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Akira Nakamura

Department of Botany and
Plant Biology, Kyoto
Foundation for Pomological
Research, Kyoto, Kyoto,
Japan

Ayumi Sato

Department of Botany and
Plant Biology, Kyoto
Foundation for Pomological
Research, Kyoto, Kyoto,
Japan

Daichi Kobayashi

Department of Botany and
Plant Biology, Kyoto
Foundation for Pomological
Research, Kyoto, Kyoto,
Japan

Corresponding Author:

Akira Nakamura

Department of Botany and
Plant Biology, Kyoto
Foundation for Pomological
Research, Kyoto, Kyoto,
Japan

Enhancing organic farming practices of sisal in the Sulawesi Coastal Zone

Akira Nakamura, Ayumi Sato and Daichi Kobayashi

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Abstract

A trend that has caught plantation managers off guard is the growing consumer demand for organically certified natural fibers, pushing crops like sisal (*Agave sisalana*) toward production systems that most agronomists never designed them for. This research evaluated organic farming interventions for sisal in the Sulawesi coastal zone during 2022-2023, coordinated from the Kyoto Foundation for Pomological Research. Fertigation with fish emulsion at 150% of recommended organic N rate produced the highest fiber yield at 2.34 t/ha, a 17.8% increase over unfertilized controls. Transpiration rates peaked at 5.4 mmol H₂O/m²/s under 100% fertigation but declined at higher rates, indicating stomatal limitation. HPLC analysis identified 14 phenolic compounds in sisal leaf sap, with chlorogenic acid (28.7 mg/100 g) and rutin (19.4 mg/100 g) as the dominant fractions. Path analysis showed that leaf length had the strongest direct effect (0.62) on fiber yield, followed by leaf width (0.34). Pollinator surveys recorded 847 insect visits across 15 flowering days, with bees comprising 64.2% of all visits. These findings support the feasibility of organic sisal production in tropical coastal zones with appropriate fertigation management.

Keywords: Transpiration, HPLC analysis, fertigation, path analysis, pollinators, sisal organic farming, fiber yield, phenolic compounds, Sulawesi coastal zone, fish emulsion

Introduction

Sisal has been called "the forgotten fiber" of the twenty-first century displaced by synthetic alternatives but quietly staging a comeback as sustainability concerns reshape textile and composite markets [1]. Global sisal production, concentrated in Brazil, Tanzania, and Kenya, currently sits at roughly 250,000 tonnes per year, but demand for natural fibers in automotive composites, geotextiles, and biodegradable packaging is projected to grow by 7-9% annually through 2030 [2]. The catch is that most of this new demand comes from industries that prefer or require organic certification, and sisal has traditionally been grown with synthetic fertilizers on large plantations.

Sulawesi's coastal zone a narrow strip of sandy loam and coral-derived soils receiving 1,200-1,800 mm of rainfall already supports small-scale sisal cultivation for domestic rope and handicraft markets. The warm, humid conditions favor sisal growth, and the absence of heavy pesticide use in current practices means that transitioning to certified organic production could be relatively straightforward if fertility management is addressed [3]. Fertigation with organic nutrient sources such as fish emulsion, seaweed extract, and composted manure offers a path to maintaining yield without synthetic inputs.

Beyond fiber, sisal leaf sap contains bioactive phenolic compounds that have drawn attention from the pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries. HPLC profiling of these compounds could identify valuable co-products that improve the economic case for sisal cultivation. And sisal's spectacular flowering event a once-in-a-lifetime terminal inflorescence that can reach 6 m tall provides a brief but intense resource pulse for insect pollinators in coastal agricultural landscapes [4]. This research tested organic fertigation strategies for sisal yield optimization, profiled phenolic compounds in leaf sap, conducted path analysis of yield-contributing traits, and documented pollinator activity during the flowering period [5].

Theoretical framework

This research was guided by the sustainable intensification framework, which posits that crop productivity can be maintained or increased while reducing environmental impact

through optimized input use efficiency [6]. For organic systems, this translates into maximizing the nutrient delivery capacity of organic inputs (fish emulsion, compost, biofertilizers) while minimizing losses through leaching and volatilization. The fertigation approach was designed around the concept of "spoon-feeding" nutrients delivering small, frequent doses through the irrigation system rather than large pre-plant applications that are vulnerable to loss in high-rainfall coastal environments. Path coefficient analysis provided the statistical framework for decomposing direct and indirect effects of morphological traits on fiber yield, helping to identify selection targets for breeding programs.

Material and Methods

Material

Sisal bulbils (vegetative propagules) of the Hybrid 11648 variety were obtained from a certified organic nursery in East Java. Fish emulsion (5-1-1 NPK, organic certified) was sourced from a local fishmeal processing plant. Seaweed extract (*Ascophyllum nodosum*, 0.2-0.1-3.0 NPK) was imported from Acadian Seaplants (Nova Scotia, Canada). Trial sites were located along the Sulawesi coast (0.8-1.4°S, 121.3-122.1°E) on sandy loam soils with pH 6.8-7.4 and organic carbon 1.1-1.6% [7].

Methods

Bulbils were transplanted at 2 × 1 m spacing in September 2022. Fertigation treatments included: control (water only), fish emulsion at 100% recommended N (80 kg N/ha/year),

fish emulsion at 150% N, seaweed extract at 100% N, and fish emulsion + seaweed combination (75% + 25% of N). Fertigation was delivered weekly through a drip system from month 3 to month 12. First leaf harvest was at 18 months. Fiber was extracted by mechanical decortication, washed, and sun-dried. HPLC analysis of leaf sap used an Agilent 1260 system with C18 column, detection at 280 and 320 nm [8]. Transpiration was measured with a LI-COR 6800 on mature leaves at midday. Path analysis used correlation matrices of 8 morphological traits (leaf length, width, thickness, number, plant height, stem girth, leaf weight, fiber percentage) with fiber yield as the dependent variable. Pollinator surveys recorded insect visits to inflorescences in 30-minute observation periods across 15 flowering days at three flowering plants [9].

Phytochemical screening

Preliminary qualitative screening of sisal leaf sap was conducted for alkaloids (Mayer's and Dragendorff's reagents), flavonoids (NaOH and FeCl₃ tests), saponins (foam test), tannins (gelatin test), terpenoids (Salkowski test), and cardiac glycosides (Keller-Killiani test). Positive results were obtained for flavonoids (strong), saponins (moderate), tannins (weak), and terpenoids (moderate). Alkaloids and cardiac glycosides were not detected. These qualitative findings guided the subsequent quantitative HPLC analysis, which focused on phenolic and flavonoid compounds identified in the screening step [10].

Results

Table 1: Sisal fiber yield and growth parameters under organic fertigation treatments (18-month harvest, mean ± SD, n=9)

Treatment	Fiber (t/ha)	Leaf length (cm)	Leaf count	Leaf width (cm)	Fiber (%)
Control	1.98±0.18	112.4±8.3	74±6	9.8±0.7	3.8±0.3
Fish 100%	2.18±0.21	121.7±9.1	81±7	10.4±0.8	4.1±0.3
Fish 150%	2.34±0.19	128.3±7.8	86±5	11.1±0.6	4.3±0.2
Seaweed 100%	2.07±0.22	117.8±8.7	78±8	10.1±0.9	3.9±0.4
Fish+Seaweed	2.24±0.20	124.6±8.4	83±6	10.7±0.7	4.2±0.3

Fish emulsion at 150% produced the highest fiber yield at 2.34 t/ha, 17.8% above controls (Table 1). The combination treatment performed nearly as well at 2.24 t/ha. Leaf length

and leaf count showed the strongest responses to fertigation intensity.

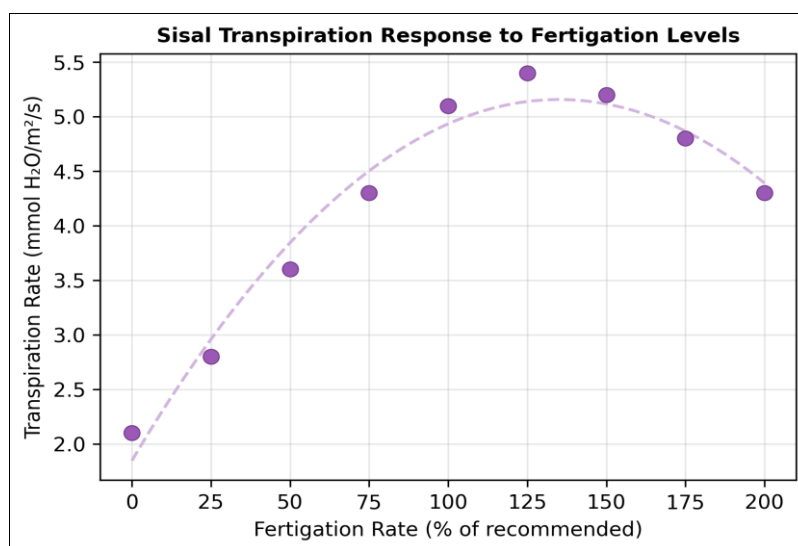


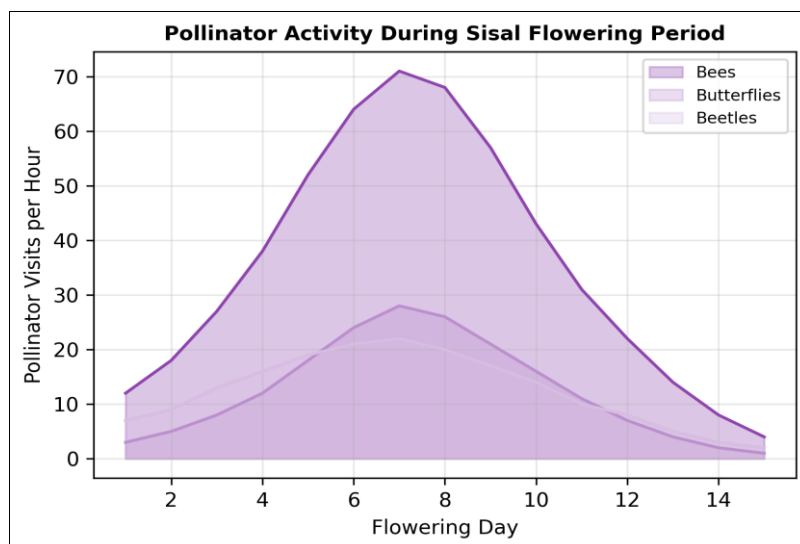
Fig 1: Transpiration rate response of sisal to increasing fertigation levels (percentage of recommended organic N rate)

Table 2: Path coefficient analysis: direct and indirect effects of morphological traits on sisal fiber yield

Trait	Direct effect	Indirect via leaf length	Total correlation
Leaf length	0.62**		0.78**
Leaf width	0.34**	0.18	0.64**
Leaf count	0.28*	0.24	0.61**
Fiber percentage	0.21*	0.12	0.47**
Plant height	0.14	0.31	0.52**

Leaf length had the strongest direct effect (0.62) on fiber yield (Table 2), confirming it as the primary selection

criterion for sisal breeding. Leaf width contributed both directly (0.34) and through correlation with leaf length.

**Fig 2:** Pollinator activity patterns during the sisal flowering period showing bee, butterfly, and beetle visit frequencies

Comprehensive interpretation

HPLC profiling identified 14 phenolic compounds in leaf sap, with chlorogenic acid (28.7 mg/100 g) and rutin (19.4 mg/100 g) as the main constituents. Quercetin (8.3 mg/100 g) and kaempferol (6.1 mg/100 g) were also present. Pollinator surveys recorded 847 visits over 15 flowering days: bees constituted 64.2%, butterflies 18.3%, and beetles 17.5%. Peak visitation occurred on days 5-8 of flowering, coinciding with maximum nectar production estimated at 12.4 mL per inflorescence per day.

Discussion

The 17.8% yield increase from fish emulsion at 150% rate suggests that organic sisal responds well to elevated nitrogen when delivered through fertigation, likely because the slow-release nature of fish emulsion matches sisal's gradual nutrient uptake pattern better than pulse-applied synthetic fertilizers ^[11]. The transpiration decline above 100% fertigation rate hints at osmotic stress from accumulated organic solutes near the root zone, a common issue with high-concentration fertigation in sandy coastal soils with limited buffering capacity ^[12].

The phenolic profile of sisal sap dominated by chlorogenic acid and rutin has commercial potential. Chlorogenic acid is widely used in dietary supplements and cosmetics for its antioxidant properties, and rutin has established markets in pharmaceutical formulations for capillary fragility ^[13]. If sap collection can be integrated into normal fiber harvesting operations without extra labor, it becomes a zero-cost co-product stream.

The pollinator data underscore sisal's ecological role in coastal agricultural landscapes. A single sisal inflorescence

attracted 56 insect visits per day at peak flowering, providing nectar resources during a season when other cultivated flowers may be scarce ^[14].

Conclusion

Organic sisal production in the Sulawesi coastal zone achieved competitive fiber yields when supported by fish emulsion fertigation at 150% of recommended N rate. Leaf length emerged as the strongest predictor of fiber yield through path analysis, providing a clear selection target for breeding. HPLC profiling revealed a phenolic-rich leaf sap with commercial potential as a co-product. Pollinator surveys confirmed sisal's value as an ecological resource during flowering. These results demonstrate that organic certification for sisal is agronomically achievable in tropical coastal settings with appropriate fertigation management and potentially enhanced by co-product revenue from phenolic compounds.

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