

Volume 4, Number 1 (2017) suppl.

Columella

Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences



Szent István University Press
Gödöllő

COLUMELLA
Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences

This peer reviewed journal of the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences of the Szent István University, Gödöllő, Hungary publishes papers in English language.

Technical assistance is provided by the respective Scientific Committees of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The journal is published in yearly volumes of two issues annually.

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E-mail: columella@mkk.szie.hu

HU ISSN 2064-7816 (print)
HU ISSN 2064-9479 (online)
DOI: 10.18380/

Printed in Hungary, Gödöllő
Printed by Szent István Egyetemi Kiadó Nonprofit Kft. (Szent István University Press)
HU-2100 Gödöllő, Páter Károly utca 1.

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Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences

Volume 4 Number 1 (2017) suppl.

HU ISSN 2064-7816 (print)

HU ISSN 2064-9479 (online)

DOI: 10.18380/SZIE.COLUM.2017.4.1.suppl

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Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Gödöllő,
HUNGARY

PROCEEDINGS

OF THE



16th Alps-Adria Workshop
Synergism in science

Opatija, Croatia

03rd April - 08th April, 2017

Edited by

Zoltán KENDE

The edition of this volume was supported by the
Kutató Kari Kiválósági Támogatás - Research Centre of Excellence - 11476-3/2016/FEKUT and
VKSZ (VKSZ_12-1-2013- 0034 - Agrárklíma.2), NVKP (NVKP_16-1-2016-0016),
TÁMOP and KTIA funds of the Government of Hungary

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Table of Contents

Prologue	
Márton JOLÁNKAI.....	9
The effects of wastewater irrigation on the yield of energy willow and soil sodicity	
Ágnes KUN - Csaba BOZÁN - Károly BARTA - Mária B. ONCSIK.....	11
Model study to investigate the toxic interaction between glyphosate herbicide and lead acetate on chicken embryos	
Rita SZABÓ - Géza SZEMERÉDY - Adrienn GRÚZ - Péter BUDAI - József LEHEL.....	15
The effect of sowing date and plant density on yield elements of different winter oilseed rape (<i>Brassica napus</i> var. <i>napus</i> f. <i>biennis</i> L.) genotypes	
Éva VINCZE.....	21
Responses of maize (<i>Zea mays</i> L.) roots to soil condition in an extreme growing season	
Igor DEKEMATI - Zoltán RADICS - Zoltán KENDE - Igor BOGUNOVIC - Márta BIRKÁS.....	27
Measuring and mapping within-field soil moisture content for precision (site-specific) plant production	
Gabor MILICS - Viliam NAGY - Tomas ORFANUS.....	31
The natural viral infections of the weedy <i>Panicum miliaceum</i> L.	
György PÁSZTOR - Rita SZABÓ - András TAKÁCS - Ágnes HENÉZI - Erzsébet NÁDASY.....	35
Abiotic stress impacts caused by weather and nutrient replenishment on the yield of maize (<i>Zea mays</i> L.)	
Adrienn SZÉLES - Péter RAGÁN - János NAGY.....	39
Inland excess water hazard on the flat lands in Hungary	
Csaba BOZÁN - János KÖRÖSPARTI - Gábor ANDRÁSI - Norbert TÚRI - László PÁSZTOR.....	45
Impacts of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi on plant growth and yield of three pepper genotypes	
Hong Duc NGUYEN - Au Trung VO - Katalin POSTA.....	49
Wheat genotypes under reduced nitrogen supply: changes in chlorophyll fluorescence parameters	
Szilvia VERES - Attila SIMKÓ - László KISS - László ZSOMBIK.....	53
Activated charcoal improves growth of <i>F. imperialis</i> propagated by indirect organogenesis	
Nigar SAEED - Sabahattin CÖMERTPAY.....	59
Effects of soil tillage systems and fertilization on the CO ₂ emission of chernozem soil	
Ágnes TÖRÖ - András TAMÁS - Tamás RÁTONYI - Endre HARSÁNYI.....	65

Gene expression of glutathione-S-transferase in sunflower (<i>Helianthus annuus</i> L.) inoculated with arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi under temperature stresses Zoltán MAYER - Nguyen HONG DUC - Katalin POSTA.....	69
The comparison of spring to early summer SPAD values of various winter cereals Ákos TARNAWA - Laura CZERŐDINÉ KEMPF - Ferenc NYÁRAI-HORVÁTH - András MÁTÉ - Zsolt SZENTPÉTERY.....	73
Effect of salinity on rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.) in seedling stage Árpád SZÉKELY - Tímea SZALÓKI - János PAUK - Mihály JANCsó.....	79
Performance of rice varieties under aerobic conditions in Hungary Mihály JANCsó - Árpád SZÉKELY - Tímea SZALÓKI - Csaba LANTOS - János PAUK.....	83
The marigold's (<i>Calendula officinalis</i> L.) drug yield and economic value changes over time and composition of the essential oil active agents under different fertilization settings Judit Éva LELESZ - József CSAJBÓK.....	89
Aluminum-toxicity responses in <i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i> L. genotypes Brigitta TÓTH - Michael A. GRUSAK.....	95
Effect of aluminum and bacteria fertilizer treatment on the <i>Vigna radiata</i> root growth and photosynthetic activity on early growth stage Dávid KACZUR - Csaba BOJTOR - Gerda HANKOVSKY - Szilvia VERES - Brigitta TÓTH.....	101
The effects of two pesticides on the mortality and reproduction of <i>Folsomia candida</i> Adrienn GRÚZ - Dóra VARJAS-BODROG - Rita SZABÓ - József LEHEL - Péter BUDAI.....	107
Herbicidal activity and inhibitory potency of two essential oils on weeds under natural condition Kamel MOUSSAOUI - Karima BABA-AISSA - Islam ZEKKARI - Abdelhamid BOUCHERFI - Zahr-Eddine DJAZOULI.....	113
Biocidal effect of two formulated essential oils compared with a synthetic product on a green aphid <i>Chaitophorus leucomelas</i> K. of black poplar <i>Populus nigra</i> L. Karima BABA-AISSA - Kamel MOUSSAOUI - Asma BERDIA - Nesrine MECHERI - Zahr-Eddine DJAZOULI.....	117
Three different genotypes of maize hybrids yield response to sowing date and plant density changes Ákos TÓTIN.....	123
Runoff and infiltration - Case study of a Cambisol Judit Alexandra SZABÓ - Boglárka SZABÓ - Zoltán SZALAI - Marianna RINGER - Gergely JAKAB.....	127
The role of climate strategies and green infrastructure in the adaptation to climate change Edit HOYK - András Donát KOVÁCS.....	131

Climate consciousness and adaptation from the viewpoint of farmers Jenő Zsolt FARKAS - Edit HOYK.....	137
Nitrate dispersion-diffusion coefficients in agricultural soil profile of Zitny ostrov locality (Slovakia) Viera KOVÁCOVÁ.....	143
Effects of carbon dioxide concentration on chlorophyll fluorescence of peas „ <i>Pisum sativum</i> L.” András TAMÁS - Ágnes TÖRÖ - Zoltán BALLA - Tamás RÁTONYI - Endre HARSÁNYI.....	149
Infiltration and runoff measurements on arable land with different slopes and rainfall intensities Boglárka SZABÓ - Judit SZABÓ - Csaba CENTERI - Gergely JAKAB - Zoltán SZALAI.....	153
Impact of crop year and nitrogen topdressing on the quantity and quality of wheat yield Adnan ESER - Katalin M. KASSAI - Ákos TARNAWA - Ferenc NYÁRAI-HORVÁTH - Márton JOLÁNKAI.....	157
Investigation of the phytotoxic effect of herbicide 2,4-D with hormonal function on winter wheat György PÁSZTOR - Rita SZABÓ - Erzsébet NÁDASY.....	163
Effect of gluten formation on wheat quality Desimir KNEZEVIC - Anja ROSANDIC - Danijela KONDIC - Adriana RADOSAVAC - Dragana RAJKOVIC.....	169
Subalpine Springs (The Krkonose Mountains National Park): Species Diversity in Relation to Environmental Factors Milan SKALICKY - Vaclav HEJNAK - Josef HAKL - Marketa HRONOVSKA - Josef HARCARIK.....	175
Environmental and production aspects of maize cultivation in relation with the different time-applied nitrogen Milan MESIC - Aleksandra PERCIN - Igor BOGUNOVIC - Zeljka ZGORELEC - Lola GANDJAEVA.....	181
Elaboration of the methodology of dew measurement by means of weighing lysimeters Krisztina CZELLÉR - Lúcia SINKA - Géza TUBA - József ZSEMBELI.....	187
Complex effect of secondary salinization and composting on soil respiration József ZSEMBELI - Yuriko MORI - Géza TUBA - Krisztina CZELLÉR - Györgyi KOVÁCS.....	193
Land cover changes in the Visegrád Group between 1990 and 2012 József LENNERT.....	199
The determination of the areas at risk of soil degradation by water erosion Elena KONDRLOVÁ - Jaroslav ANTAL.....	205

Risk of soil salinization/sodification in the Danube Lowland after the realization of underground sealing walls between Komárno and Stúrovo, Slovakia Tomás ORFÁNUS - Anezka CELKOVÁ - Viliam NAGY.....	211
Economic Structures of Tobacco Farms: The Case of Denizli Province in Turkey Mevlüt GUL - Nurgül SALUK.....	217
Socio-Economic Structure of Buckwheat Farms in Turkey Mevlüt GUL - Emine BIRER.....	223
Nitrogen fertilization analysis on small plot winter wheat (<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.) experiments István BALLA - Gergő Péter KOVÁCS - Péter Pál MIKÓ - Csaba GYURICZA . . .	229
Impacts of nutrition and age on the angiological state Zsuzsanna SÓFALVY - Zsolt SZENTPÉTERY.....	235
Appearance of the health - conscious consumer behavior in the V4 countries Amelita Kata GÓDOR - Éva HEGYES GÖRGÉNYI.....	241
Changes in capacity and utilization of general practitioner care in Northern Hungary since the EU accession Csaba BÁLINT.....	247
Detection and quantification of enzyme activity of ericoid fungi under solid-state fermentation Ahlam HAMIM - Sevastianos ROUSSOS - Robin DUPONNOIS - Rachid MRABET - Mohamed HAFIDI.....	253
Estimation of different fractions of organic carbon and it's implication to carbon dynamics in agricultural soil Nandkishor MORE - Ashima SINGH - Rana Pratap SINGH.....	259
Water deficit irrigation strategy and arbuscular mycorrhizae application in field crop production Jawdat BAKR - Hussein G. DAOOD - Lajos HELYES - Katalin POSTA.....	265
Status of plant available phosphorus in Nisava area of the South and Eastern Serbia Miodrag JELIC - Violeta MAKLENOVIC - Vlado KOVACEVIC - Desimir KNEZEVIC - Aleksandar PAUNOVIC.....	271
Integration of the traits of life history "fitness" of the black bupreste in his environment Latifa BRAHIMI - Nawel MEKIOUS - Zahreddine DJAZOULI.....	275

Reviews & project communications

Cultural and economic aspects of the Roman limes route in Hungary Lajos SZABÓ - Bulesú REMENYIK.....	281
Agronomic impacts on the performance of active ingredients of hemp (<i>Cannabis sativa</i> L.) plant Laura CZERÓDINÉ KEMPF - Zuzana FINTA - Ákos TARNAWA.....	287

Support of implementation process of EU directive 2007/60/EC on the assessment and management of flood risks in Georgia Peter STRADIOT.....	293
Storage proteins in wheat (<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.) and impact of mycotoxins affecting quality and quantity with focus on nitrogen supply Adnan ESER.....	299
Determining the main physical characteristics of fertilisers Zoltán BALLA - András TAMÁS - András VÁNTUS - Zoltán HAGYMÁSSY.....	305
Methodological approach in rehabilitating coal ash disposal sites from thermoelectric power plants and mitigation of environmental risks Hamid CUSTOVIC - Melisa LJUSA - Emira HUKIC.....	309
Index.....	315
Sponsors.....	318

Abiotic stress impacts caused by weather and nutrient replenishment on the yield of maize (*Zea mays* L)

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Abstract: In the long-term experiment established by the University of Debrecen, we were examining how the amount and distribution of yearly precipitation, as well as nutrient replenishment affect maize productivity during the growing season in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Environmental factors have a significant impact on yield. In all examined cases, there was a significant ($P < 0.001$) difference between crop years. The most significant difference was observed between the yield of 2015 and 2016 (3475 kg ha^{-1} , $P < 0.001$). The growing season of 2016 - which ended with significant precipitation surplus (+110 mm) - provided the availability of nutrients, thereby resulting in the highest yield both in treatments A and B.

Averaged over the examined years, treatment B resulted in a non-significant yield increasing effect (603 kg ha^{-1}) in comparison with treatment A. When evaluating the different crop years one by one, it can be concluded that there was a significant yield difference in 2015 (1036 kg ha^{-1} ; $P < 0.05$) (averaged over the different fertiliser treatments), despite the fact that it was a dry year. This phenomenon is explained by the fact that the silking of the examined maize hybrid ended before the dry period and the unfavourable effect of weather could be reduced with a high amount of nutrient replenishment.

Keywords: maize, nutrient replenishment, environmental factors

Introduction

The intensive growth of world population and the change of dietary habits prompt agriculture to increase productivity at an accelerating rate. Food production has to be increased with 70% by 2050 (FAO 2009), as the world's population is expected to be higher by 2.2 billion people and the quantity of cereals has to be increased by one billion in order to provide food for the population. However, in order to do this, increased amount of irrigation water must be applied and mineral fertilisation accessible for growing crops also needs to be performed (Yang et al. 2006).

Various research findings show that maize yield is mainly related to fertilisation, which has a more significant impact than genotype and all other examined production technological factors (crop rotation, tillage, irrigation, sowing density and crop year) (Berzsenyi and Gyorffy 1995; Nagy 2012).

Nitrogen fertiliser is an essential crop nutrient which increases vegetative mass and plays a fundamental role in increasing yield (Modhej et al. 2008) and it also has an impact on yield quality (Ványiné and Nagy 2012), as well as access to other elements (Bruns and Ebelhar 2006). 61% of nitrogen taken up by maize is transferred into the grain yield (Berzsenyi 2013). A sufficient amount of nitrogen must be available in the whole vegetation period. In the case of N deficiency, yield loss is inevitable (Alvarez and Grigera 2005). The amount of N fertiliser used in excess of the crop's needs reduces economicalness and harms the environment (Nagy 2012). Phosphorus is also an indispensable nutrient and the most important element of the generative development and energy supply of maize. Consequently, phosphorus deficiency causes metabolic disturbance, the water balance of

crops deteriorate, while silking and ripening delay. However, phosphorus oversupply leads to significant nutrient imbalance. The excess phosphorus resulting from P-Zn antagonism results in relative Zn deficiency, which has a negative impact on yield quantity and quality (Szakál et al. 2004). 70% of the phosphorus taken up during the vegetation period is transferred into the grain yield, which shows the significant role of phosphorus in yield formation (Berzsenyi 2013).

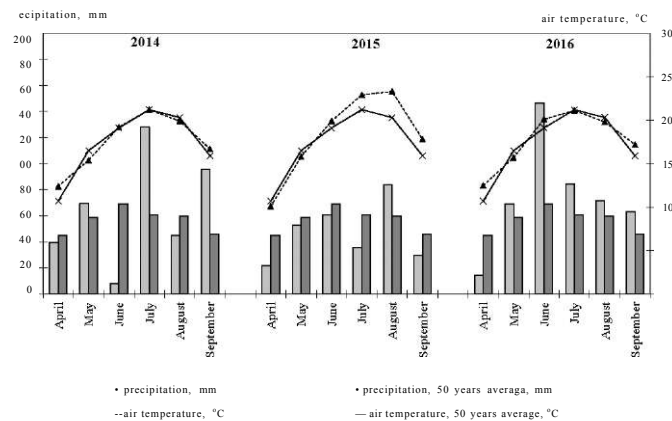
Potassium affects photosynthesis (Árendás et al. 1998), increases the active water uptake of crops (Mengel et al. 2001) and it has a role in the process of opening and closing stomata. Balanced potassium supply improves stress tolerance (frost and drought tolerance) (Sárdi 1999). Insufficient potassium supply leads to significant yield decrease. NPK fertilisation can be used to increase yield, while the unwanted impact of certain agrotechnical factors can also be mitigated (Széll et al. 2004). However, nutrient conversion greatly depends on crop year (Csathó et al. 1991; Wiswakumar 2008). The unfavourable impact of crop year can be avoided or mitigated with rational nutrient and water management. This research carried out in different crop years (2014, 2015 and 2016) focused on revealing how the amount of yearly precipitation and its distribution over the growing season, as well as nutrient replenishment affect maize productivity. It was also the aim of this research to identify the NPK ratio, which results in the highest yield at the lowest cost.

Material and methods

The examinations were performed in Eastern Hungary (horizontal degree: 47°56', longitudinal degree: 21°44') in a long-term small plot field experiment on calcareous chernozem soil with deep humus layer formed on loess. The experiment had a strip plot design and four replications and it was carried out under natural precipitation supply conditions between 2014-2016. The examined hybrid was FAO 490 in all three years. The proportions of the constant NPK fertiliser active ingredient doses of treatment "A" were 1 N : 0.75 P₂O₅ : 0.88 K₂O. The nitrogen base dose was 30 kg ha⁻¹. In addition to non-fertilised control, we applied 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 times this dose. Increasing N dose and the same P and K doses (184 kg ha⁻¹ P₂O₅ and 216 kg ha⁻¹ K₂O) were applied in treatment "B". The harvested grain yield was provided for 14% moisture content. Weather was evaluated based on the data measured and logged by the automatic weather station installed on the experiment site. In 2014, the amount of precipitation in the growing season was 385 mm, which was 13% higher than the 50-year-average (Figure 1). There were two significantly drier months during the growing season: 2% of precipitation was observed in June and 12% in August. The 40 mm rainfall observed in April is considered to be the average amount. In May, the amount of precipitation was 10 mm more than the multiple year average. In July (128 mm) and September (96 mm), the amount of rainfall was more than twice higher than the average. The number of wet days (61) when rainfall reached 10 mm was 47, while there were 11 days when rainfall was above 10 mm. Rainfall was above 20 mm for three days altogether. The mean temperature of the growing season was 0.2 °C higher than the 50-year average. April was significantly warmer (+1.7 °C). The mean temperature of May (-1.1 °C) and August (-0.4 °C) was lower than the multiple year average. The mean temperature of June and July was in accordance with the average, while it was 0.8 °C higher in September. In 2015, the average precipitation sum of the growing season was 285 mm, which is 84% of the 50-year-average (Figure 1). May was somewhat drier than usual, the amount of rainfall was 90% of the average. June and July were rather dry. In

June, the amount of rainfall was 9 mm lower than the normal value, while the precipitation in July was 25 mm lower. The amount of rainfall in August is significant, as 24 mm excess was measured. In September, rainfall was lower than the average, as its amount did not reach 65% of the average. There were 43 rainy days in the growing season of 2015, and the amount of rainfall exceeded 1 mm during 32 of these days. For 9 days, precipitation was above 10 mm, while there were only two days with rainfall above 20 mm. The mean temperature of the growing season was higher (+1.0 °C) than the multiple year average. The mean temperature values of April and May were below the multiple year average. The rest of the observed months were significantly warmer than the average. The biggest positive anomaly was observed in August, when the monthly mean temperature was 3.0 °C higher than the 50-year average. This value is followed by those of September (+1.9 °C), July (+1.7 °C) and June (+0.8 °C).

Figure 1. Precipitation and temperature trends in the growing season (Debrecen, 2014-2016)



The growing season of 2016 was rich in rainfall (Figure 1). The precipitation sum of 2016 (450 mm) was 110 mm higher than the 50-year average (340 mm). April was dry, as there was less than 15 mm rain, which is well below the multiple year average of 45 mm. There was 69 mm rain in May, which was 17% higher than the 50-year average. The amount of rainfall in June (146 mm) was more than twice as much as the average precipitation sum (69). Unfortunately, more than one third of this rain (45 mm) arrived in only one day. There was significant excess rain also in July, August and September. We observed 39% excess rain in July, 20% in August and 37% in September in comparison with the 50-year average. Both in August and September, more than half of all precipitation arrived in one day - on 21st August and 21st September. There were 48 rainy days in the growing season, of which there were 40 days when the amount of rainfall was above 10 mm. Precipitation increased 20 mm for five days and there were only three days when the amount of rainfall was lower than 10 mm. Altogether, the mean temperature of the growing season was 16.5 °C, which differed from the 50-year average by only a few tenths. The month of sowing was much warmer than the average (+1.8 °C), while May was 0.9 °C colder. June was more than 1 °C warmer than the 50-year average, while the temperature in July was in accordance with the average. In August, the amount of average temperature decrease was

0.5 °C, while September was warmer again, exceeding the average by 1.3 °C. *Statistical analysis.* The correlation between the dependent variable (yield) and the production factor (fertilisation, irrigation) was evaluated using a general linear model (GLM). Duncan's test was used to compare yield to its mean values. The correlation between dependent variables was evaluated using a linear function. Functions were fitted with regression analysis and by minimising the sum of squared deviations. The correctness of fitting the functions was determined using the R value and the mean squared error. Evaluation was performed using SPSS for Windows 14.0.

Results

The yield quantified for each crop year - averaged over the different treatments - shows significant differences. The yield difference was significant in all three years at a 0.1% level. The most significant difference was observed between the dry year of 2015 and the wet year of 2016 (3475 kg ha⁻¹). Based on the paired T test of the fertilisation treatment, it can be concluded that treatment "B" (10.876 t ha⁻¹) provided better conditions for maize, but the 603 kg ha⁻¹ excess yield was not shown to be significant difference in comparison with treatment "A" (10.273 t ha⁻¹). By examining the two fertilisation treatments, it can be concluded that treatment "B" was more successful in 2014 - averaged over the different treatments - by 1006 kg ha⁻¹, but the difference is not significant. In the dry year of 2015, higher yield was observed on fields where the fertilisation treatment "B" was applied and the difference (1306 kg ha⁻¹) was significant (P<0.05). There was no notable difference between the two treatments in 2016 (Table 1).

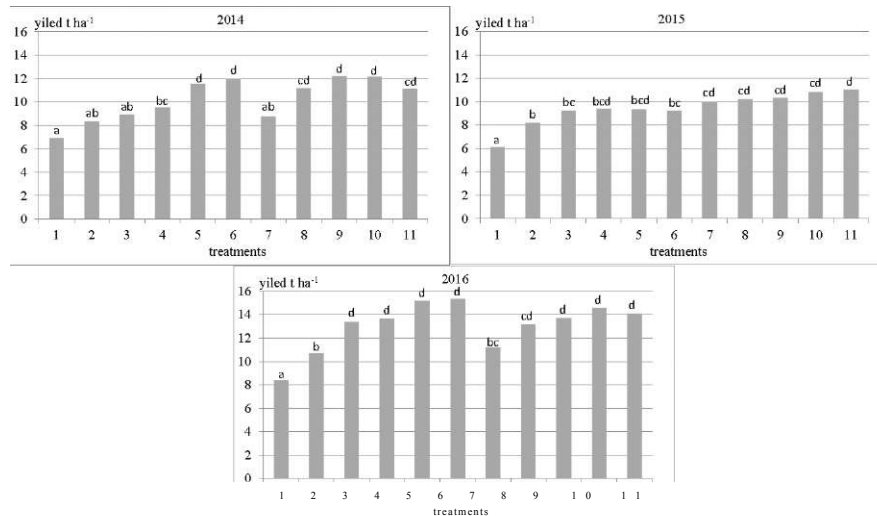
Table 1. The impact of crop year and fertilisation treatments on maize yield (Debrecen, 2014–2016)

Fertilisation treatment	Average yield (t ha ⁻¹)		
	2014	2015	2016
"A"	9.460 ^{ns}	8.490*	12.870 ^{ns}
"B"	10.466	9.796	12.366

Legend: *P=0.05, ns= not significant

As a result of examining the significance of fertilisation treatments carried out each year, it was shown that larger fertiliser doses had a favourable effect in 2014. However, the effect of the fertiliser doses of 120:92:108, 150:115:135, 120:184:216, 180:184:216, 240:184:216 and 300:184:216 kg NPK ha⁻¹ cannot be separated from each other. All six treatments were equally shown to provide significantly better impacts in terms of yield compared to the non-treated control and the 30:23:27, 60:184:216 and 60:46:54 kg NPK ha⁻¹ treatments. Compared to the non-treated control, the response to the higher doses of 30:23:27, 60:46:54 and 60:184:216 kg NPK ha⁻¹ was properly realised in yield, but the Duncan's test showed that the yield resulting from these four fertilisation treatments were classified into the same homogeneous group. The yield of the 90:69:81 kg NPK ha⁻¹ treatment (9.506 t ha⁻¹) was significantly different from the yield resulting from lower and higher fertiliser doses. In 2014, yield increased as a result of nutrient supply and the highest value was observed in the case of 120:92:108 kg NPK ha⁻¹ (11.546 t ha⁻¹) (Figure 2). There was a notable difference (3658 t ha⁻¹) between the yield of the non-treated control and the fertilised plots in the driest year of 2015. Even the lowest dose of 30:23:27 kg NPK ha⁻¹ resulted in an excess yield of 2074 kg ha⁻¹, but the impact of this treatment did not show any significant yield increase in comparison with the other treatments of treatment "A". There was a slight, non-significant difference between the impact of the NPK fertiliser doses evaluated in treatment "B". In this year, the fertiliser level of 90:69:81 kg NPK ha⁻¹ was shown to have a favourable effect (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The impact of fertilisation on maize yield (Debrecen, 2014–2016)



Legend: Columns indicated with different letters significantly differ from each other at the level of $P < 0.05$, based on Duncan's test

The more favourable weather impact of 2016 made larger yields possible (13403 kg ha^{-1}). The yield of the non-treated control was 8.353 t ha^{-1} , which was properly separated from the other fertiliser levels. There was no significant yield increase between the doses of 30:23:27 and 60:184:216 $81 \text{ kg NPK ha}^{-1}$ (519 kg/ha). Similarly, no significant difference was observed between the doses of 60:184:216 81 and $120:184:216 \text{ kg NPK ha}^{-1}$ (1958 kg ha^{-1}). The other fertiliser treatments carried out in the experiment resulted in nearly identical yields, which formed a homogeneous group based on the Duncan's test. In 2016, the highest yield resulted from the fertiliser dose of 60:46:54 kg NPK ha^{-1} (Figure 2).

Conclusions

Based on the MQ value of the multivariate ANOVA, the environmental factor had the most significant yield impact (at a level of 0.1%), averaged over the three examined years. Treatment "B" was not shown to be significantly better than treatment "A". The different fertiliser doses used in these treatments had a significant impact ($P < 0.001$). Similarly to the conclusions of Izsáki (2008), the highest and economically attainable yield was not observed in the same year during either of the examined years. In 2014, the highest yield resulted from the $180:184:216 \text{ kg NPK ha}^{-1}$ treatment, which was only 6% higher than the yield resulting from $120:92:108 \text{ kg NPK ha}^{-1}$, which provided the highest significant yield. In 2015, the difference between the results of the statistically significant $90:69:81 \text{ kg NPK ha}^{-1}$ and the extreme $300:184:216 \text{ NPK ha}^{-1}$ treatments was 18%. In 2016, there was a 16% difference between the treatment of $60:46:54 \text{ NPK ha}^{-1}$ which was statistically significant and the treatment of $150:115:135 \text{ NPK ha}^{-1}$ which provided the highest yield. Averaged over the three examined years, $90:69:81 \text{ kg NPK ha}^{-1}$ was the most effective treatment. Similarly to the results of Pepó (2012), it was shown with statistical methods that crop year greatly affects the impact of applied fertilisers. The most effective NPK ha^{-1} level resulted in 23% yield difference between the rainfall-deficient (-55 mm) year of 2015 and

2014, when the amount of rainfall was 45 mm higher than the 50-year average, while it was 43% in 2016, when the precipitation surplus was 110 mm. The difference between the yields of the two years with excess rainfall (2014 and 2016) was the lowest (16%).

Acknowledgement

This publication was supported by the project "Establishing a scale-independent complex precision consultancy system (GINOP-2.2.1-15-2016-00001)".

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