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# Can Silkworms Grow Without Mulberry? The Science Behind Artificial Diets

*Shravanilakshmi, V and Tejaswini A S
Department of Sericulture, University of Agricultural Sciences, GKVK, Bangalore, Karnataka-560065, India
*Corresponding Author's email: shravanivrao0212@gmail.com

For centuries, the silkworm *Bombyx mori* has been inseparably linked to mulberry leaves, its sole natural food source and the foundation of traditional sericulture. The belief that mulberry is indispensable for silkworm growth, cocoon formation and silk production has shaped sericulture practices across the world. Yet, recent studies in sericulture research are challenging this long held notion. Scientists have developed specially formulated artificial diets that mimic the nutritional composition of mulberry, opening new possibilities for rearing silkworms without dependence on seasonal leaf availability. This emerging innovation not only broadens the scientific understanding of silkworm nutrition but also holds promise for year-round silk production, sustainability and expansion of sericulture into non-traditional regions. This article deals with the science, development, advantages, challenges and future potential of artificial diets exploring whether silkworms can truly thrive without mulberry and what this means for the future of silk farming.

## The Role of Mulberry Leaves in Silkworm Rearing

Mulberry leaves (*Morus* spp.) serve as the primary and natural food source for silkworms (*Bombyx mori*), providing a complete profile of macronutrients, micronutrients, and bioactive compounds essential for larval growth. These leaves are rich in proteins (contributing over 70% to silk production), carbohydrates, lipids, vitamins (A, $B_2$, C), minerals (calcium, iron, zinc), amino acids (alanine, glycine, serine) and hydration without needing additional water. The nutrient assimilation from mulberry meets silkworm requirements for water, vitamins, energy and nitrogen for protein synthesis directly influencing silk gland development and cocoon quality.

Proteins and amino acids from the leaves are directly converted into fibroin, the key silk protein, while vitamins and minerals bolster immunity, digestion and overall health. Leaf quality determines larval performance; fortified leaves with extra amino acids enhance cocoon weight, shell ratio and fibroin content compared to plain diets.

## Formulation and Development of Artificial Diets

Creating an artificial diet to replace mulberry leaves is complex. The diet must replicate the nutritional composition and bioavailability of mulberry, balancing macronutrients (proteins, carbohydrates, lipids), micronutrients (vitamins, minerals) and bioactive compounds. Formulations commonly utilize soybean meal, wheat germ, starches, sugars, vitamins, minerals and lipid supplements. Amino acid profiles especially rich in glycine, serine, alanine and tyrosine that are important for silk protein synthesis are carefully engineered through supplementation.

Early artificial diets were experimental and simplified, yielding inconsistent larval growth with reduced silk production. However, modern formulations incorporate metabolomics data to identify limiting nutrients, advanced nutrient supplementation strategies and understanding of silkworm gut microbiota to improve digestion and absorption.

Additives such as probiotics and enzymes are incorporated to enhance nutrient uptake and immune function.

## Types of Artificial diets:

- **Holidic diets:** These are fully chemically defined diets composed of purified nutrients such as carbohydrates, amino acids, lipids, vitamins and minerals in exact amounts. These diets contain no natural or crude ingredients and are mainly used for research purposes to study nutrient effects with maximum precision.
- **Meridic diets:** These are semi-synthetic and partially chemically defined. They combine chemically defined ingredients with some natural components (*e.g.*, mulberry leaf powder). They typically include most nutrient components known chemically but may also contain some undefined or crude organic materials. These are used to simulate natural feeding but in a controlled, consistent form suitable for mass rearing.
- **Oligidic diets:** These consist mainly of crude organic materials that are chemically undefined or minimally processed such as agricultural by-products or leaf powders. These diets are simpler and less refined, often composed of powders or extracts that are low-cost but less consistent nutritionally.

Adapting silkworms to artificial diets requires gradual transition in feeding, combining mulberry leaves and artificial feed, allowing larvae to adjust their digestive enzymes and gut microbial communities to the new diet.

**Fig. 1: Silkworm chow (An artificial diet)**

**Fig. 2: Silkworms feeding on artificial diet**

## Physiological, Genetic and Metabolic Effects of Feeding Artificial Diet

Research involving gene transcription, proteomic and metabolomic analyses reveals significant physiological differences between silkworms fed natural mulberry leaves and artificial diets:

- Silkworms feeding on artificial diets show alterations in silk gland development, immune system gene expression and metabolic pathways.
- Silk yield and cocoon weight are generally lower with artificial diets.
- The efficiency of nutrient digestion and assimilation is reduced partly due to diminished gut microbiota diversity and microbial function in silkworms fed with artificial diets.
- Accumulation of certain inhibitory metabolites such as D-pinitol have been detected in silkworm faeces which may negatively impact larval appetite and development.
- Strategic amino acid supplementation (*e.g.*, methionine, glycine) improves silk synthesis and growth performance.
- Haemolymph glucose levels in silkworms can be modulated by diet, supporting experimental disease models for diabetes using artificial diets.

The silkworm's gut microbiome adapts over time to new diets, but synthetic diets tend to reduce microbial diversity compared to mulberry feeding. Recent studies explore engineering gut microbial communities to optimize diet utilization.

## Advantages of Artificial Diets in Sericulture

The shift to artificial diets offers multiple benefits that address the limitations inherent in mulberry leaf reliance:

- Year-round rearing: Artificial diets eliminate the seasonality problems of mulberry leaf availability, facilitating continuous silkworm rearing.
- Geographical flexibility: Sericulture can be expanded to regions unsuitable for mulberry cultivation.
- Nutrient control: Consistent and customizable nutrient delivery improves predictability in larval growth and silk quality.
- Reduced ecological footprint: Reduced land and water use for mulberry farming.
- Labour efficiency: Streamlined feeding and management reduce labour costs and risks of contamination by pesticides or pathogens present on natural leaves.
- Biomedical and biotechnological applications: Artificial diets enable controllable feeding regimens necessary for disease and drug studies, as well as silkworms used as bioreactors to produce recombinant proteins and vaccines in sterile, pathogen-free conditions.

## Challenges and Limitations of Artificial Diets

Despite promising advances, important challenges remain before artificial diets can fully replace mulberry leaves in commercial sericulture:

- Lower silk yield and cocoon quality: Artificial diets generally produce lighter cocoons and reduced silk fibre strength.
- Nutrient bioavailability issues: Some essential micronutrients and bioactive compounds found in mulberry leaves are difficult to replicate or absorb efficiently.
- Feeding behaviour: Silkworm larvae sometimes exhibit reduced feeding activity and acceptance response to artificial diets.
- Gut microbiota disruption: Diet-induced alterations in the silkworm gut microbiome can compromise digestion and immune health.
- Cost: High quality diet ingredients and complex supplementation raise production costs compared to cultivated mulberry leaves.
- Long term health effects: Potential negative impacts on silkworm lifespan and reproductive success require further study.

**Table 1: Comparison of Silkworm Performance: Mulberry Leaves *vs*. Artificial Diets**

| Parameter | Mulberry Leaves | Artificial Diets | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Larval Duration (5th Instar)** | ~23 days | ~25.5 days (10.9 % longer) | Extended due to slower growth and metabolism. |
| **Mature Larval Weight** | 2.89 - 3.48 g | 2.41 - 2.79 g | Lower weight impacts cocoon size. |
| **Cocoon Weight** | Higher (baseline) | 10-20 % lower | Reduced silk gland development. |
| **Silk Yield/Shell Ratio** | Higher quality & quantity | Lower, but improvable with supplements | Amino acid gaps cause deficiencies. |
| **Nutrient Absorption (Faeces)** | Balanced (lower organics) | Higher urea, citric acid, D-pinitol | Indicates inefficiencies; pinitol inhibits growth. |
| **Gut Microbiota Diversity** | Higher (rich polysaccharides) | Lower (Proteobacteria/ Firmicutes dominant) | Affects digestion; probiotics help to enhance gut microbiota. |
| **Survival & Growth Rate** | Optimal | Comparable with optimization | Valine supplementation boosts by 11-25%. |

## Practical Applications and Future Prospects

The development and application of artificial diets is transforming sericulture practices:

- Commercial silk production: Pilot-scale trials show artificial diets can sustain sericulture in new regions and non-traditional seasons.
- Research models: Artificial diets allow reproducible experimental systems for studying insect physiology, disease models and drug testing.
- Biotechnological rearing: Artificial diets enable sterile, pathogen-free silkworm rearing for recombinant protein and vaccine production.
- Sustainability: Reduced reliance on mulberry plantations minimizes water use, land clearing and pesticide application.

Future research aims to refine diet formulations with comprehensive nutrient and microbial supplementation tailored to specific silkworm strains and environmental conditions. Novel delivery methods such as pelleted or bioengineered feed and automated feeding systems promise to improve adoption and outcomes.

## Conclusion

Silkworms can indeed grow and complete their life cycle without mulberry leaves by consuming scientifically formulated artificial diets that replicate the natural nutrient profile of their traditional foliage. Although current limitations such as lower larval performance, cocoon yield and silk quality persist, continuous advancements including optimized amino acid supplementation, probiotic enrichment and the development of strains adapted to artificial feeding are steadily improving outcomes. Originating from extensive research in Japan, these diets enable sustainable, year-round rearing independent of mulberry availability, reduce environmental pressures from mulberry cultivation and have the potential to expand sericulture into non-traditional regions. Overall, artificial diets represent a transformative innovation that could revolutionize silk production with ongoing research bringing the possibility of fully replacing mulberry based rearing closer to reality.

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