+71%, F1,87.78 = 3966.58, *p* < 0.001, Figure 2g). Leaf nitrogen concentration increased in the S treatment (3.32 vs 2.95%, F1,87.19 = 525.03, *p* < 0.001, Figure 1D).

# Figure legends

**Figure 1: Experimental design.** (a) Schematic representation of the experiment, each dark square representing a Rhizothube ®. (b) and (c) close-up views on Rhizotubes ® showing wheat seedlings and their roots. (d) Positions of the seedlings within the Rhizotubes ® in both pure (up) and mixed (bottom) stands. Different colors represent different genotypes.

**Figure 2: Effect of the stressed treatment on seedlings growth and architecture.** Comparison of number of leaves (a), number of tillers (b), leaf nitrogen content (c), shoot biomass (d), root biomass (e), total biomass (f), Root:Shoot Ratio (g), root length (h), and root surface (i) between the control (C) and the stressed (S) conditions. Points and error bars represent the mean ± standard deviation. The number of observations in each treatment are reported below each violin plot. Symbols above the plots represent the significance of the treatment effect (\*\*: *p* < 0.01, \*\*\*: *p* < 0.001, Supplementary Table 3).