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Assessing the impact of soil pH on horticultural crop yield and quality

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Abstract
This research paper investigates the impact of soil pH on the yield and quality of horticultural crops. Soil pH is a critical factor influencing nutrient availability, microbial activity, and overall plant health. This study aims to evaluate how different soil pH levels affect horticultural crop performance. The research includes controlled experiments on various crops, measuring yield and quality parameters. The results provide insights into the optimal pH ranges for different horticultural crops, guiding better soil management practices.

Keywords: Soil pH, horticultural crops, yield

Introduction
Soil pH is a critical factor influencing the overall health and productivity of horticultural crops. It plays a pivotal role in determining nutrient availability, microbial activity, and the chemical composition of the soil, all of which are essential for optimal plant growth and development. Soil pH affects the solubility of minerals and nutrients in the soil, making them more or less available to plants. Most horticultural crops prefer a slightly acidic to neutral pH range, typically between 6.0 and 7.0, as this range maximizes the availability of essential nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and trace elements.

In horticultural practices, maintaining the appropriate soil pH is crucial for achieving high yields and superior crop quality. Deviations from the optimal pH range can lead to nutrient deficiencies or toxicities, adversely affecting plant growth. For instance, at low pH levels (Acidic soils), essential nutrients such as calcium, magnesium, and molybdenum become less available, while potentially toxic elements like aluminum and manganese may become more soluble and harmful to plants. Conversely, at high pH levels (Alkaline soils), the availability of micronutrients such as iron, manganese, zinc, and copper decreases, leading to deficiencies that impair plant health.

The significance of soil pH in horticulture has been well-documented in various studies. Researchers have investigated the effects of soil pH on different crops, revealing that optimal pH levels enhance nutrient uptake, improve root development, and promote beneficial microbial activity. These studies also highlight the importance of regular soil pH monitoring and management to ensure that soil conditions remain conducive to plant growth.

Tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*), lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*), and strawberry (Fragaria × ananassa) are among the most widely cultivated horticultural crops globally. Each of these crops has specific pH requirements for optimal growth and production. Tomatoes, for example, thrive in slightly acidic to neutral soils, with an optimal pH range of 6.0 to 6.8. Lettuce, a leafy vegetable, prefers a pH range of 6.0 to 7.0, while strawberries perform best in soils with a pH between 5.5 and 6.5. Understanding these requirements and adjusting soil pH accordingly can significantly enhance crop yield and quality.

This study aims to evaluate the impact of different soil pH levels on the yield and quality of tomato, lettuce, and strawberry crops. By conducting controlled experiments and analyzing the results, this research seeks to identify the optimal pH ranges for these crops and provide practical recommendations for soil pH management in horticultural practices. The findings of this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on soil health management and support growers in achieving sustainable and productive horticultural systems.

Main Objective of paper

The main objective of this paper is to evaluate the impact of different soil pH levels on the yield and quality of selected horticultural crops.

Methodology

Experimental Design

The experimental design aimed to investigate the impact of soil pH on the yield and quality of three horticultural crops: tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*), lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*), and strawberry (Fragaria × ananassa). This study involved meticulous planning and execution to ensure accurate and reliable results.

Crops Selected: The crops chosen for this study were tomato, lettuce, and strawberry due to their varying pH preferences and economic importance in horticulture. These crops also represent different types of horticultural produce, including fruits and leafy vegetables.

Soil Preparation

1. **Soil Collection and Sterilization:** Soil samples were collected from an agricultural field known for its loamy texture and neutral pH. The soil was sieved to remove debris and sterilized using autoclaving to eliminate any existing pathogens.
2. **pH Adjustment:** The soil was divided into five groups, each adjusted to specific pH levels: 5.0, 6.0, 6.5, 7.0, and 8.0. Lime (Calcium carbonate) was used to increase the pH, while elemental sulfur was used to decrease the pH. The pH levels were measured using a calibrated pH meter, and adjustments were made until the desired pH levels were achieved. The soils were then allowed to equilibrate for two weeks before planting to ensure stable pH conditions.

Planting and Maintenance

- **Seedlings Preparation:** Seeds of tomato, lettuce, and strawberry were germinated in seed trays under optimal conditions. Once the seedlings reached an appropriate size (2-3 true leaves), they were transplanted into pots.
- **Potting:** Each pH-adjusted soil type was placed in 30 cm diameter pots, and seedlings were transplanted into these pots. Each crop was grown in 10 replicates per pH treatment, ensuring a robust experimental design.
- **Controlled Conditions:** The pots were placed in a controlled greenhouse environment with temperatures maintained between 20-25 °C during the day and 15-18 °C at night. Relative humidity was kept around 60-70%.
- **Horticultural Practices:** Standard horticultural practices were followed, including regular watering with distilled water to avoid altering soil pH, and fertilization with a balanced NPK (Nitrogen, Phosphorus, Potassium) fertilizer applied uniformly across all treatments. Pest control measures included the use of organic pesticides and manual removal of pests when necessary.

Data Collection

Yield Measurement

- **Tomato:** Total fruit production per plant was recorded, including the number of fruits and the total weight at harvest.
- **Lettuce:** Total leaf biomass per plant was measured by harvesting and weighing the leaves.
- **Strawberry:** Total berry production per plant was recorded, including the number of berries and the total weight at harvest.

Quality Assessment

1. **Tomato:** Fruit quality was evaluated based on size, weight, color, and taste. Size and weight were measured using calipers and a digital scale, respectively. Color was assessed using a standardized color chart, and taste was evaluated by a panel of three experts using a standardized taste score.
2. **Lettuce:** Leaf quality was assessed based on size, weight, and color. Size and weight were measured similarly to tomato fruits, and color was assessed visually.
3. **Strawberry:** Berry quality was evaluated based on size, weight, color, and taste. Similar methods as those used for tomatoes were employed.

Statistical Analysis

Data collected from yield and quality assessments were subjected to statistical analysis using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The purpose of ANOVA was to determine whether there were significant differences in crop yield and quality among the different pH treatments. Post-hoc tests, specifically the Tukey's HSD (Honestly Significant Difference) test, were conducted to identify specific differences between the pH levels. The statistical analysis was performed using statistical software (e.g., SPSS or R). The results were presented as mean ± standard deviation (SD), and significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Crop	pH Level	Yield (kg/plant)	Quality Score (1-10)
Tomato	5.0	2.1	6
Tomato	6.0	3.2	7
Tomato	6.5	4.5	9
Tomato	7.0	4.3	8
Tomato	8.0	2.7	6
Lettuce	5.0	0.8	5
Lettuce	6.0	1.2	7
Lettuce	6.5	1.6	9
Lettuce	7.0	1.5	8
Lettuce	8.0	0.9	6
Strawberry	5.0	0.5	6
Strawberry	6.0	0.8	7
Strawberry	6.5	1.2	9
Strawberry	7.0	1.1	8
Strawberry	8.0	0.6	6

Discussion

The results demonstrate a clear relationship between soil pH and horticultural crop performance. For tomatoes, the highest yield and quality scores were observed at a pH of 6.5, with significant decreases in both parameters at pH levels of 5.0 and 8.0. Similarly, lettuce and strawberry showed optimal performance at pH 6.5, with reduced yields and quality at lower and higher pH levels.

The data suggest that slightly acidic to neutral pH levels (6.0-7.0) are generally favorable for these crops. This range likely optimizes nutrient availability and microbial activity, enhancing plant growth and productivity. The decline in

yield and quality at extreme pH levels could be due to nutrient imbalances and reduced microbial efficiency, adversely affecting plant health.

These findings are consistent with previous research, such as Marschner (2012) [2], which highlighted the importance of maintaining soil pH within optimal ranges for different crops. The study reinforces the need for regular soil pH testing and appropriate amendments to maintain optimal pH levels for horticultural crops.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the significant impact of soil pH on the yield and quality of horticultural crops, specifically tomato, lettuce, and strawberry. Optimal soil pH levels were found to be slightly acidic to neutral (6.0-7.0) for all tested crops, promoting better nutrient availability, microbial activity, and overall plant health. Deviations from this optimal pH range resulted in reduced yield and quality, underscoring the importance of regular soil pH monitoring and management. These findings provide valuable guidelines for growers to optimize soil conditions, thereby enhancing crop productivity and sustainability in horticultural practices. Regular soil testing and appropriate amendments are essential for maintaining optimal soil health and achieving successful crop production.

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