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Leafy season length is reduced by a prolonged soil water deficit but not by repeated defoliation in beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica* L.): comparison of response among regional populations grown in a common garden

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1 Research Paper _ revised version

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5 **Leafy season length is reduced by a prolonged soil water deficit but not by**
6 **repeated defoliation in beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica* L.): comparison of**
7 **response among regional populations grown in a common garden.**

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29 **Highlights**

- 30 • Three years of soil water deficit delayed bud-burst and advanced leaf-yellowing.
- 31 • Three years of annual experimental defoliations had no impact on leaf phenology.
- 32 • Leafy season length varied among populations along a small latitudinal gradient.
- 33 • Populations presented different leaf phenology response to soil water deficit.

34

35 **Abstract**

36 Bud-burst and leaf-senescence determine the length of the growing season for deciduous trees
37 and therefore the duration of potential carbon assimilation with consequences on biomass
38 production. In *Fagus sylvatica* L., leaf phenology depends on both photoperiod and
39 temperature. The future climate is expected to induce more frequent soil water deficits and
40 biotic attacks (possibly resulting in severe defoliation). The aim of the study is to assess
41 whether these constrains may alter leaf phenology. In a common garden, we sowed seeds
42 collected from six beech forests along a small latitudinal gradient (140 km) in North-Eastern
43 France. In 2014, after seven years growth, a rain exclusion was installed above the trees to
44 test how recurrent soil water deficits impacted bud-burst (BB) and leaf-yellowing (LY) over
45 three years. We also analyzed the response of leaf phenology to annual defoliation, aiming at
46 affecting carbon and nitrogen availability in trees. Delayed BB and early LY were observed,
47 reducing the growing season (GS) until 14 days in response to soil water deficit whereas no
48 influence of defoliation was detected. These time lags were not in relation with leaf nitrogen
49 content. In the control treatment, BB occurred earlier and LY later in the northernmost
50 populations than in the southernmost without clear relationships with local climate. A
51 significant treatment x population interaction was observed revealing a plasticity in the leaf

52 phenology response to soil water deficit among populations. These results suggest that beech
53 trees present a genetic differentiation of leaf phenology even within a small latitudinal
54 gradient but that these differentiations could be disrupted by soil water deficit that is predicted
55 to increase in the future.

56 Keywords: *Fagus sylvatica* L., bud-burst, leaf-senescence, leaf phenology, drought,
57 intraspecific variability.

58

59 **1. Introduction**

60 Phenology describes the timing of recurrent biological events in response to
61 seasonal variations in climate. Phenology is one of the plant traits where responses to climate
62 change are the most visible (Menzel *et al.*, 2006). Since 1950, shifts in phenology have been
63 observed and used as evidence of global warming (Menzel and Fabian, 1999; Menzel, 2000;
64 Sparks *et al.*, 2000; Peñuelas *et al.*, 2002, Menzel *et al.*, 2020). For instance, in vineyards,
65 historical recordings of harvest dates helped to detect changing temperatures over several
66 centuries (Chuine *et al.*, 2004).

67 Leaf phenology events such as bud-burst (BB) and leaf senescence are particularly
68 important in deciduous forest trees because they determine the length of the leafy season and
69 consequently the duration of new carbon production by assimilation that is essential for
70 biomass production (Richardson *et al.*, 2010). The leaf phenology of perennial plants is
71 expected to optimize their carbon gain (Manzoni *et al.*, 2015; Vico *et al.*, 2015) and water
72 uptake (Zapater *et al.*, 2013). Leaf senescence implies nutrient resorption from leaves to
73 perennial organs. It usually happens before autumn frosts and nutrient resorption efficiency
74 affects leaf production during the following year (Estiarte and Peñuelas, 2015).

75 In the two last decades, numerous experimental and modelling approaches have
76 been developed to understand the drivers of leaf phenology and its variations with climate
77 (Cooke *et al.*, 2012). Leaf phenology is strongly controlled by local temperature (Hunter and
78 Lechowicz, 1992; Peaucelle *et al.*, 2019). To summarize, in temperate tree species, BB results
79 from the succession of two phases: i) breaking endodormancy by the fulfilment of chilling
80 temperature requirements and ii) the accumulation of warm temperatures (forcing
81 temperature) during the ecodormancy phase (Lang *et al.*, 1987). The temperature
82 requirements during the two phases are species-specific (Kramer, 1995; Chuine and Cour,
83 1999; Morin *et al.*, 2009; Vitasse *et al.*, 2009a; Basler and Körner, 2014; Schuster *et al.*,

84 2014; Zohner and Renner, 2014; Dantec *et al.*, 2014; Laube *et al.*, 2014; Fu *et al.*, 2015).
85 Moreover, in some tree species like beech, photoperiod may also interact with temperature to
86 determine bud-burst date, though the mechanisms of this interaction remain unclear (Heide,
87 1993; Partanen *et al.*, 1999; Körner and Basler, 2010; Vitasse and Basler, 2013; Basler and
88 Körner, 2014; Laube *et al.*, 2014; Hamilton *et al.*, 2016; Fu *et al.*, 2019b). Day-length may
89 interact negatively with heat requirements during ecodormancy to avoid that BB occurred too
90 late (if abnormally cold spring) or too early (if warm spring) (Fu *et al.*, 2019b).

91 The role of climate as a driver of leaf senescence (i.e. yellowing and shedding) is less well
92 understood than that of spring phenology (Richardson *et al.*, 2013). Long-term investigations
93 on the links between leaf-senescence and air temperature have sometimes revealed a delay in
94 leaf senescence in response to global warming, sometimes an advance, and sometimes no
95 effect at all (Peñuelas *et al.*, 2002; Menzel *et al.*, 2006; Morin *et al.*, 2009). A recent meta-
96 analysis showed that leaf senescence seemed to be particularly dependent on October
97 temperatures, a warmer autumn leading to delayed senescence (Gill *et al.*, 2015). Several
98 models have been designed to predict leaf-yellowing or leaf-shedding while considering both
99 temperature and photoperiod (Delpierre *et al.*, 2009), or only temperature (Richardson *et al.*,
100 2006; Keenan and Richardson, 2015) but more complex interactions among factors, including
101 soil water availability should be integrated for accurate predictions (Xie *et al.*, 2018; Liu *et al.*,
102 2019). Furthermore, leaf senescence may also affect spring bud-burst timing the following
103 year (Nielsen and Jorgensen, 2003; Heide, 2003), and BB timing could impact the leaf
104 senescence timing of the current year (Fu *et al.*, 2014; Keenan and Richardson, 2015).

105 Extreme drought events occurred more frequently in Europe in the last decades
106 (e.g.1976, 2003, 2018, and 2019) and their frequency and severity are projected to increase
107 under future climate scenarios (IPCC 2014). Experiments that directly evaluate the effects of
108 soil water deficit on leaf phenology are scarce and present contrasted results. Leaf unfolding

109 responses to rainfall seem to be positive, i.e. a later unfolding date with higher water
110 availability (Peñuelas *et al.* 2004; Adams *et al.* 2015). Ogaya and Penuelas (2004) showed
111 that a 15% reduction in soil water availability induced by a rainfall exclusion system, delayed
112 all the phenophases in *Arbutus Toledo* but not in *Quercus ilex* or in *Phillyrea latifolia*.
113 Another more drastic rainfall exclusion experiment reducing rainfall by 50% in autumn
114 showed no impact on leaf development the following spring for *Quercus ilex* whereas a 58%
115 reduction in rainfall during spring led to severe aborting of buds (Misson *et al.*, 2011). How
116 soil water deficits interact with warm temperature in leaf senescence is complex; the two
117 parameters have yet to be disentangled (Estiarte and Peñuelas, 2015; Liu *et al.*, 2019).
118 Escudero and Del Arco (1987) showed that soil water deficit induced earlier leaf fall, but
119 Pallardy and Loewenstein (2004) observed that this response was species dependent. Estrella
120 and Menzel (2006) also observed advanced leaf senescence during autumn drought, though
121 leaf yellowing date may be dependent on climatic drivers occurring not only during autumn
122 but also throughout the leafy season (Liu *et al.*, 2019).

123 During the growing season, a prolonged soil water deficit limits water and carbon uptake by
124 trees (Cowan, 1982; Farquhar and Sharkey, 1982) and slows down nutrients uptake and
125 phloem transports (Sevanto, 2014; Dannoura *et al.*, 2019). The question remains, however,
126 whether these modifications affect leaf phenology. Indeed, in spring, for the establishment of
127 new organs, deciduous trees use carbon reserves (Barbaroux and Bréda 2002; Hoch *et al.*,
128 2003; Gilson *et al.*, 2014) and nutrient reserves (El Zein *et al.*, 2011a; Bazot *et al.*, 2016) and
129 need water to remobilize these reserves towards the sink organs (i.e, buds and leaves). During
130 leaf senescence, nutrients are resorbed from the leaves towards perennial organs, and this also
131 implies important fluxes (Estiarte and Penuelas, 2015) which may be disrupted by severe soil
132 water deficits.

133 Finally, phenology is also controlled by complex interactions between genetic and
134 environmental factors. Indeed, studies on beech species have shown differences in leaf
135 phenology among populations from a large climatic gradient within the distribution area of
136 species (Von Wuelish *et al.*, 1995; Zohner and Renner, 2014; Harter *et al.*, 2015; Schueler
137 and Liesebach, 2015; Kramer *et al.*, 2017) or along altitudinal clines (Vitasse *et al.*, 2009a;
138 Vitasse *et al.*, 2009b). These results suggest that leaf phenology in beech trees is adapted to
139 large variations in climatic conditions, and this capacity could help populations to cope with
140 climate change. However, the phenotypic plasticity and adaptive capacity of populations at a
141 regional scale within a small climatic range have rarely been investigated. Moreover, it is
142 important to study to what extent this adaptation could be challenged by recurrent extreme
143 events, like droughts.

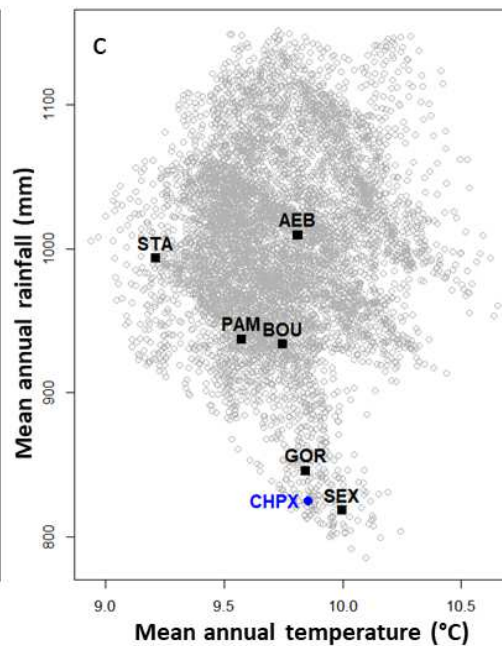
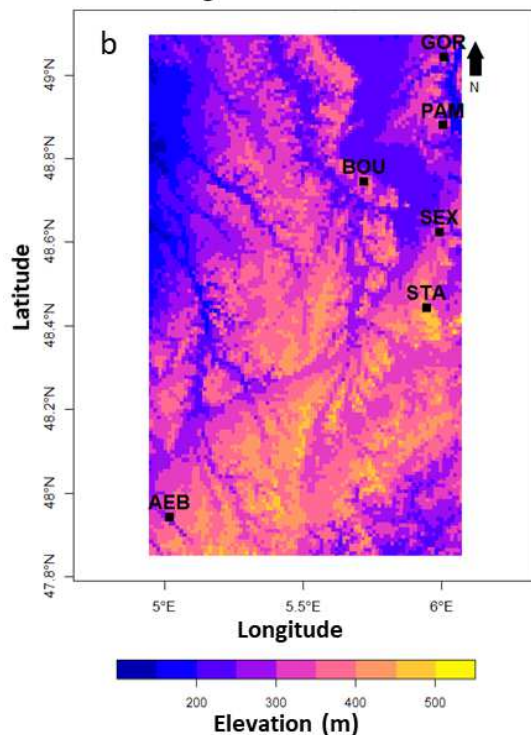
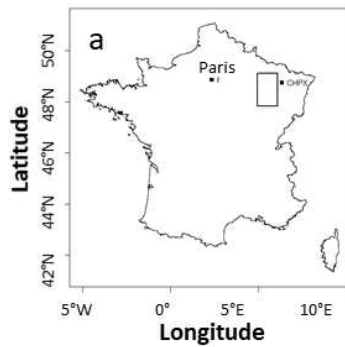
144 In the present study, we used a common garden experiment to investigate the
145 variability of leaf phenology among regional beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.) populations along a
146 small latitudinal gradient of 140 km in lowlands located in the central area of the European
147 beech distribution range (North-eastern France). We also compared the response of these
148 populations to repeated soil water deficit or defoliation events. Our main aim was to assess
149 whether or not leaf phenology would be modified by disturbances i) in tree water status
150 and/or ii) in tree carbon and nitrogen status. For three years, these statuses were
151 experimentally modified by provoking recurrent prolonged soil water deficits in a rain
152 exclusion system or annually repeated defoliation. In response to these constraints, carbon
153 assimilation was reduced either by stomatal closure under soil water deficit or by reducing
154 leaf area under defoliation. We examined the impact of these constraints on the mean tree BB
155 and LY, on the length of growing season (GS) and on leaf unfolding and leaf yellowing
156 dynamics. We analyzed these traits in the offspring of six regional beech populations. We
157 addressed three questions: (1) Do three years of soil water deficit and defoliation modify

158 budburst and leaf-yellowing days and dynamics in beech trees? (2) How does leaf phenology
159 vary among regional populations? (3) Do prolonged soil water deficits and repeated
160 defoliation modify leaf phenology similarly in all regional populations?

161 **2. Materials and methods**

162 *2.1. Study site, plant material and treatments*

163 In October 2006, beechnuts from *Fagus sylvatica* L. trees were collected on the ground in six
164 forests in Lorraine (North-eastern France) along a latitudinal gradient of 140 km (Fig. 1). For
165 each forest, seed collection was conducted in plots of at least 0.5 ha, which included at least
166 20 mother trees with at least 120 seeds on the ground (E Silva, 2010). All the beechnuts
167 collected in a forest were combined in order to constitute a population. After being rehydrated
168 to a water content of 30-34% and having received an antifungal treatment, the beechnuts were
169 stored in a cold chamber at 3°C in the dark for three months to break their dormancy. In 2007,
170 the seeds were sown in a nursery and 144 randomly selected seedlings per forest were
171 transplanted by groups of 24 into the soil in six different blocks in a common garden (INRAE
172 Grand Est Nancy, Champenoux, France, 48°75'2''N/6°34'15''E, elevation: 257 m,
173 Supplemental Information Table S1).



206

207 **Figure 1.** Localization of the study zone represented by the rectangle on the map of France
 208 (a), map of the elevation distribution in the study zone represented by the longitude and
 209 latitude positions (the elevation range is represented by the color scale presented below the
 210 map) (b), variation of the mean annual rainfall and the mean annual temperature in the study
 211 zone (grey points) (c). In (c), only the points in the range of elevations $\pm 5\%$ where seeds were
 212 collected (i.e., between 297m and 432m) are shown. The mean climatic characteristics were
 213 calculated at 1km resolution over the period 1981 - 2010 with the Aurehly model (Météo
 214 France, Bénichou and Le Breton, 1987; Canellas *et al.*, 2014). , The six sites where the seeds
 215 to be sown in the common garden were collected, are presented by black squares using the
 216 following names: Gorze (GOR), Pont-à-Mousson (PAM), Boucq (BOU), Sexey-aux-Forges
 217 (SEX), Saint-Amond (STA) and Arc-en-Barrois (AEB) from North to South. In c, the
 218 common garden (CHPX) is presented with a blue point. The climatic data of the six forest and
 219 the common garden are presented in the Supplemental Information Table S1.
 220

221 In 2014, a transparent roof built of polycarbonate sheets was installed 5m above all the trees
 222 to intercept rainfall. Four treatments were imposed on the seven-year-old trees (average height

223 1.5 m, average diameter 25 mm, see Fig. S3 for information per population) for three years
224 (2014-2016): i) an irrigated control treatment (n=48 trees per population split into two blocks
225 of 24 individuals each); ii) an irrigated defoliation treatment (n= 48 trees per population split
226 into two blocks of 24 individuals each) where defoliation was done once per year as follows:
227 the first two years (2014 and 2015), 75% of the foliage was manually removed from each tree
228 in June after primary growth was finished (3 short shoots, 3 long shoots and the terminal
229 shoot elongation plus leaves area monitored on 20 trees in each treatment every year), and the
230 third year (2016), 90% of the foliage was removed in May; thanks to the irrigation in both
231 control and defoliation treatments, predawn twig water potential remained above -0.25 MPa
232 during the whole experiment (Chuste et al., 2019); iii) a moderate soil water deficit treatment
233 without defoliation (MWD, n=24 trees per population in one block). The trees in this
234 treatment were near the edge of the roof and were lightly irrigated by lateral rain entry; their
235 predawn twig water potential reached until -1.2 MPa (Chuste et al., 2019); and iv) a severe
236 soil water deficit treatment without defoliation (SWD, n= 24 trees per population in one
237 block) inducing predawn twig water potential down to -2.0 MPa (Chuste et al., 2019). Tree
238 root systems in the MWD and SWD treatments were isolated with a rigid waterproof plastic
239 sheet (DELTA®-MS) buried around the two blocks of the two treatments to a depth of 1.80
240 m. The control and defoliation treatments were done with an automatic drip watering system,
241 which delivered between two and four liters of water per tree two to three times a week.
242 Irrigation was adjusted to avoid any water shortage in these two treatments, i.e. to maintain
243 Relative Extractable soil Water (REW) above 40%, the threshold below which stomatal
244 closure reduces transpiration (Granier *et al.*, 1999). In the MWD and SWD treatments, rain
245 was excluded all year round, including winter, and the trees were slightly irrigated only once
246 (about 40 mm) in November.

247

248

249 *2.2. Meteorological data and soil water content*

250 Air temperature and relative humidity were automatically recorded at 30s intervals with a
251 probe (HMP35A; Vaisala Oy, Helsinki, Finland), 2.50 m above the ground under the rain
252 exclusion roof in the middle of the common garden. The measurements were averaged and
253 stored every 30 min in a datalogger (CR5000, Campbell scientific, Shepshed, UK).

254 Soil water content was monitored with a neutron probe (TROXLER TX 4301, Research
255 Triangle Park, North Carolina, USA) to a maximum depth of 1.60 m. Neutron probe access
256 tubes (aluminum) were installed in the soil to quantify water content at different depths. The
257 tubes were distributed equally among the control, defoliation and two soil water deficit
258 treatments: for each treatment, there were two tubes ranging from 0 to 100 cm in depth and
259 one ranging from 0 to 160 cm. During the growing season of each year, measurements were
260 carried out every two weeks. Counts were logged every 10 cm for the upper 100 cm, and
261 every 20 cm below that. Relative Extractable Water (REW, in %) was calculated according to
262 Bréda *et al.* (1995).

263 We used the Aurélhy meteorological model (1km resolution, Météo France, Bénichou and Le
264 Breton, 1987; Canellas *et al.*, 2014) and a Digital Elevation Model with a resolution of 25 m
265 (BD Alti ® 25m, IGN) according to geographical coordinates to obtain the meteorological
266 conditions and altitude for the zone of origin of each population (Fig.1) and for the common
267 garden site. For each of the seven sites (six forests and the common garden), we calculated
268 mean annual temperature, mean number of freezing days and mean annual rainfall over the
269 period 1981-2010 (Supplemental Information Table S1).

270 *2.3. Phenological observations*

271 We monitored bud development on each tree during spring (between April 1st and May 30th)
272 for three consecutive years (2014-2016). Observations were made every three or four days
273 and bud development of each tree was noted from 0 to 39 according to the BBCH code
274 (Biologische Bundesanstalt Bundessortenamt und Chemische Industrie) (Supplemental
275 Information Fig. S1). For each tree, bud-burst (BB) day was set when the majority of buds on
276 the tree had reached stage 7 (Supplemental Information Fig. S1), as proposed by Chuine and
277 Cour (1999).

278 Leaf-yellowing (LY) was monitored every one to two weeks depending on the color change
279 dynamics in autumn (September 1st - December 15th) during the same three years. Leaf color
280 changes were assessed according to a specific code that we defined for our young beech trees
281 (Supplemental Information Fig. S1). For each tree, LY day was set when at least 50% of a
282 tree's leaves had no green color left (stage 6, Supplemental Information Fig. S1). As many of
283 these young beech trees were marcescent (i.e. trees keep their leaves during winter until the
284 arrival of the new leaves at the following spring), we did not follow leaf fall.

285 The BB and LY of the trees in the control treatment were monitored during a fourth year
286 (2017).

287 2.4. Leaf nitrogen content

288 Five leaves per tree were collected at 4 dates: July 2015, October 2015, June 2016 and
289 October 2016. According to the dates and treatments, between 3 and 6 trees were sampled. At
290 each date, the leaves of the same tree were pooled, frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at -80
291 °C. The samples were then freeze dried [Dura-Top ®, Dura-Dry ®, FTS Systems ®, Stone
292 Ridge, NY, USA], weighed and ground into a fine powder in a ball mill (CEPI SODEMI
293 CB2200, Cergy, France). Leaf N concentration (% of dry matter) was measured with an
294 elemental analyser (NA 1500 NCS, Carlo Erba, Milan, Italy). Analyses were carried out at the

295 SilvaTec platform (UMR Silva, INRAE Grand Est-Nancy, France). The average and standard
296 deviation were calculated per treatment and date.

297

298

299 *2.5. Data analysis*

300 We first transformed the BBCH code into a continuous variable (resulting in a new code from
301 0 to 17, Supplemental Information Fig. S1) before proceeding with the data analysis described
302 hereafter. BB day was defined for each tree as the date when the tree was noted stage 3 (new
303 code Supplemental Information Fig. S1). Given the rapid development of beech buds and the
304 three-to-four-day time lapse between two observations, the precise stage 3 date (new code)
305 was not always observed for each tree in the field. For those trees, BB day was calculated by
306 linear interpolation between the dates when stages 2 and 4 were observed. Leaf-yellowing day
307 of each tree was defined at stage 6. When the precise stage 6 date was not observed in the
308 field, the LY day was calculated by linear interpolation between the dates when stages 5 and 7
309 were observed. Growing season duration (GS) was calculated for each tree as the number of
310 days between BB and LY days. The average and standard deviation were calculated for BB,
311 LF and GS for each combination of population and treatment.

312 BB and LY days and GS length were compared among treatments and among populations
313 within each treatment with a linear model fitted in the R software (R version 3.3.2, 2016-10-
314 31, <http://www.r-project.org>). For the ANOVA analysis, done with the “car” package, the
315 fixed effects were treatment, population and their interactions. BB and LY days and GS
316 length were also ranked among populations within each treatment thanks to a Spearman
317 correlation analysis between the phenological variables and latitude. Results were considered
318 significant when the test p-values were below 0.05.

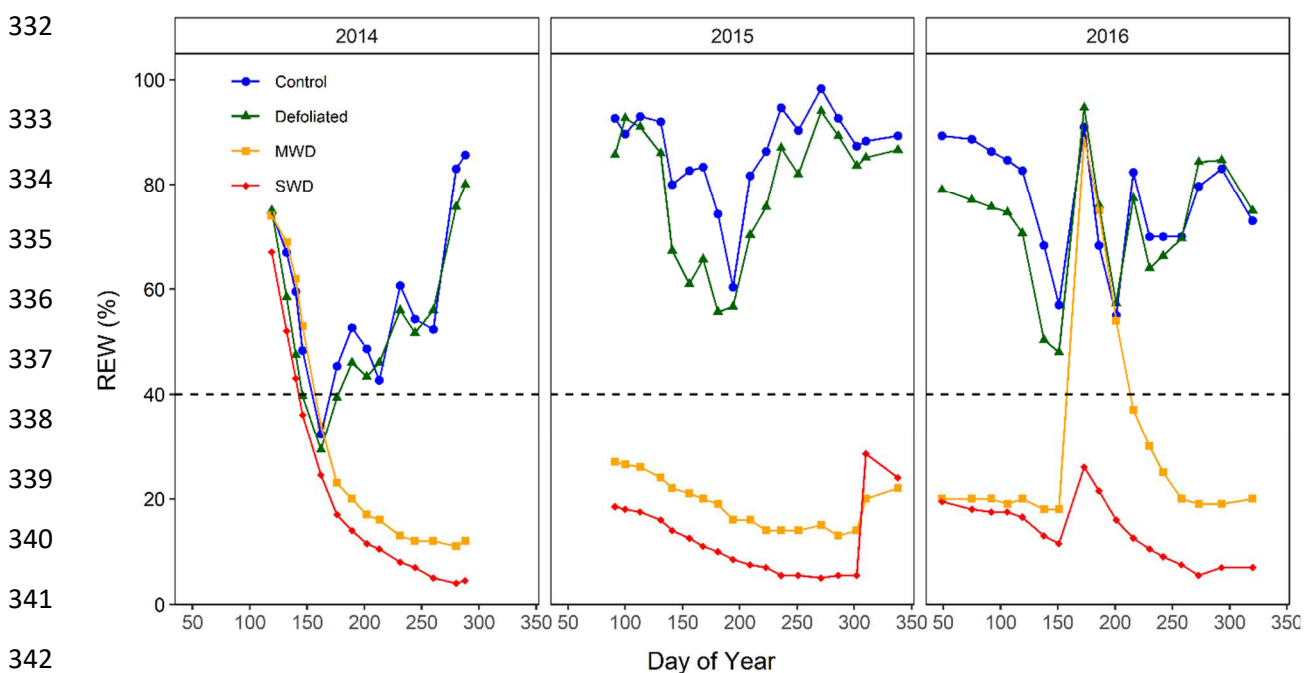
319 The seasonal progress of the mean bud development and leaf yellowing was also calculated
 320 for each treatment and was fitted with sigmoidal ($y = A/[1 + e^{-(X-X_0)/B}]$) or double sigmoidal
 321 functions ($y = A_1/[1 + e^{-(X-X_1)/B_1}] + A_2/[1 + e^{-(X-X_2)/B_2}]$).

322

323 3. Results

324 3.1. Bud-burst and leaf-yellowing responses to soil water deficit and defoliation

325 The trees in the control and defoliation treatments were irrigated and REW was maintained
 326 above a 40% threshold (Fig. 2). In the MWD treatment, REW was maintained below 40%
 327 from June 2014 until June 2016, with a minimum of 12% at the end of the 2014 and 2015
 328 summers. In 2016, a very rainy spring caused a rise in groundwater and a transitory increase
 329 in REW in this treatment, which exceeded 40% between DOY160 and DOY220. In the SWD
 330 treatment, REW was maintained below 40% all the three years with a minimum of around 5%
 331 at the end of each summer (Fig. 2).



343 **Figure 2.** Time course (Day of Year) of Relative Extractable Water (REW, %) over three
 344 consecutive years (2014 to 2016) in four treatments: control, defoliation, moderate water

345 deficit (MWD) and severe water deficit (SWD). The horizontal dashed line indicates the
346 REW threshold value (40%) below which stomatal conductance is affected, according to
347 Granier *et al.* (1999). n=3 for control and defoliation treatments, n=2 for SWD, n=1 for
348 MWD.

349

350 During spring 2014, the rain exclusion system had not been yet installed and bud
351 development was similar among treatments, following a sigmoid curve from bud opening
352 until the leaf area was fully deployed (Fig.3).

353

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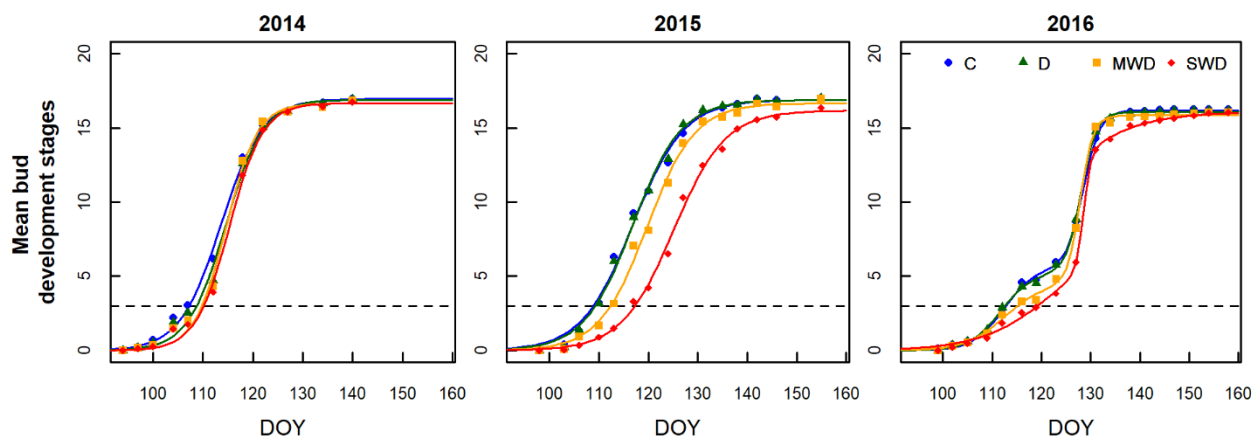
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360 **Figure 3.** Time course (DOY, day of year) of the mean bud development stages according to
361 the modified BBCH scale for three consecutive years (2014 to 2016) in beech trees under four
362 treatments: control (C), defoliation (D), moderate water deficit (MWD) and severe water
363 deficit (SWD). The horizontal dashed line represents bud-burst stage. Sigmoidal curves were
364 fitted for 2014 and 2015, and double sigmoidal curves for 2016.
365

366 During 2015, the year following the beginning of soil water restrictions and defoliation, the
367 dynamics of bud development were similar in the control and defoliation treatments (Fig. 3,
368 Table 1) whereas they were delayed in the MWD and SWD treatments (Fig. 3, Table 1). The
369 drought treatments presented a delay in the beginning of bud development compared to the
370 control and defoliation treatments whereas the speed (slope of the sigmoidal curve) and the
371 duration of leaf deployment were similar among all treatments (Fig. 3). In 2016, after two
372 years of defoliation and soil water deficit, control and defoliated trees presented similar bud

373 development dynamics whereas trees in MWD and SWD treatments reached bud burst later
374 (Fig. 3).

375

376

377 **Table 1.** Mean \pm standard deviation bud-burst (BB) day, leaf-yellowing day (LY) and growing season (GS) length for the four treatments
 378 (control, defoliation, moderate soil water deficit (MWD) and severe soil water deficit (SWD) for three consecutive years (2014, 2015 and 2016).
 379 For each variable and each year, the *P-values* of the treatment effect analyzed by a one-way ANOVA are noted in italics and the treatments with
 380 significantly different values are noted with different superscript letters. n=288 trees for control and defoliation treatments, n=144 for MWD and
 381 SWD treatments.

382

383

Treatment	2014			2015			2016		
	BB	LY	GS	BB	LY	GS	BB	LY	GS
Control	110 \pm 5 ^a	307 \pm 12 ^c	197 \pm 12 ^c	114 \pm 6 ^a	302 \pm 8 ^c	188 \pm 9 ^b	120 \pm 8	314 \pm 8 ^c	194 \pm 10 ^b
Defoliation	111 \pm 5 _{ab}	303 \pm 11 ^b	192 \pm 11 ^b	113 \pm 5 ^a	302 \pm 6 ^c	189 \pm 8 ^b	120 \pm 8	313 \pm 8 ^c	193 \pm 9 ^b
MWD	111 \pm 4 _{ab}	293 \pm 17 ^a	182 \pm 17 ^a	116 \pm 5 ^b	292 \pm 7 ^a	176 \pm 9 ^a	120 \pm 7	300 \pm 8 ^a	180 \pm 10 ^a
SWD	112 \pm 4 ^b	296 \pm 12 ^a	184 \pm 12 ^a	120 \pm 5 ^c	298 \pm 7 ^b	178 \pm 8 ^a	120 \pm 6	303 \pm 9 ^b	183 \pm 11 ^a
<i>P-value</i>	<i>0.002</i>	<i><0.001</i>	<i><0.001</i>	<i><0.001</i>	<i><0.001</i>	<i><0.001</i>	<i>0.569</i>	<i><0.001</i>	<i><0.001</i>

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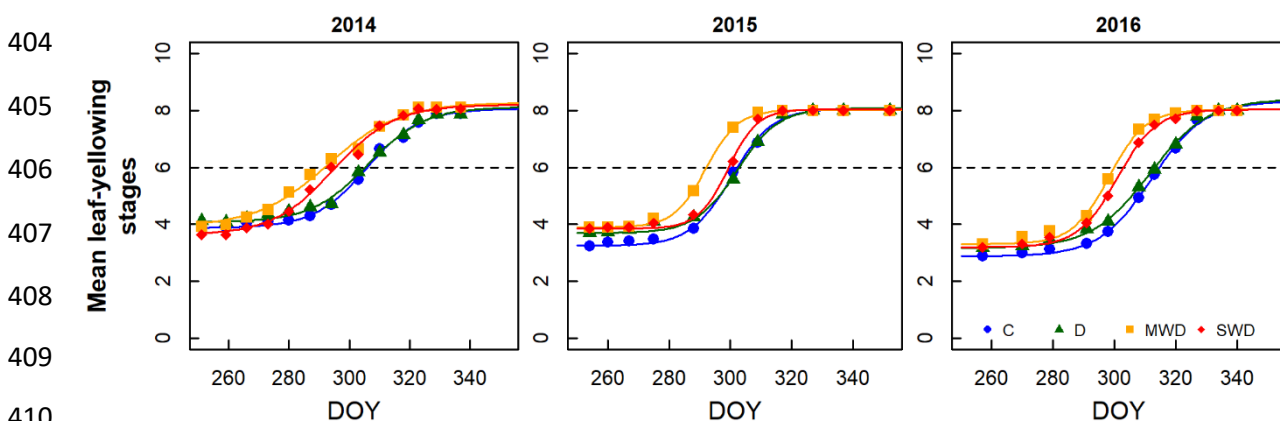
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389 Due to peculiar climatic conditions during the spring 2016 (very cold temperatures with a
 390 daily mean of 6°C from day 114 to day 122 followed by warm temperatures with a daily
 391 mean of 14.8°C from day 123 to day 132 during the bud-burst period, (Supplemental
 392 Information Fig. S4), the dynamics of bud development followed a double sigmoid curve
 393 (Fig. 3). These particular dynamics were particularly marked in the treatments with the
 394 earliest development (the control and defoliation treatments), which were more strongly
 395 slowed down by the late cold. Consequently, whereas the bud development trajectory showed
 396 differences among treatments (Fig. 3), there was no difference in mean BB day among
 397 treatments for the year 2016; BB day was delayed until day 120 for all treatments (Table 1).

398 Leaf-yellowing followed a sigmoid curve each year (Fig. 4). In all treatments, majority of tree
 399 displayed a leaf coloration corresponding to stage 3 from the spring, stages 1 and 2 were
 400 observed for very few trees. Similar LY dynamics were observed in the control and
 401 defoliation treatments in 2015 and 2016 whereas LY occurred four days earlier in the
 402 defoliation treatment compared to the control in 2014 (Table 1). The MWD and SWD trees
 403 displayed earlier LY than the controls during the three years.



411 **Figure 4.** Time course (DOY, day of year) of the mean leaf-yellowing stages according to
 412 leaf colour code (see Supplemental Information figure S1) for three consecutive years (2014
 413 to 2016) in beech trees under four treatments: control (C), defoliation (D), moderate water
 414 deficit (MWD) and severe water deficit (SWD). The horizontal dashed line represents leaf-
 415 yellowing stage. Sigmoidal curves were fitted for all three years.

416 LY occurred slightly earlier in the MWD than in the SWD, though the difference was
417 significant in 2015 only. In 2014 and 2015, LY began earlier and finished earlier in the water
418 deficit treatments, with the same rate of yellowing (Fig. 4). In 2016, leaf yellowing started at
419 the same time in all the treatments but proceeded faster in the water deficit treatments than in
420 controls, leading to an earlier end of LY. LY occurred earlier in the drought treatments
421 compared to the controls (for MWD and SWD treatments, respectively, by 14 and 11 days in
422 2014, 10 and 4 days in 2015 and 14 and 11 days in 2016, Table 1)

423 As a result, length of the growing season (GS), varied among treatments (Table 1). In 2014,
424 GS was longer in control than defoliated trees, whereas during the following two years, both
425 treatments presented similar GS lengths (Table 1). Over the three years, GS was shorter in
426 SWD and MWD than in control and defoliated trees. The shortest GS was observed in the
427 MWD treatment. When all individual trees were considered over the three years and the four
428 treatments, the variation in GS length depended more on LY day ($R^2=0.65$, data not shown)
429 than on BB day ($R^2=0.15$, data not shown), and no correlation was observed between LY and
430 BB ($R^2=0.06$, data not shown). The correlation coefficient (R^2) between GS and LY varied
431 among treatments between 0.51 and 0.73 whereas the correlation coefficient between GS and
432 BB was between 0.12 and 0.23 (Fig. 5).

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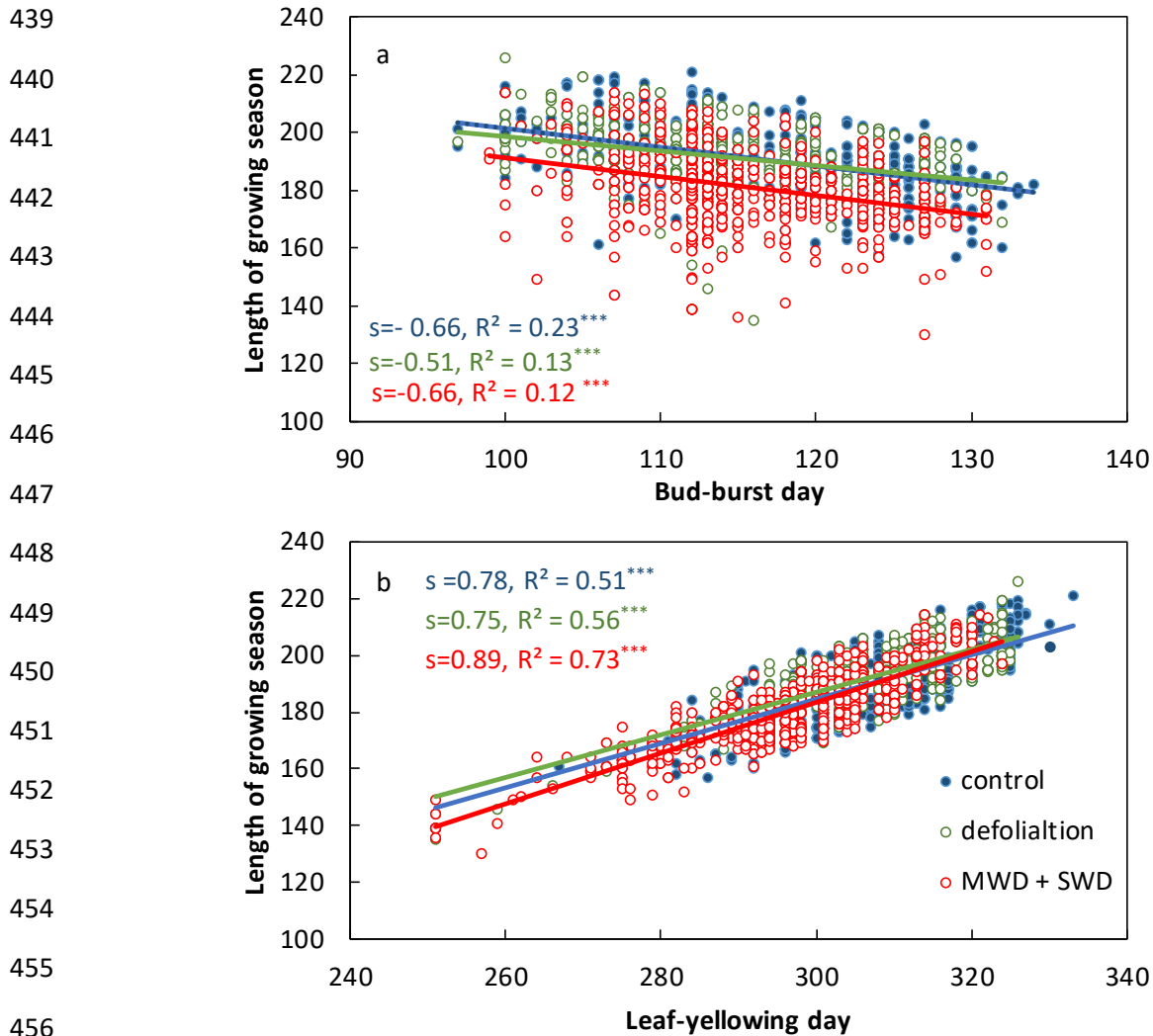
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457 **Figure 5.** Correlations between the length of the growing season (in days) and (a) bud-burst day and
 458 (b) leaf-yellowing day over the three years of the experiment in the combined moderate (MWD) and
 459 severe (SWD) soil water deficit, defoliation and control treatments. Each point is a single tree
 460 belonging to one of the three treatments during one of the three years of the experiment (2014-2016).
 461 The trees in the control treatment monitored during a fourth year were added. The slope (s), the
 462 correlation coefficients (R^2) and their significance (***) when $p < 0.001$ are indicated in the
 463 corresponding color for each treatment.

464 3.2. Leaf nitrogen response to soil water deficit and defoliation

465 Leaf nitrogen content was similar between all treatments in October 2015 and October
 466 2016 but presented some differences earlier in the season (Table 2). In July 2015, a higher N
 467 content was measured in the leaves of the Defoliation treatment than in that of the Control. In
 468 June 2016 the trees in the SWD and MDW treatments presented significant lower N content
 469 in their leaves than the trees in the Control and Defoliation treatments.

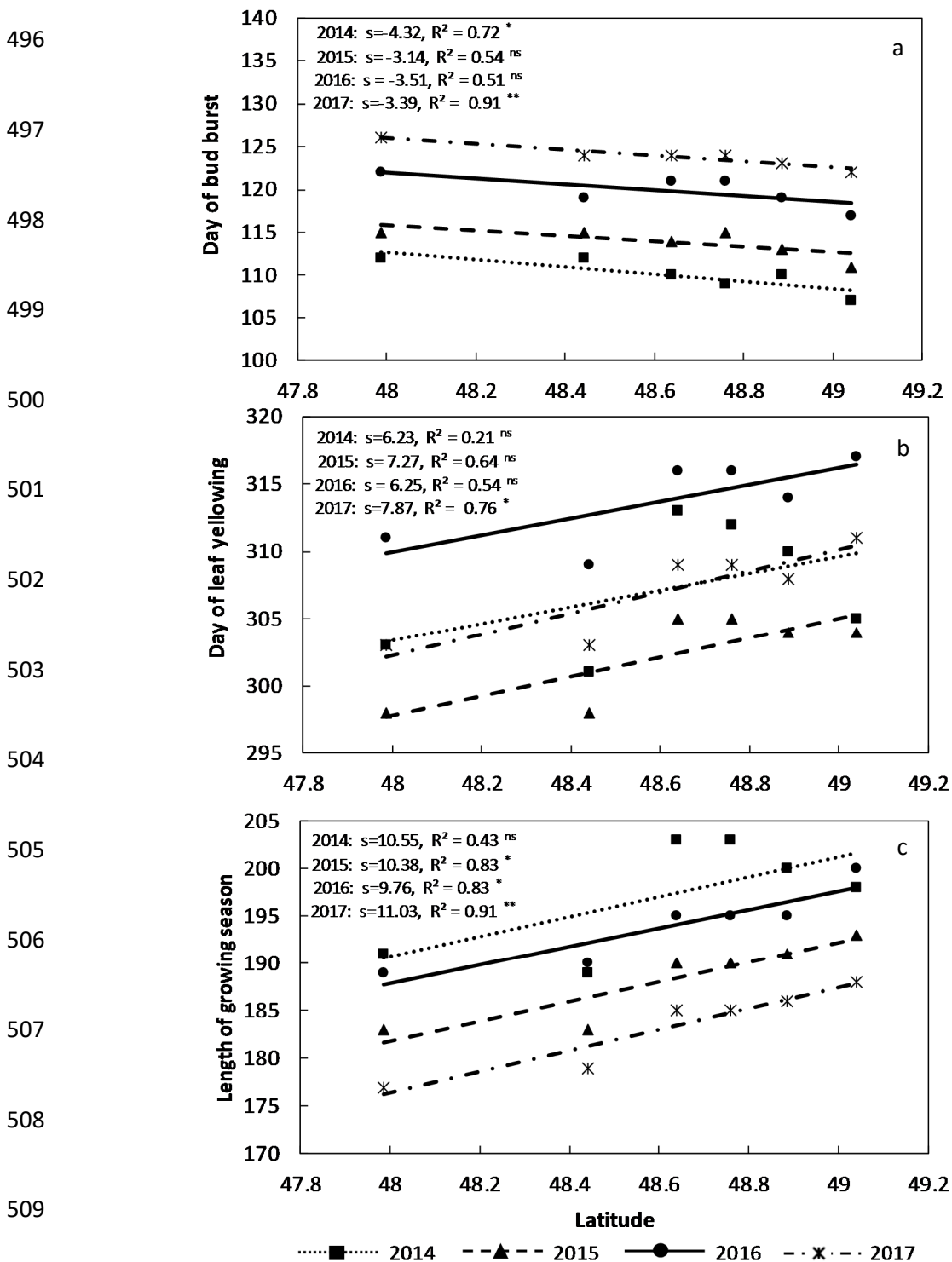
470 **Table 2.** Mean \pm standard deviation leaf nitrogen content (g.100g⁻¹ Dry Matter) for the four
 471 treatments (control, defoliation, moderate soil water deficit (MWD) and severe soil water
 472 deficit (SWD) at two dates per year for two years (2015 and 2016). For each date, the *P*-
 473 values of the treatment effect analyzed by a one-way ANOVA are noted in italics and the
 474 treatments with significantly different values are noted with different superscript letters. n=3
 475 to 6 trees per date and treatment. In October 2016, only trees in SWD treatment were
 476 measured.

Date	Treatment				Treatment effect
	Control	Defoliation	MWD	SWD	<i>P-value</i>
July-15	1.83 \pm 0.1 ^b	2.28 \pm 0.12 ^a	1.86 \pm 0.1 ^b	2.08 \pm 0.11 ^{ab}	<0.001
Oct-15	1.45 \pm 0.07	1.62 \pm 0.48	1.50 \pm 0.13	1.22 \pm 0.7	0.82
June-16	2.24 \pm 0.05 ^a	2.18 \pm 0.05 ^a	1.99 \pm 0.04 ^b	1.99 \pm 0.03 ^b	<0.001
Oct-16	1.63 \pm 0.24	1.5 \pm 0.08	-	1.56 \pm 0.08	0.51

477 *3.3. Variability in bud-burst and leaf-yellowing days among populations under well-*
 478 *watered conditions*

479 The latitudinal gradient presented also an altitudinal variability (between 313m and 411m), a
 480 range of mean annual temperature between 9.2°C and 10°C and a range of mean annual
 481 rainfall between 818mm and 1009mm among the populations (Fig. 1 and supplemental
 482 information Table S1). BB and LY days and the length of the GS displayed a correlation with
 483 the population's latitude of origin (Fig. 6). Populations ranking according to latitude was
 484 tighter for BB and GS length than for LY (Spearman rank correlation, Table 3). Even if all the
 485 correlation coefficients (R²) varied among years, the slope of the relationship with latitude
 486 was well conserved over the four years (slopes between -3.5 and -4.3 days.degré⁻¹ for BB,
 487 between 6.2 and 7.9 days.degré⁻¹ for LY and between 9.8 and 11 days.degré⁻¹ for GS). This
 488 shows some stability in the ranking of the populations and indicates a similar phenological
 489 response of the populations to inter-annual variations in weather conditions. During the four
 490 years, BB was negatively correlated with latitude; the northern populations displaying an
 491 earlier BB than the southern ones (Fig. 6a, R² from 0.51 to 0.91 according to the year). A
 492 maximal delay of five days was observed between the two most distant populations (Table 3).
 493 On the contrary, a positive correlation was observed between LY and latitude; the northern

494 populations senesced later than did the southern ones (Fig. 6b). A delay of 7 to 12 days
 495 according to year was observed between the earliest and the latest populations (Table 3).



511 **Figure 6.** Relationships between the latitude of origin of the trees grown in the common
 512 garden experiment under well-watered conditions (controls) and (a) bud-burst day, (b) leaf-

513 yellowing day and (c) growing season length in 2014 (squares and dotted line), 2015
514 (triangles and dashed line), 2016 (circles and solid line) and 2017 (crosses and dashed-dotted
515 line). For each year, the slopes (s), the correlation coefficients (R^2) and their significance (ns
516 when $p > 0.05$, * when $p < 0.05$, ** when $p < 0.01$, *** when $p < 0.001$) are given.

Table 3. Mean \pm standard deviation of bud-burst day, leaf-yellowing day and growing season length for six populations under four treatments (control, defoliation, moderate soil water deficit (MWD) and severe soil water deficit (SWD) for three years (2014, 2015 and 2016). n=48 trees for each population in the control and defoliation treatments and n=24 in MWD and SWD treatments. The populations are listed following a latitudinal gradient from North to South. For each variable, each year and each treatment, populations ranking was tested with the Spearman correlation coefficient (ρ) between the phenological variables and the latitude. Different superscript letters note the statistically significant differences among populations revealed by a one-way ANOVA in each treatment. The comparison of populations (*Pop effect*), treatments (*Treat effect*) and their interaction (*Treat x Pop inter*) was analysed with a two-way ANOVA (The *F*-values and their significance *** = P<0.001, ** = P<0.01 and * = P<0.05, ns= non-significant are noted).

	2014				2015				2016				
	Control	Defoliation	MWD	SWD	Control	Defoliation	MWD	SWD	Control	Defoliation	MWD	SWD	
BUD-BURST	Gorze	107 \pm 5 ^a	110 \pm 4 ^{ab}	110 \pm 3	110 \pm 4 ^{ab}	111 \pm 5 ^a	111 \pm 4 ^a	113 \pm 3 ^a	117 \pm 3	117 \pm 7 ^a	115 \pm 7 ^a	118 \pm 7	116 \pm 5 ^a
	Pont-à-Mousson	110 \pm 5 ^{ab}	109 \pm 5 ^a	110 \pm 4	110 \pm 4 ^a	113 \pm 6 ^{ab}	111 \pm 4 ^a	115 \pm 3 ^{ab}	118 \pm 5	119 \pm 8 ^{ab}	116 \pm 7 ^{ab}	120 \pm 6	118 \pm 7 ^{ab}
	Boucq	109 \pm 6 ^{ab}	109 \pm 5 ^a	110 \pm 5	110 \pm 5 ^{ab}	115 \pm 7 ^b	112 \pm 4 ^{ab}	115 \pm 6 ^{ab}	123 \pm 5	121 \pm 8 ^{ab}	118 \pm 7 ^{abc}	119 \pm 8	120 \pm 5 ^{ab}
	Sexey-aux-Forges	110 \pm 5 ^{ab}	111 \pm 5 ^{abc}	112 \pm 3	112 \pm 4 ^{abc}	114 \pm 7 ^{ab}	113 \pm 5 ^{ab}	114 \pm 2 ^{ab}	122 \pm 5	121 \pm 8 ^{ab}	120 \pm 8 ^{bc}	121 \pm 5	121 \pm 7 ^{ab}
	Saint-Amond	112 \pm 4 ^b	113 \pm 4 ^{bc}	113 \pm 4	114 \pm 4 ^{bc}	115 \pm 6 ^b	115 \pm 5 ^{bc}	118 \pm 6 ^{bc}	121 \pm 4	119 \pm 8 ^{ab}	122 \pm 6 ^{cd}	122 \pm 6	122 \pm 5 ^{ab}
	Arc-en-Barrois	112 \pm 5 ^b	113 \pm 3 ^c	113 \pm 3	115 \pm 3 ^c	115 \pm 5 ^b	117 \pm 4 ^c	119 \pm 5 ^c	120 \pm 5	122 \pm 6 ^b	126 \pm 3 ^d	123 \pm 6	125 \pm 5 ^b
	<i>Spearman ρ</i>	-0.89 [*]	-0.83 [*]	-0.94 [*]	-0.94 [*]	0.66 ^{ns}	-1 ^{**}	-0.83 [*]	-0.43 ^{ns}	-0.6 ^{ns}	-1 ^{**}	-0.94 [*]	-1 ^{**}
	<i>Treat effect</i>	5.5 ^{***}				55.4 ^{***}				0.5 ^{ns}			
	<i>Pop effect</i>	22.7 ^{***}				19.7 ^{***}				19.0 ^{***}			
<i>Treat x Pop inter</i>	1.1 ^{ns}				2.2 ^{**}				1.5 ^{ns}				
LEAF-YELLOWING	Gorze	305 \pm 14 ^{ab}	305 \pm 12	307 \pm 13 ^b	292 \pm 12	304 \pm 8 ^{bc}	305 \pm 5 ^b	299 \pm 6 ^b	298 \pm 7	317 \pm 7 ^c	314 \pm 8	305 \pm 9	302 \pm 7
	Pont-à-Mousson	310 \pm 11 ^{ab}	304 \pm 10	290 \pm 20 ^a	294 \pm 12	304 \pm 6 ^{abc}	304 \pm 5 ^{ab}	292 \pm 10 ^a	301 \pm 5	314 \pm 6 ^{abc}	311 \pm 8	302 \pm 10	305 \pm 7
	Boucq	312 \pm 10 ^b	301 \pm 9	282 \pm 16 ^a	302 \pm 10	305 \pm 7 ^c	302 \pm 6 ^{ab}	289 \pm 7 ^a	301 \pm 8	316 \pm 7 ^c	312 \pm 9	300 \pm 6	306 \pm 7
	Sexey-aux-Forges	313 \pm 12 ^b	304 \pm 10	294 \pm 12 ^{ab}	298 \pm 11	305 \pm 9 ^{bc}	300 \pm 6 ^a	291 \pm 4 ^a	299 \pm 6	316 \pm 8 ^{bc}	312 \pm 7	298 \pm 5	304 \pm 10
	Saint-Amond	301 \pm 11 ^a	302 \pm 11	295 \pm 9 ^{ab}	293 \pm 15	298 \pm 9 ^{ab}	300 \pm 7 ^a	293 \pm 4 ^{ab}	296 \pm 9	309 \pm 11 ^a	313 \pm 8	299 \pm 7	300 \pm 16
	Arc-en-Barrois	303 \pm 9 ^a	301 \pm 12	288 \pm 17 ^a	298 \pm 10	298 \pm 7 ^a	301 \pm 7 ^{ab}	291 \pm 6 ^a	297 \pm 9	311 \pm 7 ^{ab}	314 \pm 7	298 \pm 7	301 \pm 7
	<i>Spearman ρ</i>	0.37 ^{ns}	0.71 ^{ns}	0.31 ^{ns}	-0.31 ^{ns}	0.54 ^{ns}	0.83 [*]	0.43 ^{ns}	0.6 ^{ns}	0.77 ^{ns}	-0.14 ^{ns}	0.94 [*]	0.54 ^{ns}
	<i>Treat effect</i>	54.9 ^{***}				72.0 ^{***}				116.0 ^{***}			
	<i>Pop effect</i>	4.4 ^{***}				9.9 ^{***}				5.5 ^{***}			
<i>Treat x Pop inter</i>	6.3 ^{***}				3.5 ^{***}				2.4 ^{**}				
GROWING SEASON	Gorze	198 \pm 13 ^{bc}	195 \pm 12 ^{ab}	197 \pm 13 ^b	182 \pm 12 ^{ab}	193 \pm 8 ^c	194 \pm 6 ^c	186 \pm 7 ^b	181 \pm 7 ^{ab}	200 \pm 8 ^c	199 \pm 9 ^c	187 \pm 13 ^b	186 \pm 9
	Pont-à-Mousson	200 \pm 10 ^c	195 \pm 9 ^b	180 \pm 20 ^a	184 \pm 12 ^{ab}	191 \pm 7 ^c	193 \pm 6 ^c	177 \pm 10 ^a	183 \pm 6 ^b	195 \pm 9 ^{bc}	195 \pm 8 ^{bc}	182 \pm 11 ^{ab}	187 \pm 8
	Boucq	203 \pm 9 ^c	192 \pm 11 ^{ab}	172 \pm 17 ^a	192 \pm 10 ^b	190 \pm 7 ^{bc}	190 \pm 7 ^{bc}	174 \pm 8 ^a	178 \pm 9 ^{ab}	195 \pm 8 ^{bc}	194 \pm 11 ^{abc}	181 \pm 9 ^{ab}	186 \pm 6
	Sexey-aux-Forges	203 \pm 9 ^c	193 \pm 10 ^{ab}	182 \pm 12 ^a	186 \pm 11 ^{ab}	190 \pm 9 ^{bc}	187 \pm 8 ^{ab}	177 \pm 5 ^a	177 \pm 6 ^{ab}	195 \pm 8 ^{bc}	192 \pm 9 ^{ab}	177 \pm 6 ^a	183 \pm 13
	Saint-Amond	189 \pm 11 ^a	189 \pm 11 ^{ab}	182 \pm 10 ^a	179 \pm 15 ^a	184 \pm 8 ^{ab}	185 \pm 6 ^{ab}	180 \pm 7 ^a	175 \pm 8 ^a	190 \pm 12 ^{ab}	191 \pm 8 ^{ab}	177 \pm 8 ^{ab}	178 \pm 17
	Arc-en-Barrois	191 \pm 10 ^{ab}	188 \pm 13 ^a	175 \pm 16 ^a	183 \pm 11 ^{ab}	183 \pm 8 ^a	184 \pm 8 ^a	172 \pm 8 ^a	177 \pm 9 ^{ab}	189 \pm 8 ^a	188 \pm 7 ^a	175 \pm 8 ^a	176 \pm 8
	<i>Spearman ρ</i>	0.37 ^{ns}	0.89 [*]	0.31 ^{ns}	0.14 ^{ns}	0.94 [*]	1 ^{**}	0.71 ^{ns}	0.89 [*]	0.94 [*]	1 ^{**}	0.94 [*]	0.89 [*]
	<i>Treat effect</i>	67.8 ^{***}				134.1 ^{***}				95.3 ^{***}			
	<i>Pop effect</i>	13.2 ^{***}				35.7 ^{***}				25.4 ^{***}			
<i>Treat x Pop inter</i>	5.8 ^{***}				2.3 ^{**}				0.6 ^{ns}				

523 The differences in both BB and LY days among populations acted in the same direction on
524 growing season length, which showed as many as 14 days of difference between the northern
525 and southern populations; the northern populations displayed longer GS than the southern
526 populations (Fig. 6c). GS length presented higher correlation coefficients with latitude than did
527 BB and LY days in 2015 and 2016.

528 *3.4. Bud-burst and leaf-yellowing responses to soil water deficit and defoliation among* 529 *populations*

530 For BB, in 2014 and 2016, the population ranking was stable whatever the treatment, as shown
531 by the Spearman rank correlation results and the non-significance of the treatment - population
532 interaction (Table 3). But in 2015, the SWD treatment presented a different population ranking,
533 leading to a significant treatment - population interaction. LY often presented a lower Spearman
534 correlation coefficient than did BB, with a less clear ranking of the phenological dates according
535 to population latitude, but the ranking of the extreme populations in the latitudinal gradient was
536 well maintained. The treatments significantly impacted LY and differently according to the
537 populations as revealed by the significant treatment - population interaction for the three years.
538 For GS, in 2015 and 2016, the ranking of populations was stable whatever the treatment (high
539 spearman correlation coefficients). In 2014 and 2015 a significant treatment-population
540 interaction was observed.

541 **4. Discussion**

542 *4.1 Annual variability of leaf phenology in beech trees*

543 Over the three years of our experiment, for the beech trees in the control treatment, the maximal
544 inter-annual variability in bud-burst date was 14 days. LY seems to play an important role on the
545 GS length in beech trees since GS was more strongly dependent on LY than on BB. This was
546 also observed by Vitasse *et al.* (2009a) on beech populations along an altitudinal gradient.
547 Consequently, LY date variability could significantly impact the annual carbon balance in beech

548 trees. Dragoni *et al.* (2011) showed that variations in leaf senescence date would have more
549 impact on the C balance than the variations in BB date in a broadleaf forest. However, under our
550 latitude with low sun elevation and short photoperiod in October, cumulated daily irradiance is
551 smaller in autumn than in spring. These properties could limit the impact of the LY variations on
552 the seasonal C balance. Indeed, at the beginning of our experiment, when the trees were seven
553 years old, the phenological differences among populations did not seem to have a significant
554 influence in tree height or diameter growth which were similar among populations
555 (Supplemental Information Fig. S2).

556

557 *4.2. Responses of beech leaf phenology to soil water deficit and defoliation*

558 In a context of climate change, beech has been described as a species whose leaf phenology (or
559 at least BB) would be little affected by global warming (Fu *et al.*, 2019a) because: i) BB would
560 occur only when a defined photoperiod, which is a fixed parameter, is reached, and ii) the
561 absence of a sufficient chilling temperature would be compensated for an increase in a forcing
562 temperature, as observed during warm years in the past (Cannell, 1997; Dantec *et al.*, 2014).
563 However it is obvious from our study that leaf phenology is also modified by a long soil water
564 deficit. We observed that a soil water deficit caused delayed bud-burst, and overall, early leaf-
565 yellowing, thus significantly reducing the length of the growing season. These results are valid
566 for our young beech trees but could be attenuated in mature trees due to a potential deeper root
567 system. As a reference, under natural condition the duration of one of the most extreme water
568 deficit during the last-10-years in beech stand in 2003 lasted 124 days (Granier *et al.*, 2008),
569 from DOY 178 to DOY 300 with minimum REW close to zero (Peiffer *et al.*, 2014). Similar
570 extreme soil water deficits were computed in European forests in 2003 (Granier *et al.*, 2007) and
571 in 2018 (Schuldt *et al.*, 2020). Depending on the intensity of the water deficit and on year, GS
572 was shortened by up to 15 days, which is within the same range of variation as the inter-annual

573 variability of GS length observed in the control treatment. Surprisingly, MWD treatment
574 presented earlier LY than SWD treatment. This is a possible response to variation of
575 microclimate under the roof, the trees of the MWD being situated at the edge of the roof.
576 Reducing GS in response to soil water deficit may help the tree save water by shortening the
577 transpiration period, thus avoiding extreme dehydration and reducing the risk of hydraulic
578 dysfunction as was suggested in the study on the impact of rainfall exclusion on a Mediterranean
579 forest (Misson et al, 2011). An early leaf fall affecting green leaves in summer, without any
580 yellowing process, has sometimes been reported in case of extreme drought (Bréda *et al.*, 2006;
581 Marchin *et al.*, 2010), probably as a result of petiole embolism. But this was not the case in our
582 study since the duration of the leaf yellowing process was similar for drought-stressed and
583 control trees. Reducing GS may also allow the tree to save carbon and nitrogen. Indeed,
584 prolonged soil water deficit induces a long-term source-sink imbalance because some carbon
585 sinks are maintained active such as maintenance respiration whereas carbohydrates production is
586 reduced due to stomatal closure (Farquhar and Sharkey, 1982; Calister and Adams, 2006; Flexas
587 *et al.*, 2006). Both carbon and nitrogen metabolisms are enhanced in response to soil water
588 deficit to help save internal water and ensure cell survival (Chuste *et al.*, 2019, 2020). Although
589 some carbon sinks, such as primary and secondary growths, are sacrificed under soil water
590 deficit (Chuste et al, 2020), other important C sinks remain active (*e.g.* transport, maintenance
591 respiration) or may even be up-regulated (*e.g.* defense, starch interconversion to soluble sugars
592 for osmoregulation and protection against cell dehydration) (Chuste, 2018). Beech trees have to
593 compensate for this carbon imbalance. They may remobilize their carbon reserves to ensure
594 survival (Chuste *et al.*, 2020). In response to soil water deficit, early leaf senescence may save
595 carbon by reducing the carbon used in the maintenance respiration of living organs and to avoid
596 tissue dehydration (Hinckley *et al.*, 1979; Xie *et al.*, 2018). As carbon and nitrogen metabolisms
597 are closely linked, early leaf yellowing may also save nitrogen and would allow an early

598 resorption of leaf nitrogen before leaf death and dehydration in case of extreme soil water deficit
599 (Marchin *et al.*, 2010; Chuste, 2018). These regulations could participate in the survival strategy
600 of the beech trees in response to soil water deficit. However, even if shortening GS is an adaptive
601 response of trees to drought, it is not the best mean for saving water and carbon; other adaptive
602 mechanisms such as stomatal closure or leaf area reduction are much more efficient.

603 In our study, neither BB nor LY changed in response to defoliation. By defoliating trees, we
604 limited i) the tree's capacity to assimilate carbon by strongly reducing photosynthetic leaf area
605 (75% of defoliation in 2014 and 2015 and 90% in 2016) and ii) the nitrogen available to the trees
606 since 30% of the N total stock is contained in the beech leaves in spring (El Zein *et al.*, 2011b),
607 at the period when defoliation was carried out. This reduction of the nitrogen and carbon
608 availability did not affect the leaf phenology of our beech trees. However, another consequence
609 of defoliation is to limit the tree consumption of carbon (by reducing maintenance respiration), in
610 the absence of re-foliation (as was our case in 2014 and 2015, but not in 2016). In addition,
611 higher leaf N concentrations was measured in the foliage remaining on our defoliated trees in
612 2015 as also observed by Pinkard *et al.* (2011) in *Eucalyptus globulus*. This leaf nitrogen
613 increase did not significantly affect leaf phenology contrarily to the results suggested by the
614 study of Fu *et al.* (2019c). As a large fraction of leaf N is invested in Rubisco (Evans, 1989), this
615 leaf N increase could increase the C assimilation in the remaining leaves of the defoliated trees, a
616 response to defoliation often reported in the literature (Hart *et al.*. 2000; Handa *et al.*, 2005).

617 Moreover defoliating part of crown undoubtedly allowed remaining, previously shaded leaves to
618 receive more light which may have stimulated carbon assimilation in these leaves. Consequently,
619 the defoliation treatment may have only slightly affected carbon assimilation at the tree scale.
620 Therefore, the absence of a phenological response to defoliation could also be because
621 defoliation affected the carbon and nitrogen balances of the trees less than expected.

622

623

624 *4.3. Plasticity of leaf phenology among regional beech forests*

625 We examined the question of the phenological differentiation among six populations issued from
626 a small latitudinal gradient presenting a small climatic range in the central distribution area of
627 *Fagus sylvatica* L. From one year to the next, we often observed a similar population ranking for
628 both BB and LY in the control treatment: Delpierre *et al.* (2017) observed that leaf phenology
629 ranking was stable from year to year among trees of temperate forest, including *Fagus sylvatica*,
630 over a large distribution area. The relationship between BB and LY and the latitudinal origin of
631 the populations that we observed, suggests a genetic differentiation at the regional scale that
632 could be adaptive or not. We checked the literature for the factors controlling the expansion of
633 beech in Europe during the post-glaciation period. We found three main drivers: i) climatic
634 conditions, ii) human activities and iii) the natural, slow migration of beech forests due to
635 dispersal limitation (Willner *et al.*, 2009; Magri, 2008). In our study, we observed few significant
636 correlations between the latitudinal gradient and the mean climatic trends along our gradient
637 suggesting that the genetic differentiation could result from factors other than climate
638 (Supplementary Information Fig S3). However, this absence of climatic links could also be due
639 to the limited number of populations within a small climatic gradient. Moreover, the
640 meteorological model we used to estimate the climatic variables at each site, may not have been
641 enough precise at the regional scale. Finally, we used mean climatic values over 30 years (1981
642 – 2010) to investigate the climatic gradients and it is possible that a population's adaptation to a
643 local climate is driven more by its ability to survive extreme climatic events than by a mean
644 climatic trend. For instance, one of our populations has been particularly sensitive in term of tree
645 mortality in response to SWD treatment in the common garden experiment (data not shown).
646 We revealed that in our regional gradient, the northern populations presented a longer GS than
647 the southern ones. This result at the local level contrasts with previous observations done over a

648 large European geographical range: several studies observed that the northern populations would
649 be genetically adapted to a cold climate with later BB and earlier LY than the southern
650 populations (Robson *et al.*, 2013; Delpierre *et al.*, 2017),. Such a response had been observed in
651 Germany and Poland where northern populations flushed later (Von Wuehlisch *et al.*, 1995;
652 Chmura and Rozkowski, 2002). In the Northern hemisphere, Gill *et al.* (2015) observed a
653 negative correlation between leaf-yellowing date and latitude. One possible explanation of our
654 conflicting results is the inversed frost gradient that we identified between the populations
655 situated at the most extreme zones of the latitudinal range (Supplementary Information Fig S3,
656 Table S1): the mean number of frost days per year was lower (69.7 days) in the most northerly
657 site than in the most southerly (81.7 days). At regional scale, small topographic and/or altitudinal
658 variations among forests may have counterbalanced the temperature gradient that we expected
659 along this latitudinal gradient (i.e., southern populations warmer than northern ones). The
660 difference in GS length observed between our northern and southern populations remains in
661 agreement with the trade-off between growth performance and frost resistance suggested by
662 Loehle (1998): the southern populations may have presented the shortest growing season to
663 avoid frost.

664 We compared the capacity of regional beech populations in the central area of distribution to
665 face future soil water deficits. Globally, the response to soil water deficit was characterized by a
666 late BB and an early LY, thus strongly reducing GS length. However, we also found population-
667 specific responses to soil water deficit with significant treatment-population interactions
668 suggesting that some populations were more impacted by soil water deficit than others. Our
669 results suggest that climate change may challenge the current adaptation of trees to their local
670 growth conditions, and this could be particularly important in the central zone of the species
671 distribution area. Indeed, for a long time studies focused on the fitness of the populations
672 growing in the extreme zones of the distribution area (Jump *et al.*, 2006; Piovesan *et al.*, 2008),

673 but more recent studies suggest a stronger sensitivity to recent drought episodes for trees
674 growing in the wetter mid-latitudes (Friedrichs *et al.*, 2009; Scharnweber *et al.*, 2011). In fact,
675 populations in the central area of distribution, where extreme events are rare, could be more
676 sensitive to soil water deficit than those growing at the south edge of the range, which frequently
677 experience extreme climatic events. Populations in the edge area would retain only the most
678 resistant and best adapted individuals in their populations (Cavin and Jump, 2017).

679 **5. Conclusion**

680 Our study suggests that beech trees present a local variation of leaf phenology, even within a
681 small latitudinal gradient, and that different populations have different phenological response to
682 soil water deficit. The impact of drought on both bud-burst and leaf yellowing dates leads to a
683 shorter growing season and suggests that soil water content should be taken into account more
684 often in studies of inter-annual phenological variability, particularly in the context of future
685 climate change where spring and summer drought events are likely to become more frequent.
686 Accounting for soil water content could help researchers to better estimate the length of the
687 growing season in carbon balance models for sensitive deciduous species like *Fagus sylvatica*
688 under future climatic conditions.

689

690 **Data accessibility**

691 The data are available from the authors upon request.

692

693 **Declaration of Competing Interest**

694 None.

695

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710 **Appendix A. Supplementary information**

711 Figure S1. Codes used to determine the bud burst day (stage 7 in the BBCH code) and leaf
712 yellowing day (stage 6).

713 Figure S2. Variability in tree size within and among beech populations at the beginning of the
714 experiment.

715 Figure S3 – Correlation matrix between the geographic, climatic and phenological variables for
716 the six beech populations.

717 Figure S4 - Changes in thermal time (°C day) during (a) bud-burst and (b) leaf-yellowing periods
718 in relation to the day of year (DOY).

719 Table S1. Mean climatic characteristics 1981-2010 from the Aurehly model (Météo France) for
720 the sites of origin for the six populations along a 140-km latitudinal gradient in the Lorraine
721 region (North-eastern France), and for the common garden site.

722

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