

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE USE OF COMMERCIAL MYCORRHIZAE PRODUCTS IN NURSERY PRODUCTION

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Mycorrhizae are specialized fungi that live on plant roots in a mutually beneficial relationship. The host plant supplies carbohydrates produced during photosynthesis. In return, the fungus grows an extensive network into the soil, transferring water and nutrients to the roots.

Mycorrhizal fungi are very common in natural soils. They are less common in agricultural fields or in nursery potting mixes. Over the past 2 years, we have tested commercial formulations of mycorrhizal products in different nursery and greenhouse settings. This presentation will review some results from controlled trials at Byland's Nurseries Ltd., in British Columbia.

### I. BENEFITS OF MYCORRHIZAE

Researchers have documented many benefits for nursery plants inoculated with mycorrhizae.

*Nutrient uptake:* mycorrhizal roots usually grow faster, are much larger, and are more physiologically active than non-mycorrhizal roots. The improved nutrient uptake, especially of phosphorus, is more obvious in low fertility soils, "tired" land, and disturbed landscape sites.

*Stress tolerance:* mycorrhizal plants show higher survival under drought conditions than non-mycorrhizal plants. Mycorrhizal plants also exhibit higher survival in cold temperatures and more tolerance of soil problems such as low pH or high salt content.

*Disease resistance:* mycorrhizal roots have an increased resistance to infection by soil-borne diseases. One level of protection comes from the physical barrier created by the fungus mantle on the root. Another level of protection comes from the secretion of antibiotics by some fungi.

### TYPES OF MYCORRHIZAE

*Endomycorrhizae:* the most widely distributed in nature, they are associated with turfgrasses, vegetables, flowers, fruit trees, and many ornamental shrubs and trees. "Endo" refers to the fungi penetrating into the root. It cannot be seen except for some hyphae growing near feeder roots.

Rhododendron, cranberry, blueberry and orchids have specialized endomycorrhizal associations.

*Ectomycorrhizae:* they are found in late succession plants including forest conifer trees and some hardwoods such as oak, beech, birch, willow and hickory. "Ecto" refers to the fungal growth forming a thick sheath around feeder roots. Many ectomycorrhizae can be seen with the naked eye and some species will produce mushrooms or puffballs, including the gourmet truffles.

*No mycorrhizal association* is a situation found on a few plants typical of early-succession, mostly weeds such as Shepherd's-purse, stinkweed, bitter cress, bindweed and buckwheat.

## II. TRIALS AT BYLAND'S NURSERIES

In July 2001, we potted shrub liners in 1-gallon containers with different potting mixes. One potting mix was augmented with "Myke Pro Endo" from Premier Tech, at label rate. The plants, 20 in each treatment, were managed following standard nursery practices.

In September 2002, fourteen months after potting, root samples were collected for an independent laboratory analysis. Plants grown in the potting mix with mycorrhizae had 42% of roots colonized, compared to 1% for plants grown in the regular potting mix.

### *Mycorrhizal colonization of *Cornus alba* 'Baithalo' fourteen months after potting*

| Treatment                 | Number of samples | Average root colonization<br>(rating scale 1 to 5) |
|---------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Regular mix (control)     | 8                 | 0.13   |
| Regular + Endomycorrhizae | 8                 | 2.13 *   |

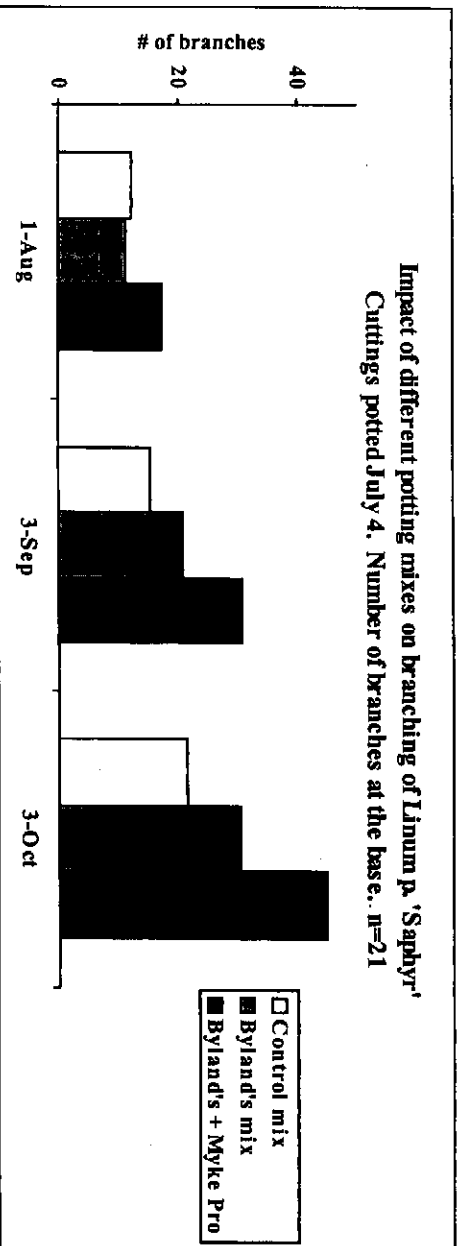
Number followed by an asterisk is statistically different than control at  $p=0.05$ , Tukey HSD Multiple Comparisons.

Plants were cut at the soil line and dried at 105°C for 24 hours. Top dry weight was not different for plants grown with mycorrhizae when compared to plants grown in the regular mix. The same results were observed with *Spiraea* 'Froebelii' and *Juniperus* 'Calgary Carpet'.

If we can achieve successful root colonization but there is no impact on top growth, what is the point of adding mycorrhizal products during nursery production? As many nursery growers already know, many factors are important to plant health, and top growth is only one of them.

### Impact on branching

On July 4, 2001, we potted cuttings of perennial flowers in 6-inch pots with different potting mixes. One potting mix was augmented with "Myke Pro Endo" from Premier Tech. For cuttings of blue flax (*Linum p.*), the addition of mycorrhizae resulted in a significant increase in the number of branches breaking from the main stem when compared to control plants.

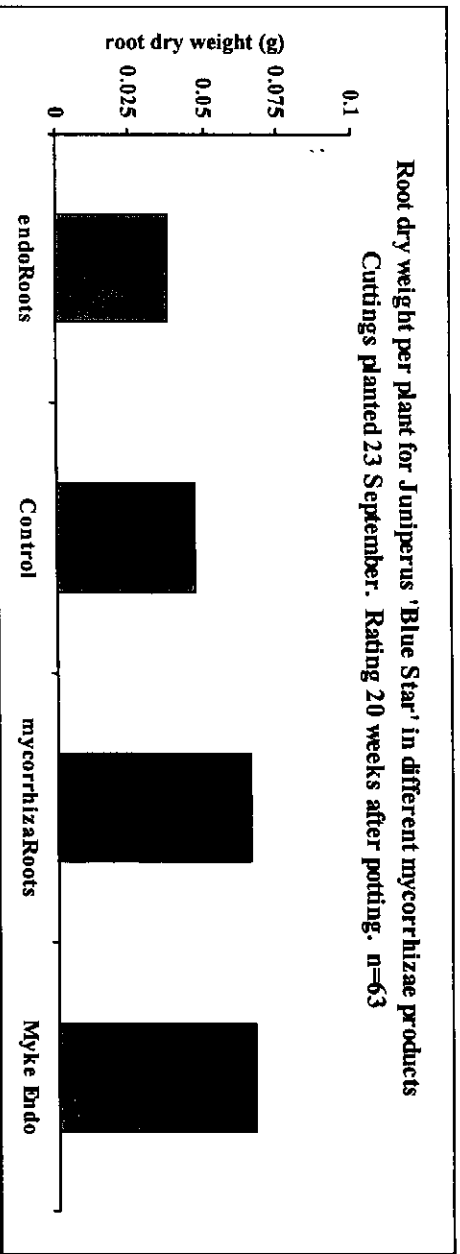


On 3-Sep and 3-Oct, results for "Byland's + Myke Pro" are statistically different than control at  $p=0.05$ , Tukey HSD Multiple Comparisons.

### Impact on rooting of cuttings

On September 23, 2001, juniper cuttings were planted in 36-cell trays with a standard propagation media. Various mycorrhizae products were mixed into the media. At regular intervals, 36 plants were lifted in each treatment and a count made of number of roots emerging from the stem. Twenty weeks after potting, plants were removed and processed for dry weight.

Fifteen weeks after planting, roots were present on 92% of cuttings treated with "mycorrhizaRoots" and 89% of cuttings treated with "Myke Endo", compared with 75% of untreated cuttings. Twenty weeks after planting, average root mass was also significantly higher.



Results for "mycorrhizaRoots" and "Myke Endo" are statistically different than control at  $p=0.05$ ; Tukey HSD Multiple Comparisons.

### Impact on post-planting survival

In April 2002, over 4,000 bare-root trees coming out of winter storage were potted in 10-gallon and 1.5-gallon containers with the regular potting mix. For some trees, a commercial mycorrhizae product was placed at label rate over the root system during potting.

In July, the trees were visually rated for quality of new growth. When combining all tree species, post-planting survival was not different between trees grown with mycorrhizae and trees grown in the regular mix. However, survival rate was consistently higher for trees difficult to replant.

#### *Tree quality 3 months after potting with or without mycorrhizae incorporation*

| Tree Type            | Treatment        | Number of trees | Active (new growth) | Wilting (dead, dying) |
|----------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Tilia 'Harvest Gold' | Regular mix      | 22              | 55 %                | 23 %                  |
| Tilia 'Harvest Gold' | With mycorrhizae | 116             | 72 %                | 3 %                   |
| Hackberry            | Regular mix      | 40              | 60 %                | 23 %                  |
| Hackberry            | With mycorrhizae | 148             | 86 %                | 9 %                   |
| Sorbus 'Skinners'    | Regular mix      | 64              | 61 %                | 34 %                  |
| Sorbus 'Skinners'    | With mycorrhizae | 92              | 85 %                | 1 %                   |
| Crataegus 'Snowbird' | Regular mix      | 29              | 41 %                | 0 %                   |
| Crataegus 'Snowbird' | With mycorrhizae | 122             | 53 %                | 0 %                   |

### III. MYCORRHIZAE AND SOIL BIOLOGY

Mycorrhizal fungi are one of many different soil microbes. Nitrogen-fixing bacteria, flagellates and predatory nematodes are other beneficial microbes found in healthy soils.

The components of soil chemistry are fairly well understood. Nursery growers know that nitrogen fertilizers will stimulate plant growth and low soil pH can be changed with lime. The components of soil biology are much less known. How many beneficial fungi are necessary for spruce trees? What type of cover crop will suppress the population of root-knot nematodes?

Nursery growers should expect radical changes in soil management in the coming years:

- Soil biology analysis will become a routine exercise, much like soil chemistry analysis.
- Fungi-enriched composts will be part of plant fertilization, much like N-P-K fertilizers.
- Commercial formulations of mycorrhizae products will be combined with other biocontrol agents to protect the root system against soil-borne diseases and to improve plant performance.

#### MYCORRHIZAE PRODUCTS IN CANADA

- 1) "Myke Pro", Premier Tech Biotechnologies, 1-800-606-6926, [www.premiertech.com](http://www.premiertech.com). The ectomycorrhizal product contains *Glomus intraradices*. The ectomycorrhizal product contains *Pisolithus tinctorius*, *Rhizopogon* sp., *Laccaria* sp., and *Scleroderma* sp.
- 2) "endoROOTS granular", Roots Inc., 1-800-342-6173, [www.rootsinc.com](http://www.rootsinc.com). This product contains species of VAM mycorrhizae and a guaranteed analysis of 3-3-4. The water-soluble product "mycorrhizalROOTS" contains ecto and endo species, and humic acids.
- 3) Mikro-Tek, Timmins, Ontario, phone (705) 268-3536. The supplier of "Mikro-Cone" and "Mikro-VAM" designed towards forest seedling nurseries.
- 4) Philom Bios, Saskatoon, phone (306) 668-8220, [www.philombios.ca](http://www.philombios.ca). This company supplies "JumpStart", a formulation of *Penicillium* fungus for grain crops.

#### IV. FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Two recent articles in the magazine "American Nurseryman" regarding mycorrhizae:
  - Dr. B. Appleton, "Silver Bullet or Silver Slug?" November 1, 2002
  - Dr. F.T. Davies Jr. "Opportunities Down Under" February 15, 2002
- Podila G.K. and D.D. Douds. 2000. "Current Advances in Mycorrhizae Research". APS Press. In 1994, the same publisher released "Mycorrhizae and Plant Health". Both books are available from American Phytopathological Society at 1-800-328-7560 or [www.shopapspress.org](http://www.shopapspress.org)
- Maronek D.M., J.W. Hendrix and J. Kiernan. 1981. "Mycorrhizal Fungi and Their Importance in Horticultural Crop Production". Horticultural Reviews, Volume 3. This journal article, still good despite its age, is probably available for free at any university library.
- <http://mycorrhiza.ag.utk.edu/mycor.htm>. An internet website based at the University of Tennessee with links to other sites, literature reviews, research reports and a list serve.
- <http://www.uoguelph.ca/botany/research/rootlab/index.htm>. An internet link to the University of Guelph "Root Biology and Mycorrhiza Research Group".