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Above and Below Ground Interactions in Intercropping: A Biological Perspective

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When many crop species are grown simultaneously on a same field, this is known as intercropping. Because it boosts output and maintains ecological balance, this approach is sustainable. Both on the surface and underground, this farming method is made possible by a number of biological interactions. Surface biological interactions include pest activity, light absorption, and variations in the canopy architecture of the plants. The distribution of roots, the distribution of nutrients, the fixation of nitrogen, and microbial activity are all biological processes occurring under the soil. By making effective use of resources, all these biological processes contribute to increased soil fertility and plant development

Keywords: Biotic, Stress, Resilience, Interpretation, Microbial activity

Introduction

Intercropping is the practice of growing two or more crops together on the same field. It has long been recognized as a sustainable method of enhancing production, resource efficiency, and ecological balance. Unlike monocropping systems, intercropping relies on complex biological interactions that occur both above and below the ground. These interactions affect plant growth, cooperation, competition, nutrient cycling, and resistance to pests and diseases. It is necessary to comprehend these processes from a biological perspective in order to design resilient and productive agroecosystems.

Above-Ground Interactions in Intercropping

Above-ground interactions primarily involve competition and facilitation among plants for light, space, and atmospheric resources.

1. Light Interception and Canopy Structure

Crops with varying canopy designs and heights can maximize light consumption in intercropping systems. For instance, shorter crops like legumes use diffused light beneath the canopy, but tall crops like maize absorb direct sunshine. This vertical stratification improves overall photosynthetic efficiency and lessens competition

2. Pest and Disease Dynamics

Pest cycles can be upset by a variety of plant species. Mixed cropping lessens the possibility that pests may find their preferred host plant, a process called "associational resistance." Furthermore, several plants emit volatile substances that either draw helpful insects or deter pests.

3. Microclimate Modification

Within the crop canopy, intercropping modifies wind patterns, humidity, and temperature. Particularly in arid areas, these modifications can lower evapotranspiration and produce ideal growing conditions for plants.

Below-Ground Interactions in Intercropping

Involving roots, soil microorganisms, and nutrient dynamics, below-ground interactions are equally important and frequently more complicated.

1. Root Architecture and Resource Partitioning

Different root systems are formed by different crops. Shallow-rooted crops take advantage of surface nutrients, but deep-rooted crops obtain water and nutrients from deeper soil layers. Direct competition is decreased by this spatial differentiation.

2. Nutrient Cycling and Facilitation

By fixing atmospheric nitrogen through symbiosis with rhizobia bacteria, leguminous crops serve an important function. This nitrogen naturally improves soil fertility by making it available to nearby dull non-leguminous crops.

3. Soil Microbial Interactions

In the rhizosphere, intercropping encourages a variety of microbial populations.

These microorganisms strengthen soil structure, increase nutrient availability, and inhibit soil-borne disease.

4. Allelopathy

Certain plants discharge biochemicals into the soil that affect nearby plants' growth. Depending on the species in question, these impacts may be either beneficial or inhibiting.

Table 1: Integrated Above- and Below-Ground Interactions in Intercropping Systems

Interaction Domain	Key Component	Process/Mechanism	Example (Maize–Legume System)	Agronomic Benefit
Above-Ground	Canopy Structure	Differential light interception and vertical stratification	Legumes utilize filtered light, while tall maize absorbs direct light.	Increased photosynthesis and effective light utilization
	Light Competition	Due to differences in plant height and leaf layout, complementary light use	Diminished impact of shade on understory crops	An general increase in productivity
	Pest & Disease Dynamics	Disruption of pest cycles and associational resistance	Mixed crops confuse insect pests	Reduced pest infestation and pesticide dependence
	Microclimate Modification	Alteration in temperature, humidity, and wind speed within canopy	Denser canopy reduces soil evaporation	Improved water use efficiency
Below-Ground	Root Architecture	Root distribution in space (deep versus shallow rooting)	legumes use surface nutrients, while maize roots deeper.	Improved resource allocation and less competition
	Nutrient Cycling	Biological sharing of nutrients and nitrogen fixing	Rhizobium is how legumes fix atmospheric nitrogen.	Improved soil fertility and decreased need for fertilizer
	Soil Microbial Activity	Increased diversity in the rhizosphere and microbial activity	Increased beneficial microorganisms in mixed root zones	Better soil health and nutrient availability
	Allelopathy	Biochemical substance release that affects the growth of nearby plants	Some legumes stop the growth of weeds.	Suppression of weeds and enhanced agricultural yields
Integrated Effect	Resource Use Efficiency	combined impact of interactions both above and below earth	Utilizing light, water, and nutrients in concert	Increased sustainability and yield

System Productivity	Overyielding due to synergistic interactions between plants	Yield of maize plus legumes is greater than that of monocrops.	The LER, or enhanced land equivalent ratio.
Ecosystem Stability	Greater resilience and biodiversity	Various cropping methods	Better long-term sustainability and decreased risk

Integrated Above and Below Ground Interactions

The integration of above- and below-ground processes is intercropping's true strength. For example, increased plant vigor due to better nitrogen uptake below ground might make crops more competitive for light above ground. In a similar vein, canopy diversity can affect microbial activity and root exudation patterns.

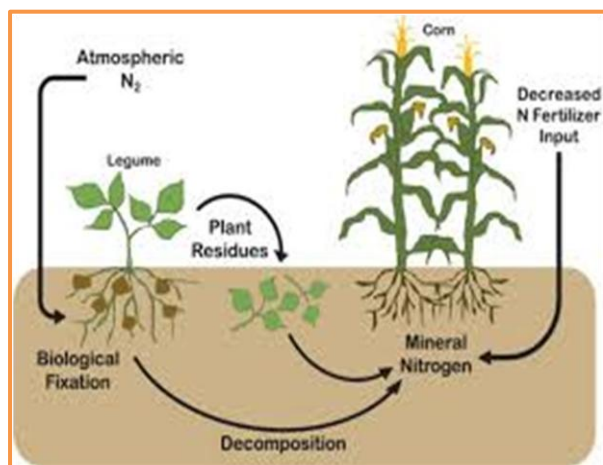


Figure 1: Above and Below Ground Interactions in Intercropping

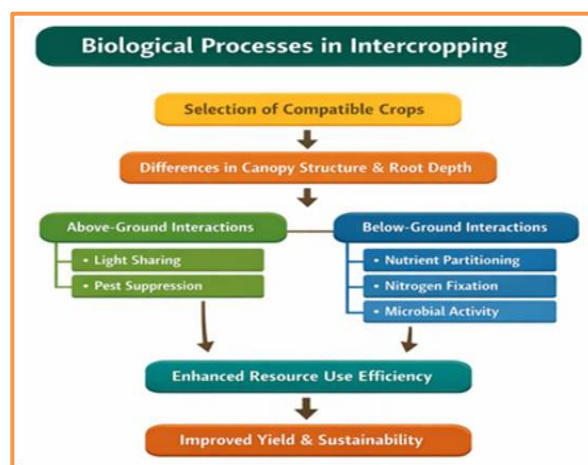


Figure 2. Biological process in intercropping

Advantages

1. Effective Use of Resources
 - Complementary utilization of water, nutrients, and light (canopy stratification).
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2. Increased Fertility of Soil.
 - Legumes' biological nitrogen fixation enhances the nitrogen status of the soil.
 - Improved nutrient cycling via a variety of root systems.
3. Improved Soil Health
 - Increased rhizosphere microbial activity and diversity.
 - Better organic matter dynamics, aggregation, and soil structure
4. Higher Productivity
 - Intercrops' combined yield frequently surpasses that of monocropping systems.
 - Enhanced Land Equivalent Ratio (LER)
5. Pest and Disease Suppression
 - Pest outbreaks are decreased via associational resistance.
 - Diversification of habitats and disturbance of pest life cycles
6. Better Microclimate Regulation
 - Decreased evapotranspiration and temperature swings in the soil.
 - Enhanced moisture retention in the presence of a thick canopy
7. Weed Suppression
 - Weed growth is inhibited by allelopathic effects and improved ground cover
8. Increased Biodiversity and Ecosystem Stability
 - Encourages the diversity of functions both above and below ground. Increases resistance to biotic and climatic stressors

9. Sustainability and Reduced External Inputs

- Lower dependency on chemical fertilizers and pesticides.
- Encourages environmentally friendly farming

Challenges

1. Crop Compatibility Issues

- Inadequate crop selection could result in intense competition rather than complementarity.

2. Complex System Management

- It necessitates careful planning of crop combinations, planting times, and spacing.

3. Competition for Resources

- Inadequate design could lead to competition for nutrients, water, and light.

4. Difficulties in Mechanization

- The processes of sowing, weeding, and harvesting get increasingly intricate.

5. Variable Yield Outcomes

- Crop mixes and environmental variables determine performance.

6. Knowledge and Skill Requirement

- Farmers require a more profound comprehension of biological relationships and system design.

7. Allelopathic Risks

- Companion crops may be impacted by inhibitory compounds released by some crops.

8. Nutrient Imbalance Possibility

- Inadequate management of unequal nutrient uptake might result in deficits.

9. Pest Carryover in Some Cases

- Instead of controlling pests, some crop combinations may house them.

10. Research and Standardization Gaps

- Restricted location-specific optimization models and suggestions.

Conclusion

Utilizing natural plant interactions to increase agricultural productivity and sustainability, intercropping is a biologically and ecologically sound farming method. In addition to improving soil health and lowering insect prevalence, the cooperation of above-ground and below-ground processes allows for the effective use of light, water, and nutrients. However, careful crop species selection and suitable management techniques are essential to intercropping systems' success. To maximize the advantages of intercropping in a variety of environmental situations, research on species-specific interactions and system optimization must be advanced. All things considered, intercropping has a great deal of promise as a robust approach to sustainable agricultural growth.

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