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Soil–Root Interactions in Mixed Plant Systems

Samuel G.K. Adiku, Laj R. Ahuja, Harry Ozier Lafontaine, G.H. Dunn, L. Garcia

► **To cite this version:**

Samuel G.K. Adiku, Laj R. Ahuja, Harry Ozier Lafontaine, G.H. Dunn, L. Garcia. Soil–Root Interactions in Mixed Plant Systems. Enhancing Understanding and Quantification of Soil–Root Growth Interactions, 4, American Society of Agronomy; Crop Science Society of America; Soil Science Society of America, 324 p., 2013, Advances in Agricultural Systems Modeling, 978-0-89118-338-9. 10.2134/advagricsystmodel4.c11 . hal-02807793

HAL Id: hal-02807793

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02807793v1>

Submitted on 6 Jun 2020

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**Advances in Agricultural Systems Modeling
Transdisciplinary Research, Synthesis, and Applications**

Laj Ahuja, Series Editor

Volume 4

Enhancing Understanding and Quantification of Soil–Root Growth Interactions

Dennis Timlin and Laj R. Ahuja, Editors

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American Society of Agronomy, Inc.
Crop Science Society of America, Inc.
Soil Science Society of America, Inc.
5585 Guilford Road, Madison, WI 53711-5801 USA

agronomy.org | soils.org | crops.org
dl.sciencesocieties.org
societystore.org

ISBN: 978-0-89118-338-9 (print)
ISBN: 978-0-89118-339-6 (electronic)
doi:10.2134/advagriscystmodel4
Library of Congress Control Number: 2013936612

Advances in Agricultural Systems Modeling
ISSN: 2163-2790 (online)
ISSN: 2163-2774 (print)

Cover design: Patricia Scullion
Cover photo: Sunflower seedling with roots. Jason Young, USDA-ARS, Water Management Research Unit, Fort Collins, CO.

Printed in the United States of America.

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Scientists cannot easily visualize or understand plant root growth and function in the soil. Yet, 50% or more of most plant growth occurs below the soil surface and interacts with the rhizosphere. Roots are dynamic organs that respond to physical, chemical, and hydrologic properties of the soil, as well as stimuli from aboveground plant parts. An understanding of the rhizosphere allows us to better understand plant growth responses to the environment as well as resource conservation and climate change. This interdisciplinary book describes methods, modeling efforts, and future needs so that the root systems and interactions with the soil can be better understood. This information is critical to advance efforts to improve water use and nutrient efficiencies, reduce pest impacts, and increase carbon sequestration. Contributors to this volume are respected international experts representing a wide array of scientific disciplines, including soil scientists, plant physiologists, and microbiologists. We thank the editors Drs. Timlin and Ahuja and all authors for their significant contributions to our understanding of soil–root growth interactions, the implications of these interactions, and their thoughts about future research directions.

Sharon Clay, 2013 ASA President

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Dynamic root growth in response to soil conditions is important to the most efficient use of soil water and nutrient resources. Thus, a better understanding of the interactions of soil properties and processes with plant root growth and function is of interest to many disciplines, within soil science and beyond. Further research is urgently needed in this area to gain better understanding and quantification to find solutions to society's growing problems in the conservation of water and soil resources and their quality. Agriculture must maximize the use of increasingly limited water available for food production, enhancing the use of soil nutrient resources. This is especially critical to nations who cannot afford the costly fertilizers and to the world where soil carbon storage can be utilized to reduce climate change effects of elevated CO₂. Research progress in the area of soil–root growth interactions, however, has been slow due to the relative inaccessibility of roots in their natural environment and the fact that root research cuts across the boundaries of soil science, ecology, crop science, and plant physiology, among others. As is often the case in research, many scientists often work in isolation of other disciplines due to limited time and resources or the need to concentrate on a limited scope to a particular problem. This can lead to the neglect of, often very important, interactions on the boundaries of disciplines. An important component that ties together the many diverse processes in soils is the rhizosphere. Unfortunately this critical component is left out of many projects. The subject for the book volume is a transdisciplinary area of critical knowledge gaps. Therefore, the overall motivation for this book is to bring together scientists from different disciplines, worldwide, together to encourage synthesis of transdisciplinary knowledge and further research and developments in the area of root–soil interactions.

The plant root system has been described as the “hidden half” (*Plant roots: The hidden half*, Yoav Waisel, Amram Esthel, and Uzi Kafkafi, editors, Marcel Dekker, New York). This term implies both the unknown and difficult to measure nature of the root system, as well as its importance as making up at least half the plant system. Because of difficulties in measuring plant root systems and related processes, there is a dearth of quantifiable data that would be useful to plant modelers to develop equations and algorithms of root growth, and water and nutrient uptake under a range of soil conditions. The objective of this book is to document recent advances in understanding, synthesis, and quantification of the effects of soil attributes, the rhizosphere, and management on root growth and architecture, and vice versa, in relation to uptake of soil water and nutrients and soil carbon sequestration. This knowledge can then be used to improve models of these processes.

Based on a review of the subject matter by the editors, some of the specific areas of knowledge gaps needing better understanding and quantification for system models are listed below.

1. Rhizosphere role in soil–root interactions
2. Effect of soil properties and the rhizosphere on root growth, root length density, diameter and architecture; total vs. active functional roots

3. Impact of root growth on soil hydraulic properties over time and interaction with microfauna in the soil
4. Quantification of vertical and lateral root growth responses to water and nutrient availability and soil impedance changes with matric potential
5. Differences in dynamic response of root growth and architecture in different crops under unstressed and stressed conditions: modeling and reality
6. Interacting root and soil parameters that affect water and nutrient uptake: root length density (RLD) distribution, root and shoot hydraulic properties, soil water potential and conductivity, root contact, and soil fauna
7. Contribution of root growth and architecture and the rhizosphere to carbon sequestration under unstressed and stressed conditions

Contributions for this volume listed under the next section have been selected around these areas and come from a compilation of papers from a symposium titled “Enhancing Understanding and Quantification of Soil–Root Growth Interactions” at the 2009 International Annual Meetings of the American Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America, and Soil Science Society of America.

We hope this volume will also encourage further research and developments in the area of root–soil interactions and the rhizosphere through coordination and collaborations worldwide.

Dennis Timlin and Laj Ahuja, Editors

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