

Why longer seasons with climate change may not increase tree growth

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Abstract

A number of recent studies have challenged the fundamental assumption that longer growing seasons lead to increased tree growth, raising concerns that forecasts of future climate change—which include increased carbon storage through this assumption—may be overly optimistic. In a review of recent literature, we found that 58% of studies report the expected increased growth with longer seasons, 36% of studies found no increased growth. We suggest the current major challenge is thus to understand and predict this widespread variation. Studies have proposed a suite of hypotheses for why longer growing seasons may not always increase tree growth, including drought-related constraints, internal limits, and methodological differences. Yet our review did not find consistent results when holding methodology constant. Instead, we found that the hypotheses—and underlying mechanisms—were generally tested in different ways by different sub-fields, making comparisons difficult. We argue that bridging disciplinary divides and integrating theory from community and phylogenetic ecology could help develop and test a mechanistic framework for when longer seasons will—or will not—lead to greater growth.

Introduction

The idea that longer growing seasons lead to increased plant growth is an intuitive tenet across multiple fields of biology, including physiology, dendrochronology and ecosystem ecology (??). It is also a foundational assumption of many models of the future global carbon cycle (e.g. ??). These models therefore project that continued anthropogenic warming will be partly offset by increased carbon sequestration as warming lengthens growing seasons in temperate and boreal forests (?), an assumption supported by a suite of ecosystem-scale studies (??).

Yet recent work has questioned this longstanding assumption (e.g. ???), with potentially large implications for future climate change. Studies finding that longer seasons do not necessarily challenge decades of research that report increased growth with longer seasons, from studies along natural elevational and latitudinal gradients (????), classic studies in lab settings (?), to stand-level trends in ecosystem fluxes with warming (???). Proposed mechanisms for the apparent disconnect are diverse (Fig. ??), including non-linear effects of climate change itself (e.g., drought or heat stress, ?), internal limits on plant growth (?).

Here we review the connections between growing season length and plant growth across fields

to identify the potential mechanisms that unite—and could disconnect—these processes. Leveraging a review of the literature alongside the current proposed hypotheses, we examine which methods and metrics suggest that extended seasons lead to increased growth. We find a pervasive disciplinary split between studies, which may limit progress. Further, research has generally tested different mechanisms on different species, overlooking insights from community and phylogenetic ecology (e.g., ???) that suggest predictable—and substantial—variation in growth \times growing season relationships across species. We argue that—with increased cross-disciplinary efforts—the field could rapidly develop a unified theoretical framework to predict when, where and how climate change may increase tree growth.

Evidence that longer seasons increase plant growth, or not

The idea that time limits growth is a fundamental principle of most biological fields. Many biological processes—including photosynthesis and many aspects of growth—are rate-limited, making time a crucial commodity (???). Thus, the hypothesis that longer growing seasons should increase growth is intuitive—and pervasive.

Multiple fields have long assumed that longer seasons yield more growth. Foundational evidence for this relationship comes primarily from spatial clines across elevation and latitude, with growth decreasing alongside growing season length at higher elevations and latitudes (Fig. ??). Experimentally, this hypothesis is supported by small-scale field warming studies that find that species which advance phenologically with warming also grow more (?), while observationally, ecosystem-scale studies have reported a similar positive relationship between growing season length and carbon fluxes across decades with global warming (?) or in years with warm, early springs (?). These findings, however, have not been supported by other recent studies, which has focused often on inter-annual correlations with metrics of standardized individual tree growth (??), and generated debate about whether future carbon storage forecasts are overestimated and which metrics of growth (?), or growing season length (?) are relevant.

Despite this recent debate, we found little support for a wholesale disconnect between growth and growing season length. Instead, research has generally found split support for when longer seasons lead to increased growth. Papers spanning 25 years have variously found evidence for—or against—the relationship, with no clear pattern by method or year (Fig. ?? and see ‘Literature review methods’ in Supplement). For example, studies that measured carbon assimilation were evenly split in finding evidence for or against the relationship—or simply not testing it (Fig. ??). Diverging results were consistently found within all well-studied methods, suggesting the drivers of this variation are likely due to biological mechanisms, not solely inconsistent definitions or methods (as some, e.g. ??, have recently suggested).

Most papers hypothesized longer seasons with climate change increase growth via either increased time to grow (10 of 36 papers) or because longer seasons are usually warmer (8 papers), but many also considered hypotheses that could disconnect growth from season length. Studies from the disciplines of dendrochronology (the study of tree rings and their dating) and physiology have readily offered mechanisms for the recent results that increased growth may not be a universal outcome of longer seasons. Hypotheses focus on both source (photosynthesis-limited,

including CO_2 limitation) and sink limitations (Fig. ??). External climatic drivers that offset the positive growth effects of longer seasons are often reported in tree ring studies (???). In particular, the hypothesis that higher temperatures paired with lower precipitation produce negative correlations with growth appeared in 58% of tree ring studies we reviewed (and was only mentioned once outside of studies measuring radial growth, see also Fig. ??). In contrast, 45% of lab experimental and wood phenology (xylogenesis) studies suggested fundamental internal constraints that prevent trees from responding to longer seasons (Fig. ??, ???). Yet we found that these hypotheses have been tested in radically different ways, never together, and ignore a suite of relevant research from other disciplines.

Controllers on growth \times growing season length relationships

A suite of major mechanisms that could limit or disrupt the positive effects of longer growing seasons operate at different levels and scales. Currently disconnected research has focused on: (1) external factors, such as drought, which should impact ecosystem-level trends at regional scales, and (2) internal physiological constraints, which some research suggests are either universal across plants (e.g., ?), or species- and population-specific (e.g., ?). The importance of these two factors, however, are highly likely to vary by species, highlighting the importance of integrating perspectives from community and phylogenetic ecology.

External drivers

Fundamentally, temperature limits many biological processes. Temperatures that are too cool (often considered to be below 5°C for temperate trees) and too warm (an area of active research, ??) slow down biological processes and eventually can lead to tissue death (see Fig. ??, ??). Between the upper and lower limits biological processes underpinning growth generally accelerate such that warming can have a direct effect, by accelerating biological time, up until the maximum rate for that particular process. Given a common growth response curve to temperature, increased growth should then be predictable at an ecosystem-level based on the current seasonal temperatures and the scale of warming.

Positive effects of longer seasons on growth, however, could be counteracted by moisture deficits from reduced precipitation or higher evaporative demand, which was a common hypothesis in tree ring studies (Fig. ??). Such studies reported support for this through negative correlations between growth and precipitation or other metrics related to plant access to water (??). While we found drought limitation was far less studied by physiological-focused studies, the mechanism is well supported by other physiological research that highlights tree water status as a biophysical limit to growth (i.e., cells cannot expand without sufficient turgor, ??), driving diel correlations between vapor pressure deficit and growth (??).

Even without the complicating factor of soil moisture, temperature’s non-linear effects on growth can also limit growth responses (Fig. ??). At very cool temperatures—such as those of early spring—a small increase in warming may have limited effect, while an increase in warmer temperatures—such as those more common in the summer (e.g., 16 to 18°C)—would have a larger physiological impact. Warming that pushes plants beyond their optima, where many

biological rates crash, could have large negative impacts (??). Thus, some studies hypothesize that longer seasons effectively only extend the very cool early-season periods and thus have no discernible effect on growth (mentioned in 5 papers), while a number of other studies—based on tree rings—suggest that any increases in growth due to longer seasons are offset by reduced growth from high summer temperatures (Fig. ??, ??). Finally, current summer temperatures may not have pushed trees above their optima (?), with some research arguing increased growth is driven by higher growth rates, rather than longer seasons (e.g. ?).

External factors related to biotic interactions—including herbivory, disease and competition—can also limit growth, and may themselves be responsive to an extended growing season. For example, herbivory can have large impacts on forests, leading to declines in satellite measures of greenness often associated with signals of plant senescence (?). Plant pathogens are also known to respond to warming, and limit productivity (??). These biotic drivers of growth were rarely mentioned in studies examining growing season length (we found no mention of them, Fig. ??e), but could increasingly limit growth as extended growing seasons allow for additional generation cycles in many pest species (??).

Internal constraints

When and how growth is initiated and ceases is under genetic and developmental control, and thus plants’ internal programming could limit growth responses to longer seasons (???). Some recent studies suggest a novel role for the summer solstice (?) in setting a developmental switch between when warming temperatures hasten or delay leaf senescence—thus influencing growing season length and growth. While recent work suggests this switching may be universal (i.e., all plants use the solstice), decades of work show similar apparent pre-programmed limits that vary at the population level (?).

Research has repeatedly shown that populations vary in their growth and its responses to extended seasons (Fig. ??d), reflecting differences in genetic and developmental controls that likely evolved to limit tissue loss to rare early or late-season events. For example, populations often vary predictably in their end-of-season phenology, with more poleward populations tending to stop height growth (budset) earlier using locally adapted photoperiod cues (??). This means longer seasons are generally driven by spring phenology, which appears far more flexible, and has advanced more rapidly than fall events (?). Within populations, individual trees may also vary in how early or late they are for both spring and fall events. This can be driven by maturity and a shifting investment to growth, survival and/or reproduction. Saplings, for which growth and survival are paramount, tend to both grow more rapidly (?) and have longer seasons relative to adult trees (???), which need to also invest in reproduction.

Trade-offs between vegetative and reproductive investments may also produce important growth response differences across years within individuals, as well as between species. Years of high reproductive output can reduce growth (??). For species that mast—producing abundant cones or fruits in only some years—high reproduction could especially impact measures of wood growth. Many hypotheses suggest higher summer temperatures trigger masting in the following year (??); if true, then reduced growth in years following warm summers may not indicate temperatures

too high for growth, as recent studies have suggested (e.g., ??), but instead shifting investment to reproduction.

Species-level variation

The effects of these external and internal drivers on growth are likely to vary across species, a reality rarely acknowledged by current studies (Fig. ??c, though species strongly predicts variation when studied, e.g., ??) with major implications for understanding the widespread observed variation in growth \times growing season relationships. Biogeographical patterns in climate and assembly within communities predict species should evolve towards different optima and different strategies (??). For example, leaf strategies vary strongly between evergreen and deciduous species, but also within each group—where variation in ‘determinacy’ defines the timing and investment of shoot growth and leaf emergence. Determinate species have most of their leaf material prebuilt in overwintering buds, generally unfolding their entire canopy within few weeks each season, while indeterminate species continue to produce new shoots including leaves over the growing season (??). Such differences would influence the extent to which the growth of different species respond to increases in growing season length, even under identical conditions. Current studies span a wide range of species (we found 57 species from 26 genera across 36 papers), making the aim of identifying a common relationship between growth and growing season length with current studies especially difficult.

Studies could leverage community and phylogenetic ecology theory to make useful predictions for when and where growth \times growing season should be most apparent. Community ecology predicts trade-offs along an acquisitive to conservative axis, where some species grow rapidly and more flexibly to take advantage of resources, but are less defended against herbivores and compete poorly at low resource levels, whereas other species compete well at low resource levels, but at the expense of growing slower and conservatively (?). These ideas would predict indeterminate acquisitive species, such as poplar, to grow more with longer seasons, while conservative species, such as beech, may not. Functional traits could further refine these predictions, with where species fall along the acquisitive versus conservative trade-off defined by suite of leaf, wood and reproductive traits (?). Under this framework, species with low leaf mass per area, diffuse vessels and consistent investment in fruit would show stronger shifts in growth with changing growing season length—assuming no other factors (e.g., drought or high temperatures) become limiting.

Phylogenetic ecology layers onto these predicted drivers from past periods, producing species differences that have critical implications for current plant responses to warming. Imprints of past selection often drive species-level differences, producing phylogenetic patterns that both limit how well species are adapted to current conditions and may constrain their responses to rapidly changing conditions (?). Most studies testing for such historical effects on plant responses find them (e.g., ?), including new work on physiological traits (?), and previous physiological syntheses finding results suggestive of strong phylogenetic relationships (e.g., ?).

Building a framework for growth \times growing season length relationships

Predicting when and where longer seasons lead to increased growth may seem overwhelming given the diversity of potential drivers and complexity of species-level differences, but together they offer a set of testable hypotheses that could rapidly advance progress—if tackled with a more cross-disciplinary approach. The high variation we found in observed growth responses to longer seasons across methods and even within species (Figs. ??, ??) could be reduced in some part through standardized measurements (see Box: Standardized measurements) and larger shifts within fields (see Box: Extending disciplinary focus). Such changes may take time, but major hypotheses can be tractably tested now. Taking advantage of existing data sets and ongoing experiments could provide tests of variation in growth—and potentially controllers on it—across individual to species and ecosystem scales, while new experiments can compare effects of external versus internal drivers on growth. Combining these in models that build up from internal limits to external drivers and include species-level variation would then provide predictions while helping to refine theory.

Using existing data and networks to partition levels of variation across drivers

Existing open data repositories could test predictions from community ecology for species-level variation in responses to external drivers. Combining large-scale databases of tree rings and vegetative phenology (e.g., the International Tree Ring Database, ITRDB, and the Pan European Phenology project, PEP725, see Fig. ??) would provide a major spatially and temporally diverse dataset to compare how external climatic drivers, species and population together explain growth \times growing season length relationships. While the low spatial and taxonomic overlap between these databases may pose challenges currently (see Box: Extending disciplinary focus), these datasets may also allow us to identify where longer growing seasons will increase growth and for which types of species. For example, combined databases could test the prediction that longer growing seasons will increase growth for species with regular reproduction (no masting, see also new masting database in ?), an acquisitive strategy, from clades that are historically (on an evolutionary timescale) plastic, in locations that are warm—but not too warm—and moist.

Taking advantage of existing ecological and field global change experiments could help bridge across the two major fields currently studying growth \times growing season length relationships—physiology and dendrochronology—and their contrasting timescales. We found most physiological studies of growth \times growing season length relationships studied 1-2 years of dynamics, usually of juvenile trees, while tree ring studies focused on synthesizing across decades of adult tree growth. Perhaps because of this dichotomy, tree ring studies often study lag effects, while they are rarely mentioned in physiological studies, but current large-scale experiments on heat (e.g., SPRUCE, ?), moisture via drought or irrigation (e.g., DroughtNet, Phynwald ?) and other factors (e.g., CO₂ in FACE) have increasingly been used to test ecological ‘memory’ (e.g., ??). They thus could help scale up from smaller and shorter-time scales of physiological studies, potentially to ecosystem-level dynamics, such as carbon cycling (??). Building on available data and infrastructure could also bridge this gap, for example, adding dendrometers to locations with phenological sampling and vice versa. Such efforts may be especially valuable in sites across elevational and latitudinal gradients (e.g., PSP, Feeley elevation network, Coweeta). These sites

in turn could be priority locations for xylogenesis and focused physiological studies.

Understanding the scale of variation across all these levels could provide a benchmark when comparing the effect sizes of other drivers of variation. While multiple papers report a lack of relationship between growth and growing season length, we have no fundamental understanding of what the effect size of this relationship should be, and thus no way to know if we have good power in current studies to detect it. Estimates of how growth shifts with elevation (Fig. ??) likely include responses from both plasticity (within-individual variation) and local adaptation (population-level variation) and thus could be an upper bound on our expectations, yet elevational trends to date appear relatively weak and noisy—suggesting this is only part of our missing mechanistic understanding.

New experiments to tease apart external & internal drivers

Given the complex effects of external drivers and internal constraints on growth \times growing season length relationships, fully disentangling them will require new experiments. Changes in growing season length with anthropogenic factors covary with other environmental changes, in particular longer seasons are usually warmer seasons. Thus, experiments to robustly tease these drivers apart seems a paramount need, especially if done across multiple species spanning diverse strategies. Similarly, experiments to compare impacts of extended seasons (via early growth or delayed senescence), and differentiating between external abiotic (e.g., heat waves, droughts) and biotic (e.g., pests, competition) drivers could provide comparable estimates. Such experiments could also test lag effects, if sampled multiple years after the manipulations (versus the common practice of destructive sampling at the end of the treatment growing season). While these are most easily done for juvenile trees, they could also be done on adult trees, given investment in infrastructure.

Efforts to design and launch such large-scale experiments should start now. A long-term experiment on adult trees that manipulates temperature, precipitation and growing season length, would test a suite of drivers at the relevant lifestage. It could robustly compare drivers and become a resource for studies of underlying mechanisms for constraints, if properly measured and designed. This would mean careful measurements of carbon allocation, including to reproductive output, and tissue lost to frost and biotic drivers, and choosing species to maximize divergent strategies and provide the potential for genomic and related studies (e.g., *Populus*, *Quercus*). Given the potential role of evolutionary history, selecting for these varying strategies within a clade, or—if not feasible—correcting for phylogenetic distance would provide more robust tests of how strategies influence the growth \times growing season length relationship. These highly measured experiments could form part of a broader network of study sites that test these relationships at a larger spatial scale. Distributed experiments to measure growth and phenology (ideally wood and vegetative) of multiple provenances of multiple species across sites could estimate variation—and potential constraints—that operate at different organizing levels.

Models that push forward theory towards forecasting

Efforts to bridge observational trends with experimental insights will need models that can bridge across temporal and organismal scales while testing the major hypotheses. Statistical models that include separate effects of temperature, moisture and growing season length while partitioning individual, population and species-level variation could provide broad-scale estimates of the effects of the major external drivers versus potential internal constraints (which may be apparent as within-season and/or population differences). Including species-level effects while also integrating phylogenetic relationships between species could then test for the role of evolutionary history in shaping responses, while adding in site \times year-level effects of biotic disturbances could begin to compare across abiotic and biotic external drivers. Such models should be built alongside a suite of mechanistic process-focused models that scale up. For example, one model could build from carbohydrate balance and cell division (e.g. ?) to predict growth dynamics observed in xylogenesis, while another could build from phenology, including frost disturbance and reproduction, to predict growth (e.g. ?).

The success of these models will likely depend on how nimbly they respond to new findings, and how well they make predictions for new studies to test. As new experiments identify potential internal growth constraints and what level they operate on (universal, population or otherwise), both statistical and physiological process models should be adapted and improved. Together the interplay of statistical and more mechanistic process-focused models would likely provide major insights into the fundamental biology how tree growth \times shifts with extended seasons, and yield a unified model for robust predictions of growth responses to warmer, longer seasons across species and levels of warming.

Conclusions: Anthropogenic climate change has often been described as an unfortunate and unplanned experiment. Like many experiments, it has highlighted important biology we don't know well, requiring us to rediscover dusty old fundamentals, and also expose their limits—and thus our limits of understanding. Understanding when, how and why longer seasons lead to increased tree growth requires an interdisciplinary reckoning with how temperature, growth and a suite of external and internal drivers affect plant growth. The task may seem large, but bridging across theory and data from dendrochronology, physiology, community and phylogenetic ecology could rapidly advance fundamental biology in ways that translate directly to improved models of future forest dynamics, and the suite of species and services that depend on them.

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1 Boxes!

Box. Standardized measurements

Tackling the diverse drivers and their underlying hypotheses (Fig. ??) for growth \times growing season length relationships requires a common language and set of metrics for growing season length (?), growth, and the potential drivers. We found 14 different metrics of start, 16 metrics of end of season (25 metrics of growing season length), and 21 different metrics of growth across 59 studies—highlighting just part of the problem (see also *The challenge of metrics: Measuring growth* in the Supplement). Definitions and metrics for external and internal drivers were myriad, with many papers reporting dozens of tests of different aspects of climate over different temporal windows. This is understandable, given the complexity of environmental variables and our limited understanding of how they trigger phenology and growth, but also slows progress.

A common framework where researchers measure and report common explanatory and response variables would accelerate research by easing communication between fields and providing a path to comparable quantitative estimates. This should also include expected statistical tests, as we found a number of papers failed to directly test for growth \times growing season length relationships (Fig. ??), often instead testing only certain hypothesized indirect relationships (e.g. spring temperature \times growth in ?).

Box: Extending disciplinary focus to help bridge the internal-external drivers divide

Each field studying growth \times growing season length today has its own historical aims, and thus its own biases towards certain species, methods and metrics. Dendrochronology’s original focus on using tree growth to estimate climate has led to certain assumptions and methods that may obscure the complexity of how growth shifts with growing season length. Fundamentally, the field relies on an assumed relationship that, within individual and populations of trees, growth (measured by annual ring width) is greater when growing conditions—climatically—are better (e.g. ?). Dendrochronologists’ traditional aim to magnify this climate signal has led to standard approaches, including sampling biases (e.g. to ‘climate-sensitive’ individual trees, ??) and statistical detrending (?), that may obscure patterns where the signal of longer growing seasons and biotic drivers may be most apparent (such as rapid growth phases, ?). Further, these approaches mean dendrochronology studies are also fundamentally washing out much of what physiological studies focus on, limiting opportunities for interdisciplinary overlap.

Opportunities to overlap dendrochronology with metrics of growing season length measured through vegetative phenology appear high, but sampling biases limit current opportunities. Dendrochronology generally focuses on conifers (gymnosperms, ?), creating a major split from most studies of leaf phenology, which focus almost entirely on deciduous angiosperm species (see Fig. ??). Phenology research has also been strongly focused on spring events (e.g., budburst, leafout), with limited data on fall events and thus limited data to calculate growing season length. This focus on spring events may have been justified decades ago, when most shifts from anthropogenic warming occurred in the spring, but less justified as increasing research suggests important complexity in fall shifts (??) and a need to scale up phenological research to

understand tree growth.

All fields could benefit from tackling the challenge of understanding the physiological connections between growing season length and growth, and even the genetic and developmental underpinnings of these connections. To date, much work has focused on measures of growth and phenology without a clear mechanistic understanding of what triggers growth and its cessation, and how these triggers and responses have evolved. Progress in this area is could be particularly important for making projections, as extrapolating can be dangerous when the underlying mechanistic model is wrong. Physiological studies that follow carbohydrate balance and cell division (see ?) versus growth dynamics could yield insights, as could additional work on xylogenesis—especially if done with a focus both to extrapolate to long-term tree ring studies and/or in physiological experiments (??). Expanding beyond the current disciplines focused on this topic could also be informative. For example, a clearer physiological understanding of which environmental stimuli trigger leaf expansion, senescence, woody growth, and heartwood formation alongside an evolutionary perspective could contribute towards a clearer understanding of growth constraints (????).

2 Figures

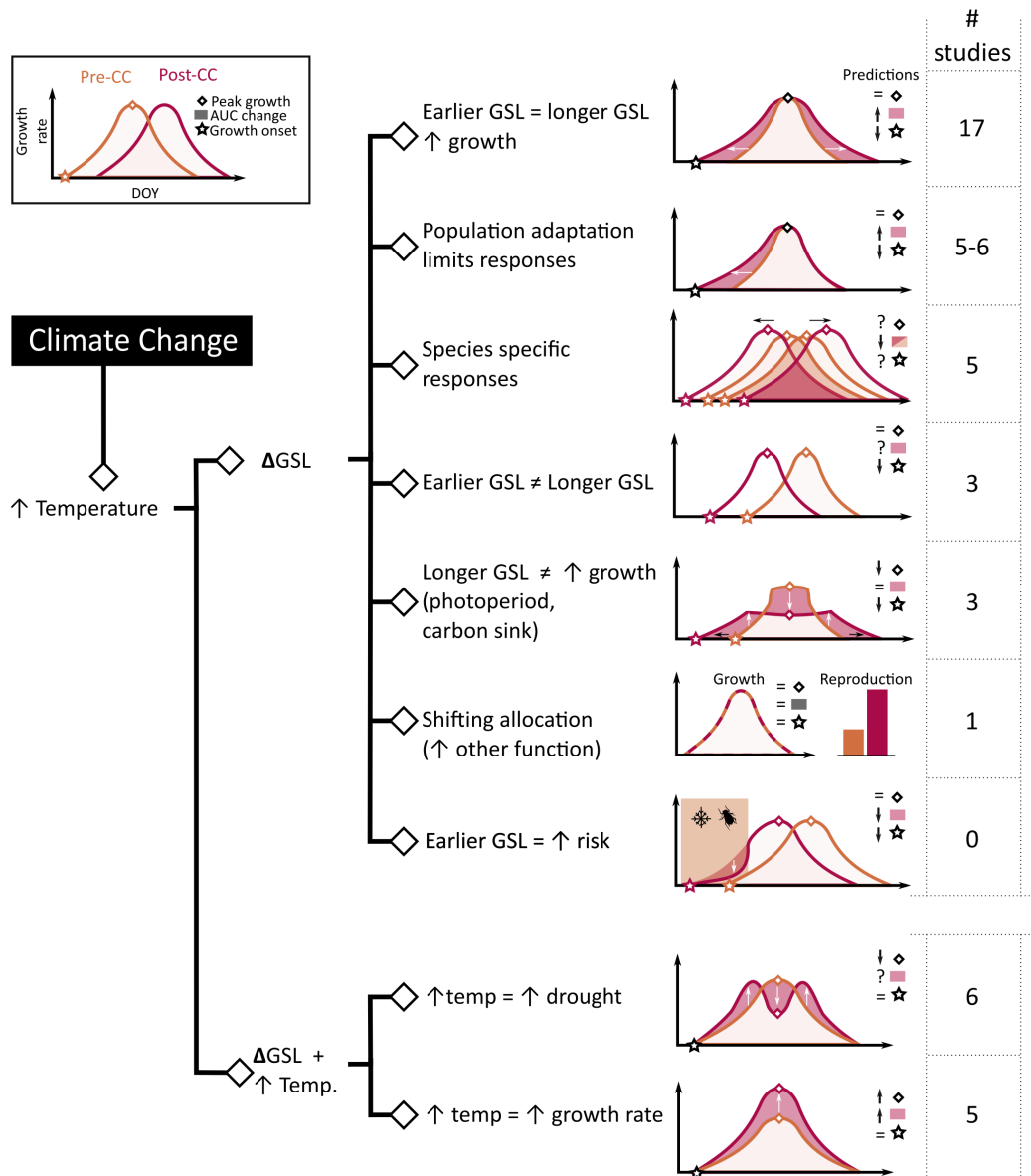


Figure 1: Pathways through which climate change could alter growing season length and growth.

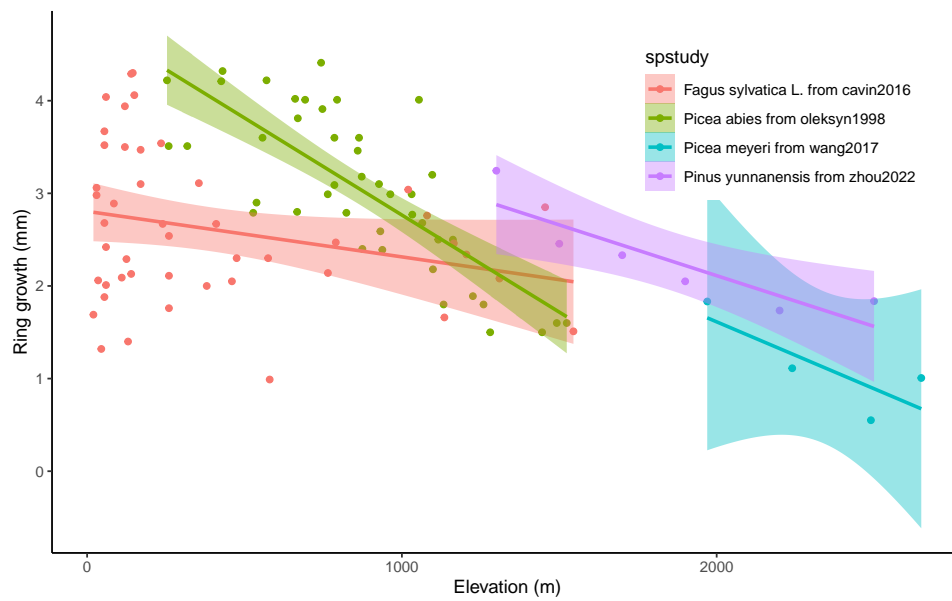


Figure 2: Growth \times elevation relationships from the literature, see Supplement for more methods details and Fig. ?? for an example from one site.

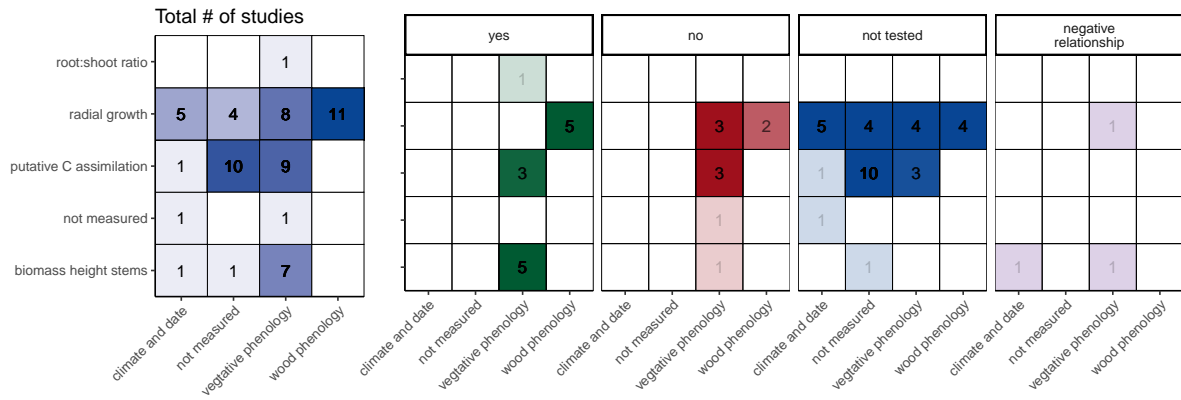


Figure 3: A review of growth \times growing season length relationship studies spanned a diversity of methods, but there was no coherency in which methods did or did not find a positive relationship. Not directly testing for the relationship was surprisingly common across methods. See Supplement for review details.

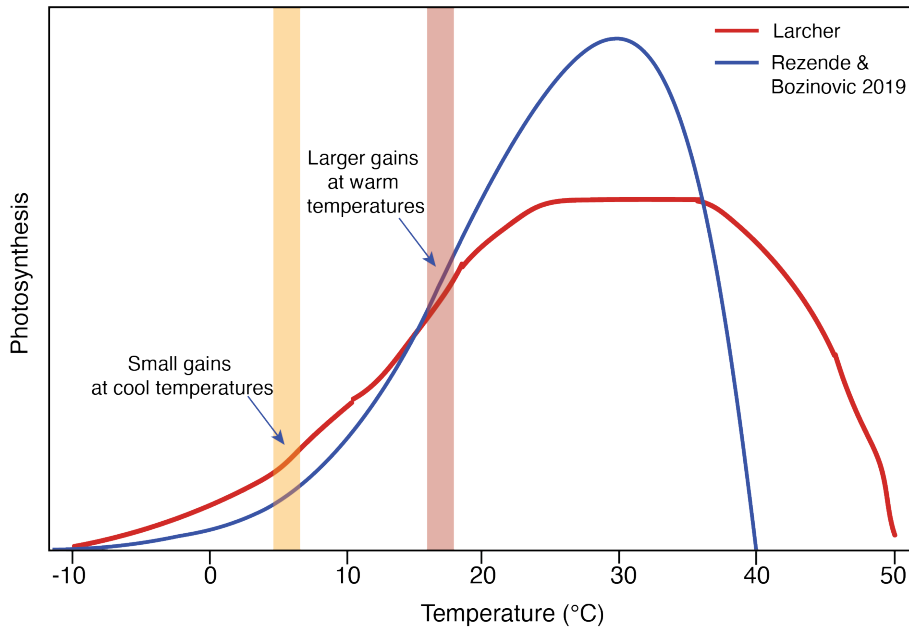


Figure 4: Growth responses to temperature depends on a suite of complex factors and is often represented as net photosynthesis, which has a non-linear response to temperature. This non-linearity means that increases in lower temperatures—such as those in the spring when much of growing season extensions may happen—have a lower absolute increase in photosynthesis compared to increases in later-season warmer temperatures. Because there is no unified model of this relationships, we show two different versions of the relationship based on ??.

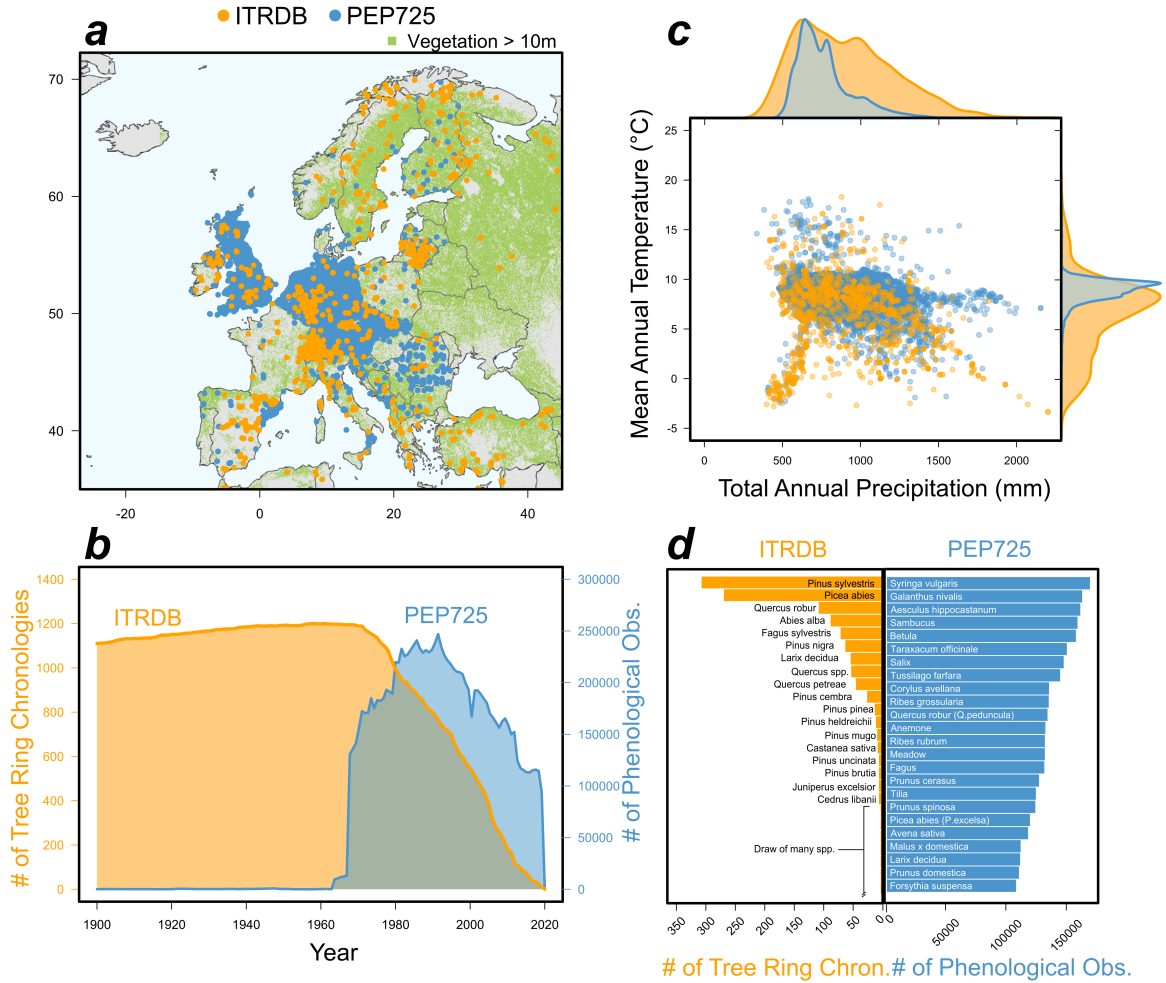


Figure 5: Data overlap between the two major databases of growth (International Tree Ring Data Bank, ITRDB, orange) and plant phenology (Pan European Phenology Project, PEP725, blue). Both databases are compared in terms of their spatial distributions (a), temporal overlaps (b), coverage of environmental conditions in climate space (c) and taxonomical representation (d). Note that the number of tree ring chronologies in (b) are composed by multiple trees per site, typically 10-20. Climatic data from Worldclim database ver. 2.1 at 2.5°grid resolution. PEP725 records in d) show the largest records for any given phenophase per species.

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