



# Quantifying the nitrogen demand of individual plants in heterogeneous canopies: A case study with crop and weed species

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## ► To cite this version:

Laurène Perthame, Nathalie Colbach, Sophie Brunel-Muguet, Hugues Busset, Julianne Lilley, et al.. Quantifying the nitrogen demand of individual plants in heterogeneous canopies: A case study with crop and weed species. European Journal of Agronomy, 2020, 119, pp.126102. 10.1016/j.eja.2020.126102 . hal-03148260

**HAL Id: hal-03148260**

**<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-03148260>**

Submitted on 22 Aug 2022

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1 European Journal of Agronomy

2 Original research paper

3 Quantifying the nitrogen demand of individual plants in heterogeneous canopies. A case study  
4 with crop and weed species.

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## Abstract

Crop mixtures may decrease reliance on pesticides but reducing herbicide use might increase weeds. Individual-based crop models can provide management guidelines. In heterogeneous canopies, light availability of individual plants depends on their dominant or dominated position. Estimating nitrogen demand at the plant scale, independently of light environment, is a challenge for modelling. A relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass (or leaf area) at optimal nitrogen nutrition was investigated to establish if it could allow estimating nitrogen demand at the plant scale independently of its light environment. Crop and weed species were grown in greenhouse under various nitrogen treatments and, for two species, under two light levels. At the plant scale, shoot nitrogen amount was proportional to leaf biomass (or leaf area) at optimal nitrogen nutrition at vegetative stage. At reproductive stage, the relationship was allometric. The effect of light on shoot nitrogen amount per leaf biomass was minor and greater when using leaf area. Using data from previous experiments showed that the relationship using leaf biomass was stable across diverse growing conditions. The relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition can be used to model nitrogen demand of individual plants in heterogeneous canopies.

**Key words:** Nitrogen demand; Individual plant; Heterogeneous canopy; Crop; Weed; Individual-based model

## 1. Introduction

With the advent of more environmentally friendly cropping systems, multispecies canopies will become more frequent. Indeed, crop mixtures are recommended to reduce the use of chemical inputs (Malezieux *et al.*, 2009; Altieri *et al.*, 2015; Duchene *et al.*, 2017; Barot *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, as herbicides constitute the most effective weed management technique (Munier-Jolain *et al.*, 2008), the decrease in herbicide use may result in a residual weed flora in arable fields.

Tools are needed to design and manage more sustainable agricultural systems including multispecies heterogeneous canopies (Gaudio *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, designing and managing such canopies is challenging because they are constituted of several species and show genetic, spatial (sowing patterns, weed patches) and temporal (multiple emergence flushes) heterogeneities which affect the environment experienced by individual plants (Colbach *et al.*, 2014). Most existing crop models and diagnosis tools have been developed for homogeneous canopies and are not adapted to heterogeneous situations.

Mechanistic individual-based crop models can provide management guidelines for multispecies canopies because they allow evaluating various cropping systems scenarios under multiple environments (Gaudio *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, they describe the processes underlying plant development and growth, and their response to environment factors make them applicable in a large range of situations (Colbach *et al.*, 2019). They simulate each plant individually, thus taking into account both the intra-specific and inter-specific variability existing in heterogeneous canopies.

Light is the main resource for which plants compete in intensive cropping systems (Wilson and Tilman, 1993; Perry *et al.*, 2003; Munier-Jolain *et al.*, 2013). Yet, competition for

belowground resources, particularly nitrogen, will become more and more frequent, as the use of mineral fertilizers must be reduced due to environmental concerns (Sutton *et al.*, 2011). Competition for nitrogen among plants in the field, whether crop or weed, might increase. It is thus important to model this process but most individual-based models take into account competition for light and rarely for nitrogen (Gaudio *et al.*, 2019) or need to be improved to accurately predict plant nitrogen demand, particularly for isolated plants (Faverjon *et al.*, 2019).

Modelling nitrogen competition in individual-based models requires representing two processes at the plant scale (1) the soil nitrogen supply and (2) the plant nitrogen demand. Soil nitrogen supply depends on the quantity of nitrogen in the soil available to the root system and on the root nitrogen uptake efficiency (Hodge *et al.*, 2009). These two aspects are already well modelled, e.g., in soil nitrogen models (Brisson *et al.*, 1998; Brisson *et al.*, 2002; Brisson *et al.*, 2003; Holzworth *et al.*, 2014) and in root architecture models (Dunbabin *et al.*, 2013; Pages *et al.*, 2014). Plant nitrogen demand is defined as the quantity of nitrogen that a plant needs to maximize its growth (Ulrich, 1952).

In homogeneous canopies, nitrogen demand is classically estimated from the critical nitrogen dilution curve developed by Lemaire and Salette (1984). The critical nitrogen dilution curve defines the minimum shoot nitrogen concentration ( $pN_{sh}$  in g nitrogen.g biomass<sup>-1</sup>) required to maximize shoot biomass ( $B_{sh}$  in g):

$$pN_{sh} = a \cdot B_{sh}^b$$

With  $a$  (in g<sup>-1</sup>) the intrinsic ability of the crop to take up nitrogen during early growth (Lemaire *et al.*, 2007) and  $b$  (dimensionless) the allometric coefficient between the nitrogen concentration and the shoot biomass accumulation (Lemaire and Salette, 1984). The critical

nitrogen dilution curve is applicable at the individual scale. As shoot biomass increases, nitrogen is diluted in response to self-shading and to a higher proportion of stem than leaf biomass. Both processes decrease shoot nitrogen concentration (Lemaire and Gastal, 1997). Parameters  $a$  and  $b$  of the critical nitrogen dilution curves vary with the amount of light intercepted by plants and its impact on plant organ composition (Lemaire and Gastal, 1997; Seginer, 2004; Lemaire *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the nitrogen dilution curve, as represented by Lemaire and Salette (1984), cannot be used to estimate nitrogen demand at the plant scale in heterogeneous canopies.

To estimate nitrogen demand at the plant level, some models use biochemical processes linked to photosynthesis (Soussana *et al.*, 2012; Barillot *et al.*, 2016). These models are functional-structural models that explicitly represent plant architecture: they are adapted to investigate interactions among a small number of plant species (one for Barillot *et al.* (2016) and two plant functional types for Soussana *et al.* (2012)) on a relatively short time scale (several weeks or months). These models are not adapted to crop-weed modelling because (1) the numerous parameters required per species cannot be assessed for the several dozens (or more) contrasting weed species coexisting in arable fields (Fried *et al.*, 2008), and (2) plant representation is too detailed to run simulations over several years or decades, as required for analysing the effect of cropping systems on weed dynamics (Gardarin *et al.*, 2010).

Other models use empirical approaches to estimate plant nitrogen demand. The COMPETE model (Berger, 2009; Berger *et al.*, 2013) uses thresholds based on empirical data used to establish maximum and minimum nitrogen amount observed in leaves and stems at several development stage for two species only. Similar empirical approaches to estimate plant nitrogen demand using observed nitrogen concentrations are used in some root architecture

models (Lynch *et al.*, 1997; Postma *et al.*, 2017; Wu and McGechan, 1998; Wu *et al.*, 2007).

This approach is not generic which makes difficult its application to other species.

A third approach, used for instance in an individual-based model simulating grasslands with forage legumes (Louarn and Faverjon, 2018), estimates shoot nitrogen concentration of the plant species at the canopy level with the critical dilution curve using shoot biomass of all plants in the mixture. Nitrogen demand of each plant then depends on its potential dry matter production determined from the amount of intercepted light by the shoot. Using the shoot biomass of the mixture (grass+legumes) allows estimating shoot nitrogen concentration with the same dilution curve coefficients as for a homogeneous grass canopy (Soussana and Arregui, 1995). But this relationship assumes that the species in the mixture have similar height and neighbour shading capacity (Gastal *et al.*, 2015). This does not apply to weed-crop canopy or many annual crop mixtures where plant height can greatly differ between species, and individual plants receive different amounts of light, depending on their position in the canopy (dominant or dominated plant).

Thus, it is necessary to find a new approach that allows the estimation of plant nitrogen demand for many species and for plants that have different access to light depending on their dominant or dominated position in the canopy.

At optimal plant nitrogen nutrition, Lemaire *et al.* (2005) found a linear relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass of individual plants of *Medicago sativa* grown in a dense stand in the field. The relationship was relatively stable regardless of the plant position in the canopy, and thus the amount of light received by the plant (Lemaire *et al.*, 2005). In a modelling perspective, this result could be used to simply simulate plant nitrogen demand from leaf biomass, independently of light environment (by multiplying the simulated leaf biomass by the slope of the relationship). Instead of leaf biomass, Lemaire *et al.* (2005) also

used leaf area. They identified a similar relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf area at plant optimal nitrogen nutrition for *M. sativa*, stable across environments (greenhouse experiment at low density and field experiment at high density). At the homogeneous canopy level, this relationship varied between environments for several crop species (Lemaire *et al.*, 2007), this relationship might thus vary across environments at the plant scale.

The objective of this study was to identify a method to estimate nitrogen demand at the plant scale, independently of light environment. The linear relationship found by Lemaire *et al.* (2005) linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition was analysed in order to determine whether (1) it was valid for other species, (2) its slope was stable irrespective of light environment, (3) its slope varied among a range of species, including both crops and weeds, (4) it was robust to growth conditions (particularly field versus greenhouse) and (5) leaf biomass was a more relevant variable than leaf area to estimate plant nitrogen demand independently of light environment.

## **2. Materials and methods**

### *2.1. Controlled-environment experiments*

#### 2.1.1. Principle

Three greenhouse experiments were conducted in Dijon (France) in 2015, 2016 and 2018. Six annual species were chosen to include monocotyledonous and dicotyledonous as well as crop and weed species, and to cover the range of the N-number of Ellenberg (1974) (Table 1). This gradient ranks species from 1 (most oligotrophic species, mostly found in nitrogen-poor soils) to 9 (most nitrophilic species, mostly found in nitrogen-rich soils).



To obtain plants at optimal nitrogen nutrition, plants of all species were grown under different concentrations of nitrogen solution. For two species used as references (*Triticum aestivum* and *Polygonum aviculare*), plants were grown under two light treatments in order to test the stability of the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass across light conditions. All the other species were grown in unshaded conditions only.

#### 2.1.2. Experimental design

Plants from all six species were grown under four or five nutrient solutions, varying in their nitrate concentration from 0.2 to 14 mM. For two species the different nutrient solutions were applied under two contrasted light treatments: 100% (unshaded) and 40% (shaded) of incident light (Table 1). Twenty-four plants were grown per species  $\times$  nitrogen treatment  $\times$  light treatment combination, except for *T. aestivum* and *P. aviculare* in the shaded treatment at the highest nitrogen concentration of the solution where twenty plants were grown. Plants were grouped by nitrogen treatments in the greenhouse because each nitrogen treatment required its own watering network. Within each nitrogen treatment, plant species were placed randomly and spaced homogeneously. At the beginning of the experiment, the distance between pots was 12cm in the unshaded treatment and 9cm in the shaded treatment (13pots/m<sup>2</sup> in the unshaded treatment and 21pots/m<sup>2</sup> in the shaded treatment). Each sampling decreased the stand density by 3pots/m<sup>2</sup> in the unshaded treatment and 5pots/m<sup>2</sup> in the shaded treatment.

#### 2.1.3. Growing conditions

Seeds were germinated in an incubator with photoperiod (from 16 hours of light per day to total obscurity) and temperature (from 10 to 25°C) adapted to each species. When the radicle

protruded, germinated seeds were sown into 2-L pots, with one seedling per pot, and placed into the greenhouse (under natural light and cooled with cooling pads). Pots were filled with a solid, inert and draining substrate (60% attapulgite and 40% expanded clay, with clay balls added at the bottom of the pots except in 2018). For *T. aestivum* and *P. aviculare* in the shaded treatment, plants were grown under a shading net that transmitted 40% of incident light. Each nutrient solution was made up of nitrate, phosphorous, potassium, and oligo-elements (Table S1 section A [Supplementary Information]) and was provided by automatic watering several times a day at a frequency allowing the pots to drain, avoiding the accumulation of ions in the substrate and ensuring non-limiting irrigation. Air temperature (PT100 sensors in ventilated shelter in unshaded treatment; Pyro-Contrôle, Vaulx-en-Velin, France) and incident photosynthetically active radiation (PAR; silicon sensors; Solems, Palaiseau, France) were measured at 300-s (2015) or 600-s (2016, 2018) intervals and stored in a data logger (DL2e; Delta-T Devices, Cambridge, UK). Mean temperature and incident photosynthetically active radiation for each year of experiment are provided in Table S2 section A [Supplementary Information]. In 2018, the mean air temperature was 0.9°C (e.g. 4.2%) higher in the unshaded than in the shaded treatment while the mean incident photosynthetically active radiation in the shaded treatment was worth 41% of the value in the unshaded treatment. The main effect affecting plants growth between unshaded and shaded treatments was thus the incident light.

#### 2.1.4. Plant measurements

For each species × nitrogen treatment × light treatment combination, four to six plants were sampled randomly at four dates, from 5 to 18-weeks after sowing for unshaded treatment and from 8 to 18-weeks after sowing for shaded treatment (Table S3 section A [Supplementary

Information]). Samplings were carried out during the vegetative stage for all species, except for *M. sativa* (for two dates) and *P. aviculare* (for all dates) that were at reproductive stage. Plants of *M. sativa* that were at vegetative stage (reproductive to shoot biomass ratio < 1%) were considered separately from the plants at reproductive stage. For each plant, leaf area as well as leaf, stem (i.e. lamina and sheath biomass for grass species) and reproductive (for *M. sativa*) biomass were measured after drying during 48h at 80°C. The nitrogen concentration in the aboveground plant part (Dumas method, ThermoScientific™ FLASH 2000 CHNS/O Analyzer) was measured. Shoot nitrogen amount was calculated for the vegetative parts of the plants, except for *P. aviculare* where reproductive parts were included.

## 2.2. Data analysis

### 2.2.1. Principle

The objective was to analyse the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition level, in order to determine whether this relationship was (1) linear for a given species as showed for *M. sativa* by Lemaire *et al.* (2005), (2) stable independently of light treatment (as individual plants differ in light access depending on their position in the canopy), (3) different among species, (4) stable across a wide range of environments (evaluate the stability of the relationship with independent data) and (5) more independent on light conditions in comparison with using leaf area (instead of leaf biomass). Indeed, in modelling perspective, if this relationship was proven stable across environments, multiplying the simulated leaf biomass by the slope of the linear relationship could be used to estimate plant nitrogen demand.

The approach consisted of four steps. The preliminary step (step 0) was to identify plants at optimal nitrogen nutrition. The nitrogen nutrition index was calculated to quantify to which extent plant nitrogen nutrition was suboptimal (nitrogen deficiency), optimal or supraoptimal (nitrogen is not used by the plant to increase shoot biomass). It was determined, using the method of the critical nitrogen dilution curve. In step 1, only plants at optimal nitrogen nutrition were used in order to study the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass at optimal plant nitrogen nutrition level (objective (1) in section 2.2.1.). For *T. aestivum* and *P. aviculare*, the significance of light treatment on the ratio between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass was analysed to assess if the relationship was independent of light environment (objective (2)). Then, the species effect on the slope of the relationship was studied (objective (3)). Step 2 consisted in evaluating the stability of the relationship across environments using field data (objective (4)). In step 3, a similar relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf area instead of leaf biomass at optimal plant nitrogen nutrition level was studied (objective (5)).

#### 2.2.2. Step 0. Identification of plants at optimal nitrogen nutrition

The critical nitrogen dilution curve was determined for each species  $\times$  light treatment combination as the critical nitrogen dilution curve depends on the species and on the light environment (Seginer, 2004; Lemaire *et al.*, 2007). We used a method derived from the reference method from Justes *et al.* (1994). This simplified method is illustrated in Figure 1 for *G. molle* in the unshaded treatment. For each sampling date, the nitrogen treatment retained to compute the critical dilution curve (i.e. black points in Figure 1) corresponded to the nitrogen treatment from which increasing solution nitrogen concentration did not result in a significant increase in shoot biomass, while shoot nitrogen concentration may differ (the

nitrogen treatments used for the analysis are given in Table S4 section B [Supplementary Information]). To identify this nitrogen treatment at each sampling date, shoot biomass was compared between the four or five nitrogen treatments using analysis of variance and least significant difference test (aov and LSD.test functions of R (RCoreTeam, 2019)). After a log<sub>n</sub> transformation for both variables, dilution curves were determined by fitting a linear regression (lm function of R) to shoot nitrogen concentration versus shoot biomass using the points corresponding to individual plants at the critical solution nitrogen concentration. The equations of the dilution curves obtained for each species × light treatment combination are given in Table S4 section B [Supplementary Information].

Then, these critical dilution curves were used to calculate the nitrogen nutrition index of each plant, which characterized to which extent plant nitrogen nutrition is suboptimal (nitrogen stress), optimal or supraoptimal (nitrogen excess) (Justes *et al.*, 1994). Nitrogen nutrition index (NNI) corresponded, for each plant, to the ratio between the measured shoot nitrogen concentration ( $pN_m$ ) and the critical shoot nitrogen concentration ( $pN_c$ ) read on the dilution curve at the corresponding shoot biomass:

$$NNI = pN_m / pN_c$$

If the nitrogen nutrition index was lower than 1, the plant was nitrogen deficient; if the ratio was equal to 1, the plant was at optimal nitrogen nutrition level; if the ratio exceeded 1, the plant nitrogen nutrition level was supraoptimal.

### 2.2.3. Step 1. Analysing the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass

Objective 1. In order to analyse the relationship at optimal plant nitrogen nutrition level between the shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass, only plants with a nitrogen nutrition index close to optimum (between 0.9 and 1.1) were selected. Linear regressions between quantity of nitrogen in shoot ( $N_{sh}$  in g) and leaf biomass  $B_L$  (in g) were fitted through the origin, discriminating plants from shaded and unshaded conditions by species (GLM procedure of SAS (version 9.4, SAS Institute, Cary, NC) was used):

$$N_{sh} = B_L + B_L \times \text{Species} + B_L \times \text{Light} + B_L \times \text{Species} \times \text{Light} + \text{error} \quad (1)$$

Plot of residuals against fitted values was used to assess if a linear model was appropriate for the data.

Objective 2. To quantify the effect of species and light treatment independently of the correlation between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass, an analysis of variance of the ratio between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass was performed. Partial  $R^2$  were calculated to quantify the effect of both factors on the variation of the ratio (Anova function of R):

$$N_{sh} / B_L = \text{constant} + \text{Species} + \text{Light} + \text{Species} \times \text{Light} + \text{error} \quad (2)$$

Mean of the ratios in unshaded and shaded treatment were compared with a Student test (t.test function of R).

Objective 3. As the effect of light was revealed to be minor (see 3.2.), model (1) was simplified to compare the slope value between species independently of light environment (lm function of R):

$$N_{sh} = B_L + B_L \times \text{Species} + \text{error} \quad (3)$$

#### 2.2.4. Step 2. Evaluation with field data

Objective 4. To assess if the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition was stable not only across light treatments in our experiments, but also across a wider range of environments, our data were compared with data from literature or prior experiments. For *M. sativa*, data from greenhouse experiments where three light treatments were applied to *Medicago truncatula* (Moreau *et al.*, 2008) were used (Table 2 first line). Our data were also compared to values obtained in high-density lucerne (*M. sativa*) stands where three hierarchical positions (dominant, intermediate or suppressed by neighbouring plants) in the overall plant population were studied (and thus three different light conditions, Table 2 second line) (Lemaire *et al.*, 2005). For *T. aestivum*, data from a field experiment with a homogeneous wheat canopy were used (Moreau *et al.*, 2012) (Table 2 third line). In these data, nitrogen nutrition status was assessed at the canopy level for homogeneous canopies while, for heterogeneous canopies, it should be assessed at the plant level. We thus tested the indicator of the present study in the particular conditions of homogeneous canopies, in which we assumed that all plants were identical. If the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition was proven stable across light treatments at the plant level with our data, this relationship should remain stable for plants grown at optimal nitrogen nutrition in any light environment (including homogeneous canopy in the field, in which all plants were considered at optimal nitrogen nutrition). For *B. napus*, data from a field experiment in a homogeneous canopy and from a simulation study with APSIM-Canola model were used (Table 2 two last lines, see sections C.1 and C.2 [Supplementary Information] for more details). In all situations, individual plants (or the average plant over the canopy for homogeneous canopies) were at optimal nitrogen nutrition level (nitrogen nutrition index between 0.9 and 1.1). To compare data from our

experiments to data from literature or prior experiments, a linear regression of shoot nitrogen amount ( $N_{sh}$ ) versus leaf biomass ( $B_L$ ) was fitted, discriminating data by species and origin using lm function of R:

$$N_{sh} = B_L + B_L \times \text{Species} \times \text{Data Origin} + \text{error} \quad (4)$$

#### 2.2.5. Step 3. Analysing the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf area

Objective 5. Linear models (1) were fitted to our data (only for plants with a nitrogen nutrition index close to optimum) using leaf area (in  $\text{cm}^2$ ) instead of leaf biomass  $B_L$  (GLM procedure of SAS). Plot of residuals against fitted values was used to assess if a linear model was appropriate for the data. To quantify the effect of species and light treatment, an analysis of variance was performed on the ratio between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf area. Partial  $R^2$  were calculated to quantify the effect of both factors on the variation of the ratio (Anova function of R). Means of the ratios were compared between unshaded and shaded treatment for *T. aestivum* and *P. aviculare* (t.test function of R).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. *Is shoot nitrogen amount proportional to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition?*

Linear regressions through the origin were fitted to the shoot nitrogen amount versus leaf biomass for plants at optimal nitrogen nutrition, for each species (for *M. sativa* at vegetative and reproductive stage, *B. napus*, *F. arundinacea* and *G. molle*) or each species  $\times$  light treatment combination (for *T. aestivum* and *P. aviculare*) (Figure 2). For all species or species  $\times$  light treatment except *M. sativa* at reproductive stage and *P. aviculare*, the residual plots



showed randomly distributed points, indicating the linear regressions were appropriate for the data. Thus, the quantity of nitrogen in the shoot was strictly proportional to leaf biomass at optimal plant nitrogen nutrition for the species at vegetative stage grown under unshaded or shaded treatment. For two species at reproductive stage (*P. aviculare* and *M. sativa*), a  $\log_n$  transformation of shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass was necessary to satisfactorily fit the data (Figure 2B and D).

### 3.2. Does light affect the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount versus leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition?

For *T. aestivum* light treatment had a significant effect on the shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass ratio, but not for *P. aviculare* (Figure 3A and B). The value of the ratio increased by 9.2% from unshaded to shaded treatment for *T. aestivum* (Figure 3A). However, light treatment as a single factor explained less than 1% of the variability of the shoot nitrogen amount per unit of leaf biomass (Table 3). Species was the main factor explaining 63.2% of the variation of the ratio. Thus, shoot nitrogen amount per unit of leaf biomass allowed discriminating the species effect on the ratio, with a minor impact of light treatment.

### 3.3. How does the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition vary among species?

Four groups of species could be discriminated (Table 4A and B). The two first groups comprised *T. aestivum*, *M. sativa* at vegetative stage and *F. arundinacea* with high values of shoot nitrogen amount at 1g of leaf biomass (0.06-0.09 g nitrogen.g biomass<sup>-1</sup>). The third group included *B. napus* and *G. molle*, with lower shoot nitrogen amount values at 1g of leaf

biomass (0.04-0.05 g nitrogen.g biomass<sup>-1</sup>). Finally, the fourth group comprised *P. aviculare* and *M. sativa* plants that were at reproductive stage, and for which the values of shoot nitrogen amount at 1g of leaf biomass were the highest (0.10-0.15g). At optimal nitrogen nutrition, plants of the species from the two first groups accumulated more nitrogen for a given leaf biomass than plants of the species from the third group. For the first three groups, the slope between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass was independent of leaf biomass, but not for the fourth group because of the allometric relationship between the two variables. We could not link these groups to clade (monocotyledonous/dicotyledonous species), crop versus weed species or preferential habitat nitrogen requirements (N Ellenberg) but the number of experimented species was small.

#### *3.4. Do other environmental conditions affect the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition?*

Our results could be compared to literature data or prior experiments for three crop species at vegetative stage, linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition in different environments (Figure 4). For *B. napus*, the slope of the regression fitted to our data was not significantly different from the slope estimated in the field or estimated using the APSIM-Canola model at optimal nitrogen nutrition (Figure 4C). Similarly, the slope for *M. sativa* based on our data was not significantly different from the slopes estimated from field data from a dense stand or in greenhouse experiments with different light treatments at optimal nitrogen nutrition (Figure 4B). For *T. aestivum*, the slope in our study was significantly greater than the one obtained from field data at optimal nitrogen nutrition (Figure 4A) though, the difference between the two values was small ( $\pm 7.2\%$ ) considering the various environments in which the data were obtained (greenhouse versus field, homogeneous versus

heterogeneous canopy, different light conditions). Thus, the slope of shoot nitrogen amount versus leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition was globally stable across various environmental conditions for the three studied crop species.

### 3.5. Is leaf biomass a better variable than leaf area to estimate optimal plant shoot nitrogen amount independently of light environment?

Similarly to leaf biomass, linear regressions through the origin were fitted to the shoot nitrogen amount versus leaf area for plants at optimal nitrogen nutrition, for each species or each species  $\times$  light treatment combination (Figure S1 section D [Supplementary Information]). According to the residual plot, the quantity of nitrogen accumulated in the shoot was strictly proportional to leaf area at optimal plant nitrogen nutrition for each species  $\times$  light treatment combination (except for *P. aviculare* and *M. sativa* at reproductive stage). For these two species at reproductive stage, a  $\log_n$  transformation on shoot nitrogen amount and leaf area was necessary (Figure S1B and D section D [Supplementary Information]). For *T. aestivum* and *P. aviculare*, the ratio between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf area significantly decreased from unshaded to shaded treatment (8.6% and 32.3% respectively, Figure 3C and D). Light treatment, in interaction with species, was significant and explained 1.9% of the variation of the shoot quantity of nitrogen per unit of leaf area (Table 5) instead of 0.9% when using leaf biomass (Table 3).

The increase of specific leaf area with shading resulted from a higher decrease of leaf biomass than leaf area for *T. aestivum* and *P. aviculare*. From unshaded to shaded treatment, plants of *T. aestivum* primarily decreased leaf biomass (by 80%, Figure 3I) and, to a lesser extent, leaf area (by 76%, Figure 3G) in order to increase specific leaf area (Figure 3E). Interestingly, the

shoot nitrogen amount per unit of leaf biomass or area was more stable (respectively 9.2% and 8.6% from unshaded to shaded treatment) (Figure 3A and C). The conclusions were similar for *P. aviculare* concerning leaf biomass: shading decreased leaf biomass (by 74%, Figure 3J) while the shoot nitrogen amount per unit of leaf biomass remained stable. However, specific leaf area reacted much more to shading (Figure 3F). In this situation, the shoot nitrogen amount per unit of leaf area was more sensitive to shading (Figure 3D). Leaf biomass was thus the most relevant variable to estimate optimal shoot nitrogen amount independently of light environment for the studied species, as plant response to shading was mainly driven by the leaf compartment size.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Shoot nitrogen amount is proportional to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition

On the studied species, the present study showed an overall linear relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition for plants at vegetative stage. Lemaire *et al.* (2005) explained the proportionality of this relationship by the feedback regulation of nitrogen uptake by plant leaf growth. As the plant leaf biomass increased, the photosynthetic activity of the plant increased, requiring more nitrogen uptake. Larger quantities of carbon were allocated to roots to satisfy the increased nitrogen demand. Also, the expansion of plant leaf biomass increased the accumulation of nitrogen within leaves. This relationship was valid for monocotyledonous and dicotyledonous crop and weed species, covering a range of N- Ellenberg (from moderately oligotrophic to highly nitrophilic, see Table 1). For each species, the relationship was established with plants sampled at different

dates, thus with different morphologies, showing the robustness of this relationship across vegetative development stage.

Two species (*P. aviculare* and *M. sativa*) started flowering during the experiment. Interestingly, for these two species at reproductive stage, the relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition was allometric. As the slope of the log-log regression was less than 1, this means that, with increasing leaf biomass, the ratio of shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass progressively decreased, pointing to a progressive reduction of nitrogen uptake by roots. This phenomenon may arise from modifications in the source-sinks relationships for carbon during the reproductive phase. Indeed, the reproductive compartment may have become a priority sink, at the expense of the root compartment, thereby reducing root (and nodule for *M. sativa*) activity (Rossato *et al.*, 2001).

#### *4.2. The relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass is relatively stable across growth environments*

In our experiments, the effect of light environment on the ratio between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass was significant but minor compared to the species effect. Light treatment explained 0.9% of the variability of the ratio for a shading treatment of 60%. Beyond our experiments, comparison with literature data or data from prior experiments for three species showed that the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass at vegetative stage was remarkably constant across very different environmental conditions at optimal nitrogen nutrition. Indeed, literature data and data from prior experiments differed greatly from our data on many levels related to environmental conditions: soil characteristics (texture, structure, composition), climate (temperature, humidity, incident light), nutrient form

(solution versus soil), cultural techniques, canopy versus individual plant, field versus pots in greenhouse. Despite these major differences of environmental conditions, the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition during vegetative stage remained stable for a given species.

Our results show that, in response to shading, the size of the leaf compartment was strongly affected, while the amount of shoot nitrogen per unit of leaf biomass was little affected even though leaves have higher nitrogen concentration than stems (Greenwood *et al.*, 1990). Consequently, at optimal nitrogen nutrition, when the light conditions or the growth stage varied, the decrease (resp. increase) of the proportion of leaf biomass (rich in nitrogen) was compensated by an increase (resp. decrease) of the proportion of stem biomass (poor in nitrogen). The quantity of shoot nitrogen that would be accumulated per unit of leaf biomass to reach optimal plant nitrogen nutrition for a given species could be an intrinsic property of the plant.

Further studies will be necessary in the future as our greenhouse experiment did not evaluate the effects of very strong shading as those reported from field studies (up to 90% including self-shading) (Munier-Jolain *et al.*, 2014). Thus higher shading treatments should be experimented. However highly shaded plants often die early during their growth cycle or remain dwarfed, and thus little participate in competition with neighbouring plants. Finally, we also need to compare greenhouse data to field data for more than the three species tested here (and for *M. sativa*, few data points were available at vegetative stage in the present study, affecting the precision of the relationship).

470       4.3. *Shoot nitrogen amount per unit of leaf area at optimal nitrogen nutrition is more*  
471               *sensitive to light conditions*

472   Light treatment had a greater effect on the shoot nitrogen amount that is accumulated at  
473   optimal nitrogen nutrition per unit of leaf area than per unit of leaf biomass. When shaded,  
474   plants of *P. aviculare* and *T. aestivum* decreased their metabolic compartments (leaf area and  
475   biomass). The specific leaf area (leaf area per unit of leaf biomass) varied with light  
476   environment at the plant scale: it increased when going from unshaded to shaded conditions in  
477   accordance with Mclachlan *et al.* (1993), Sims and Pearcy (1994), Harley and Bertness  
478   (1996), Gunn *et al.* (1999), Evans and Poorter (2001), Brainard *et al.* (2005). Specific leaf  
479   area reacted more to shading for *P. aviculare* than for *T. aestivum* in accordance with Colbach  
480   *et al.* (In revision). This reaction to shading induced that shoot nitrogen amount per unit of  
481   leaf area varied more with shading conditions than shoot nitrogen amount per unit of leaf  
482   biomass for *P. aviculare*. For the six studied species in the present study as well as other crop  
483   and weed species, specific leaf area is much more sensitive to shading than leaf biomass ratio  
484   (Colbach *et al.*, In revision). Thus, leaf area varies more than leaf biomass in response to  
485   shading. Leaf biomass seems a more relevant variable than leaf area to express nitrogen  
486   demand independently of light environment for a wide range of species. Note that only two  
487   species could be tested for light effect in the present study. So, more species with various  
488   morphological response to shading should be tested in the future to confirm this conclusion.

490       4.4. *The relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass varies among*  
491               *species*

Four species groups were discriminated in terms of shoot nitrogen amount needed per unit of leaf biomass to reach optimal plant nitrogen nutrition. We could not discriminate the groups by clade, weeds versus crops or preferential habitat nitrogen requirements, but we only had one or two species per group. Interestingly, species with a low shoot nitrogen accumulation per unit of leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition were those with a high leaf to shoot biomass ratio (*B. napus* and *G. molle* in Figure 5). At the opposite, species at reproductive stage with the highest shoot nitrogen amount for 1g of leaf biomass were those with the lowest leaf to shoot biomass ratio (*M. sativa* and *P. aviculare* in Figure 5). Finally, plants characterized by a high shoot nitrogen accumulation per unit of leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition had intermediate values of leaf to shoot biomass ratio (*T. aestivum*, *F. arundinacea* and *M. sativa* at vegetative stage). In the future, it will be necessary to study for more species the link between leaf to shoot biomass ratio and shoot nitrogen amount per unit of leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition.

#### 4.5. Implications for crop modelling and management of heterogeneous canopies

Estimating nitrogen demand in heterogeneous canopies is challenging because plants have different access to light depending on their position in the canopy. The linear relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition could thus be widely used in individual-based model to estimate plant nitrogen demand in heterogeneous canopies. For each simulated plant, once leaf biomass is predicted, the slope of the relationship multiplied by this leaf biomass gives the optimal shoot nitrogen amount of the plant, i.e. the shoot nitrogen amount needed to maximize the plant growth. However, this approach requires that leaf biomass is well simulated by the model, otherwise it will induce a bias in the estimation of shoot nitrogen demand that will impact the shoot biomass, increasing



the error as the plant grows. Biomass partitioning between the different plant parts was reported to be a weak point in several models aiming at very precise yield predictions (Rötter *et al.*, 2012; Asseng *et al.*, 2013; Coucheney *et al.*, 2015). Yet, the much rougher partitioning used in some crop-weed models was sufficient to adequately predict multiannual weed dynamics and impacts on crop yield (Colbach *et al.*, 2016). Depending on the aim of the model and the precision required to estimate plant nitrogen demand, our formalism might be sufficient. A sensitivity analysis of nitrogen demand to light conditions would allow to evaluate more precisely the effect of light for individual plants as well as for the canopy.

Beyond the modelling approaches, the relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition could be used to estimate nitrogen nutrition level of any plant or species in a canopy (virtual or not). For a given leaf biomass, the shoot nitrogen amount observed can be compared to the optimal shoot nitrogen amount indicated by the relationship. On the same principle as Justes *et al.* (1994), a nitrogen nutrition index at the plant scale could be calculated as the ratio between the measured shoot nitrogen amount and the optimal shoot nitrogen amount read on the relationship highlighted in this study. This plant nitrogen nutrition index could help understand better heterogeneous canopies regarding how the nitrogen resource is shared among individual plants or among species. With further research, this index could improve nitrogen diagnostic and management in heterogeneous canopies.

## **5. Conclusions**

The linear relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition allowed to estimate nitrogen demand of individual plants of a given species in

heterogeneous canopies at vegetative stage. This relationship became allometric when plants were at reproductive stage. Our study revealed that this relationship was remarkably constant across varying environmental conditions at optimal nitrogen nutrition. Using leaf area instead of leaf biomass in the relationship made it more dependent on light environment, confirming previous findings in homogeneous canopies.

## **Supplementary data**

Supplementary data are available online and consist of the following. Section A. Table S1: Composition of the five nutrient solutions varying for their nitrate concentrations. Table S2: Air temperature and incident photosynthetically active radiation in the experiments. Table S3: Number of days since sowing date of all four sampling dates for each species  $\times$  light treatment. Section B. Table S4: Equations of the critical nitrogen dilution curves for each species  $\times$  light treatment. Section C.1 and C.2. Details about the oilseed rape experiments. Table S5: Phenological parameters used for the virtual oilseed rape experiment. Section D. Figure S1: Relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf area.

## **Declaration of interest**

None.

## **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA), the Environment & Agronomy Department of INRA, the French project CoSAC (ANR- 15-CE18-0007), the Casdar RAID project funded by the French Ministry in charge of Agriculture and Food (Ministère de l'Agriculture et de l'Alimentation, avec la contribution financière du compte d'affectation spéciale 'Développement agricole et rural') and the European Union's

Horizon 2020 Research and innovation programme under grant agreement N. 727217 (ReMIX project). Laurène Perthame benefited from a PhD studentship funded by the French Ministry of Research. The authors are grateful to Gaëtan Louarn for helpful discussions about experimental design and for providing some seed lots, as well as Danilo dos Reis Cardoso Passos, Estelle Genottin, Laura Ponticelli and the greenhouse staff for their technical assistance. The authors also thank Xavier Pinochet, Guillaume Jolly and Jérôme Pacquetet from Terres Inovia for their involvement in the setting up of the field experiments in Bretenières and for helping in sampling rapeseed plants.

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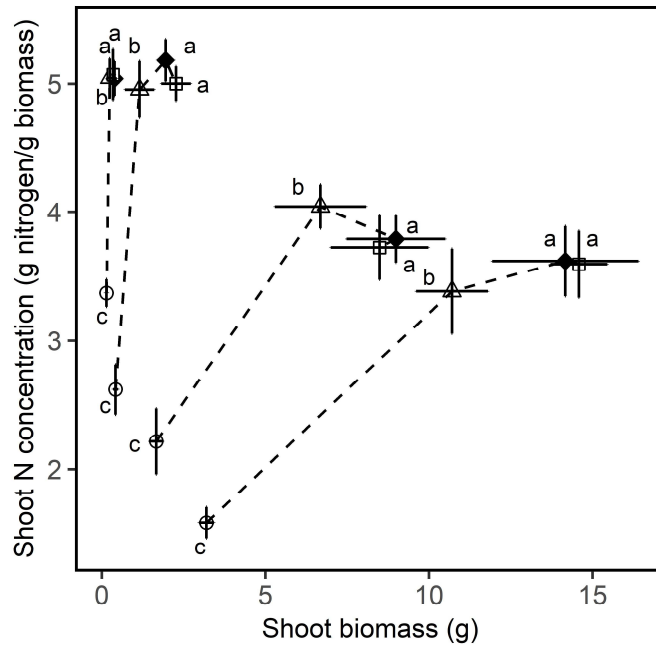


Figure 1: Method to identify the critical solution nitrogen concentration at each sampling date for *Geranium molle* in unshaded treatment. Symbol shapes indicate nitrogen treatment (○ 0.4mM, △ 1mM, ◇ 5mM and □ 10mM). Each point is the mean value of four to six plants corresponding to a nitrogen treatment × sampling date combination, error bars are standard-deviation. Nitrogen treatments of a given sampling date are linked by a dashed line. At each sampling date, the critical solution nitrogen concentration (allowing to reach the minimum plant nitrogen concentration required to maximize shoot biomass) is filled in black. The shoot biomass of points sharing the same letter are not significantly different.

Single column fitting image.

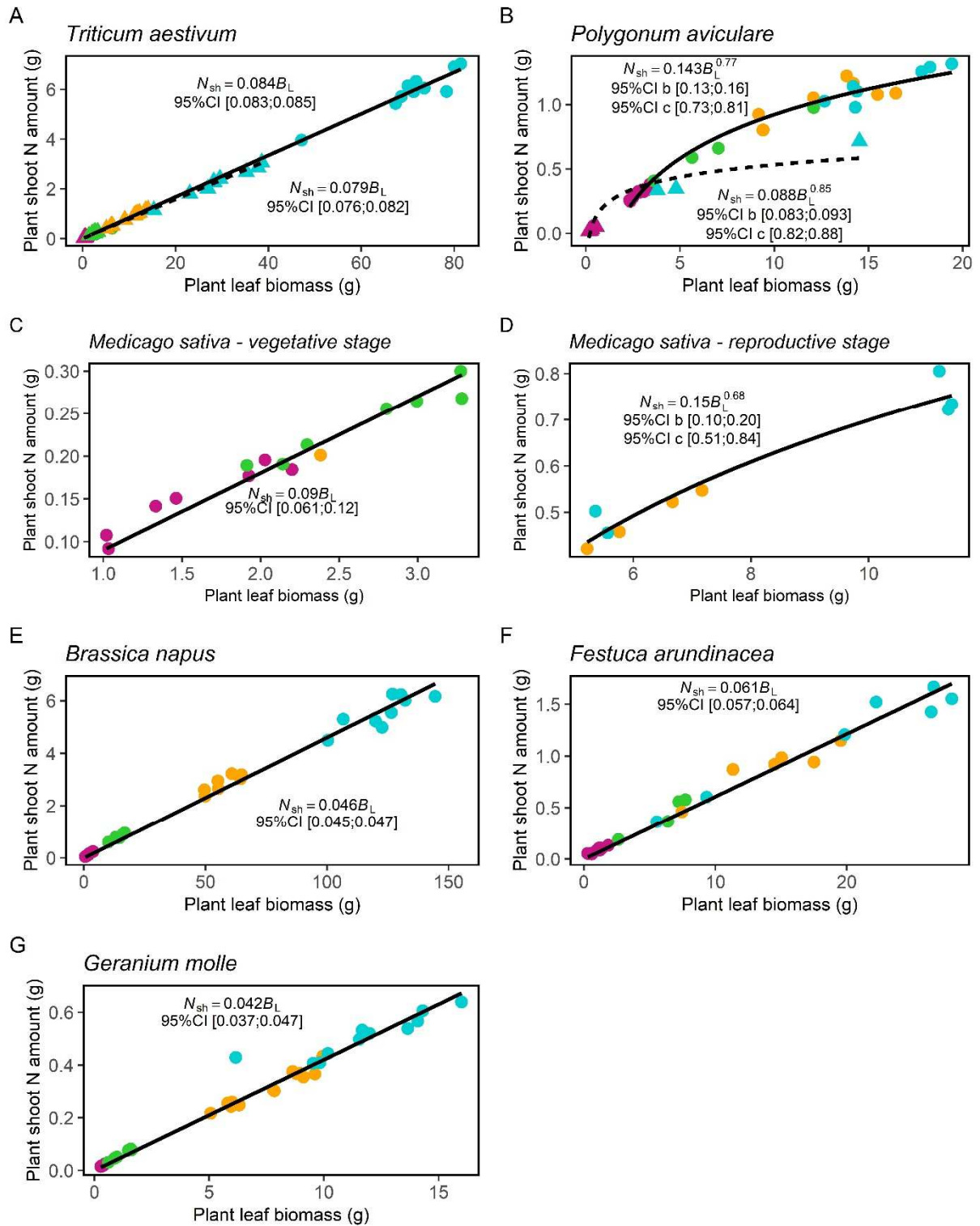




Figure 2: Relationship between shoot nitrogen amount ( $N_{sh}$ ) and leaf biomass ( $B_L$ ) at optimal nitrogen nutrition for different species grown in unshaded (●) and shaded treatment (▲). Each point represents a plant. Colours indicate plants sampled at different dates: first sampling (red), second sampling (green), third sampling (orange) and fourth sampling (blue). (A) (C) (E) (F) (G) Species at vegetative stage. Equations and black lines result from fitting linear model (1) to our data (with the 95% confidence interval of the slopes) ( $R^2=0.994$ ). (B) (C) Species at reproductive stage. Equations and black lines result from fitting  $N_{sh}=b \times B_L^c$  to our data after a log-n transformation (with the 95% confidence intervals) ( $R^2=0.996$ ).

2-column fitting image.

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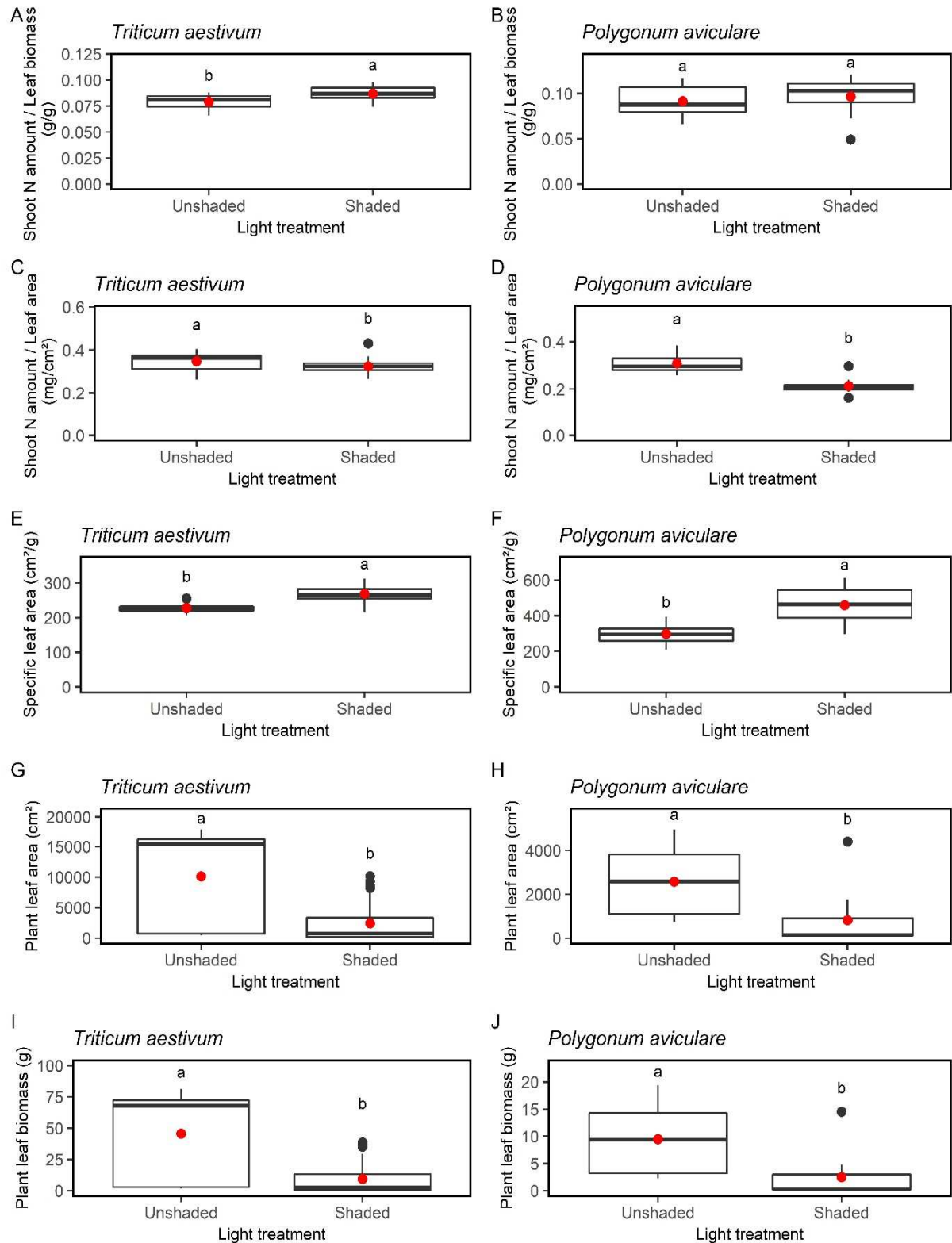
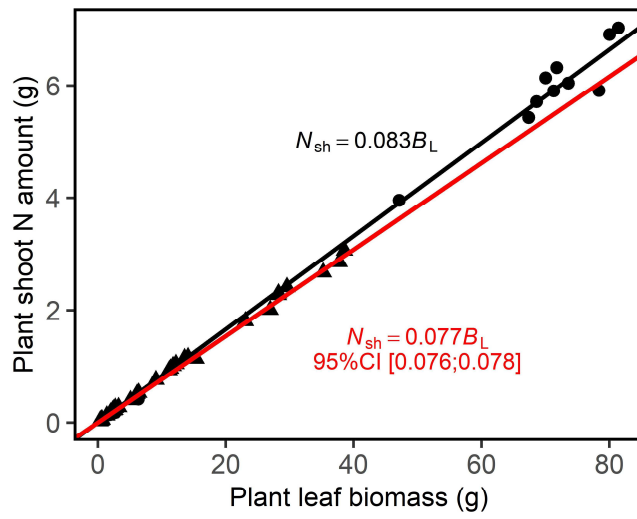


Figure 3: (A) (B) Shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass ratio, (C) (D) shoot nitrogen amount to leaf area ratio, (E) (F) specific leaf area, (G) (H) leaf area and (I) (J) leaf biomass for plants at optimal nitrogen nutrition for two species grown in unshaded and shaded treatment. Boxplots showing minimum, third quartile, median, first quartile and maximum ratio values (with outliers outside four times the interquartile range). Red points show means. Same letters indicate that means are not significantly different.

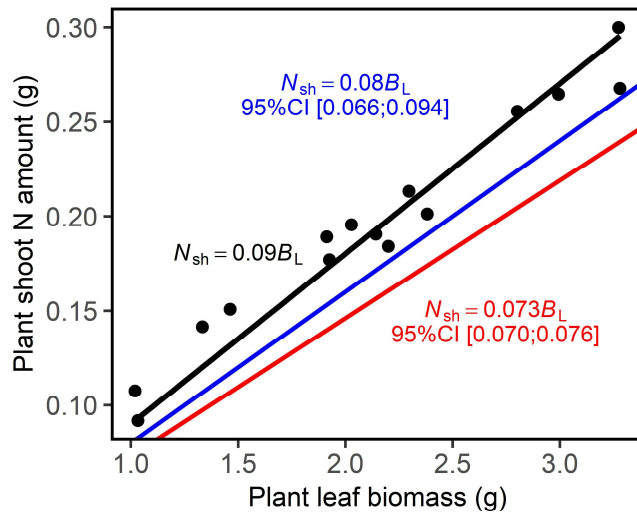
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A

*Triticum aestivum*

B

*Medicago sativa*

C

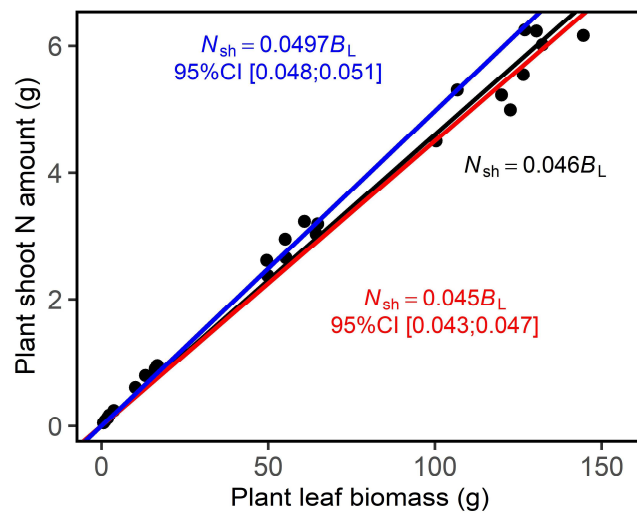
*Brassica napus*

Figure 4: Relationship between shoot nitrogen amount ( $N_{sh}$ ) and leaf biomass ( $B_L$ ) at optimal nitrogen nutrition for three crop species at vegetative stage grown in unshaded (●) and shaded treatment (▲) in our experiments. Equations and lines result from fitting linear model (4) for our experimental data (in black) and for field or simulated data obtained from the literature or prior experiments (in red or blue): (A) field data obtained in a homogeneous wheat canopy at vegetative stage (Moreau *et al.*, 2012), (B) field data obtained in a dense *Medicago sativa* stand at vegetative stage (in blue) (Lemaire *et al.*, 2005) and data of *Medicago truncatula* at vegetative stage obtained in greenhouse experiments under three light treatments (in red) (Moreau *et al.*, 2008), (C) field data obtained in a homogeneous oilseed rape field at vegetative stage (in red) and simulated data obtained with APSIM-Canola at vegetative stage (in blue) (Sections C.1 and C.2 [Supplementary Information]).

Single column fitting image.

Can be printed in grey-shades and produced in colour in the pdf-version of the paper.

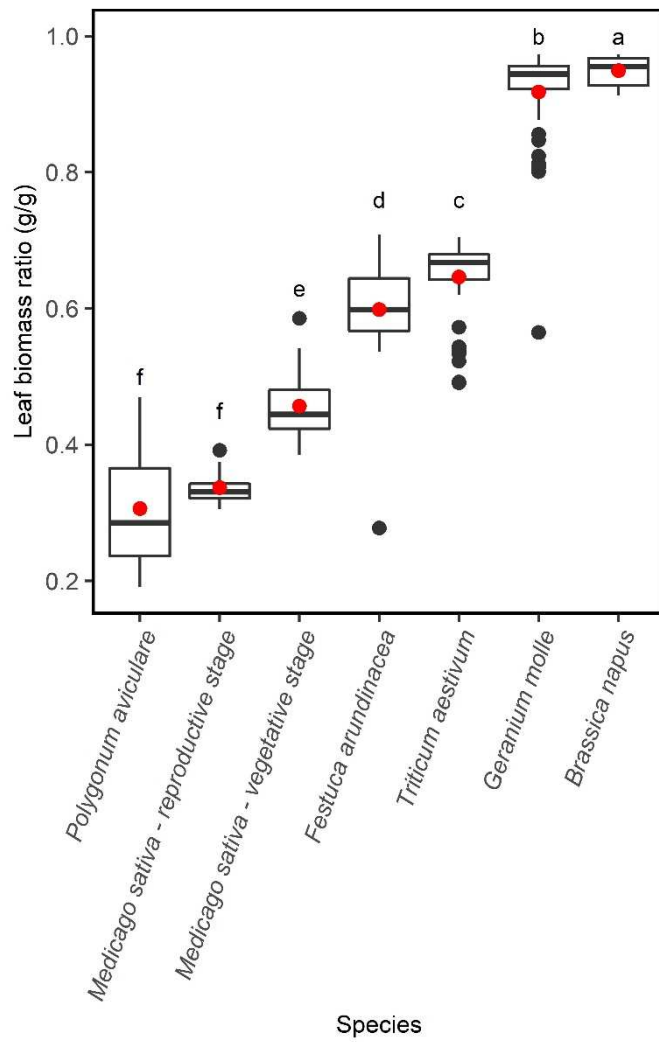


Figure 5: Leaf to shoot biomass ratio per species. Boxplots showing minimum, third quartile, median, first quartile and maximum leaf biomass ratio values (with outliers outside four times the interquartile range). Red points show mean leaf biomass ratio. Same letters indicate no significantly different means.

Single column fitting image.

Can be printed in grey-shades and produced in colour in the pdf-version of the paper.

Table 1: Details of the experiments performed in greenhouse in Dijon (France). Plants were grown under four or five nitrogen (N) treatments. *Triticum aestivum* and *Polygonum aviculare* were grown under two light treatments (unshaded or shaded).

Year	Species (cultivar for crops)	Monocotyledonous or dicotyledonous species	Ellenberg N- number <sup>a</sup>	Nitrogen treatments (mM)		Percentage of incident light available to plants	
				Unshaded treatment	Shaded treatment	Unshaded treatment	Shaded treatment
2015	<i>Festuca arundinacea</i> (Soni)	Monocotyledon	5	0.4, 1, 5 and 10		100%	
	<i>Medicago sativa</i> (Agathe NF <sup>b</sup> )	Dicotyledon	NA				
2016	<i>Brassica napus</i> (Kadore)	Dicotyledon	12.4	1, 5, 10 and 14		100%	
	<i>Geranium molle</i>	Dicotyledon	4				
2018	<i>Triticum aestivum</i> (Caphorn)	Monocotyledon	4.4	1, 5, 10 and 14	0.4, 1, 5, 10 and 14	100%	40%
	<i>Polygonum aviculare</i>	Dicotyledon	6				

<sup>a</sup> Ellenberg N-number estimated from Ellenberg (1974) for all species except *B. napus* and *T. aestivum* (Moreau *et al.*, 2013).

<sup>b</sup> Non-N<sub>2</sub>-fixing

Table 2: Description of the experiments from literature or prior experiments used to study the stability to environmental conditions of the relationship between shoot nitrogen amount and leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition.

Source	Crop species	Type of experiment	Measurement scale	Light environment
Moreau <i>et al.</i> (2008)	<i>Medicago truncatula</i>	Greenhouse	Individual plant	Three light treatments (no-shade, low-shade and high-shade)
Lemaire <i>et al.</i> (2005)	<i>Medicago sativa</i>	Field	Individual plant	Dense canopy with three hierarchical positions (dominant, intermediate and suppressed)
Moreau <i>et al.</i> (2012)	<i>Triticum aestivum</i>	Field	Average plant over the canopy	Homogeneous canopy
Section C.1 [Supplementary Information]	<i>Brassica napus</i>	Field	Average plant over the canopy	Homogeneous canopy
Section C.2 [Supplementary Information]	<i>Brassica napus</i>	Simulations (APSIM-Canola model)	Average plant over the canopy	Homogeneous canopy



Table 3: Analysis of variance of shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass ratio as a function of species, light treatment and their interaction (model (2)). Partial  $R^2$  (calculated from the type III sum of square of Anova function in R) indicate the proportion of variance of ratio explained by each factor. NS indicate non-significant factor.

Factors	Shoot N amount to leaf biomass ratio	
	Partial $R^2$	p-value
Species	0.632	<0.0001
Light	0.009	0.0451
Species $\times$ Light	0.000	NS
Total	0.641	<0.0001

Table 4: (A) Slope of the linear relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount to leaf biomass at optimal nitrogen nutrition for six species fitted with model (3) (i.e. the effect of light treatment is neglected) ( $R^2=0.996$ ). Two slope values followed by the same letter (a, b or c) are not significantly different.

Species	Slope value (g nitrogen/g biomass) and 95%CI		
<i>Triticum aestivum</i>	0.083	[0.082;0.084]	a
<i>Medicago sativa</i> – vegetative stage	0.090	[0.061;0.12]	ab
<i>Festuca arundinacea</i>	0.061	[0.057;0.064]	b
<i>Brassica napus</i>	0.046	[0.045;0.047]	c
<i>Geranium molle</i>	0.042	[0.037;0.047]	c

(B) Parameters of the allometric relationship linking shoot nitrogen amount ( $N_{sh}$ ) to leaf biomass ( $B_L$ ) at optimal nitrogen nutrition for two species at reproductive stage fitted with the model  $N_{sh}=b \times B_L^c$  neglecting light effect ( $R^2=0.988$ ). Two parameter values followed by the same letter are not significantly different.

Species	Shape parameter (c) and 95%CI			Shoot nitrogen amount at 1g of leaf biomass (b) and 95%CI		
<i>Polygonum aviculare</i>	0.90	[0.87;0.93]	a	0.10	[0.097;0.11]	a
<i>Medicago sativa</i> – reproductive stage	0.68	[0.51;0.84]	b	0.15	[0.10;0.20]	a

Table 5: Analysis of variance of shoot nitrogen amount to leaf area ratio as a function of species, light treatment and their interaction (model (2) using leaf area instead of leaf biomass). Partial  $R^2$  (calculated from the type III sum of Anova function in R) indicate the proportion of variance of the ratio explained by each factor. NS indicate non-significant factor.

Factors	Shoot N amount to leaf area ratio	
	Partial $R^2$	p-value
Species	0.647	<0.0001
Light	0.004	NS
Species $\times$ Light	0.015	0.0036
Total	0.666	<0.0001