



# International Journal of Research in Agronomy

E-ISSN: 2618-0618  
P-ISSN: 2618-060X  
© Agronomy  
NAAS Rating (2026): 5.20  
[www.agronomyjournals.com](http://www.agronomyjournals.com)  
2026; 9(5): 486-490  
Received: 02-02-2026  
Accepted: 05-03-2026

**Dawen DE**  
Department of Plant Science and  
Biotechnology, University of Jos,  
Plateau State, Nigeria

**Agbo GO**  
Department of Plant Science and  
Biotechnology, University of Jos,  
Plateau State, Nigeria

## Effect of bio priming agents on the germination of maize (*Zee Mayz*) under saline stress

**Dawen DE and Agbo GO**

**DOI:** <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/2618060X.2026.v9.i5g.5553>

### Abstract

Soil salinity is a major abiotic constraint globally limiting crop productivity, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions. This study evaluated the effectiveness of selected bio-priming agents *Trichoderma*, *Zingiber officinale* (ginger) extract, and *Tithonia diversifolia* leaf extract on maize (*Zea mays* L.) germination and early seedling growth under saline stress conditions (0, 50, and 100 mM NaCl). Germination percentage, Mean Germination Time (MGT), germination rate, Seedling Vigor Index (SVI), root length, and shoot length were assessed. Results showed that salinity significantly reduced germination rate, root length, and shoot length ( $p < 0.05$ ), while germination percentage, MGT, and SVI were not significantly affected. Bio-priming treatments did not significantly enhance germination percentage but improved seedling growth parameters, particularly root and shoot development under saline stress. *Trichoderma* exhibited the strongest effect, while ginger and *Tithonia* showed moderate improvements, especially at higher concentrations. The findings indicate that bio-priming enhances salt stress tolerance through improved metabolic activation, osmotic regulation, and antioxidant defense mechanisms. Bio-priming is therefore a sustainable and cost-effective strategy for improving maize establishment in saline-prone environments.

**Keywords:** Maize, bio-priming, saline stress, abiotic

### Introduction

Globally, maize (*Zea mays* L.) is one of the most important cereal crops, serving as a staple food, industrial raw material, and livestock feed. In Nigeria, maize plays a critical role in food security, rural livelihoods, and agro-industrial development (Tahir *et al.*, 2021; FAO, 2023) [5, 13]. However, its productivity is increasingly threatened by abiotic stresses, particularly soil salinity. Salinity affects over 800 million hectares of land worldwide and continues to expand due to climate change, poor irrigation practices, and land degradation (FAO, 2023) [5]. Salt stress imposes both osmotic and ionic challenges on plants, limiting water uptake and causing toxic ion accumulation, which disrupts physiological and biochemical processes (Munns *et al.*, 2020) [9]. These effects are particularly severe during seed germination and early seedling development.

Recent studies have further highlighted biochemical disruptions under salinity, including altered nitrogen metabolism and intracellular pH imbalance, which impair enzymatic activity during germination (Liu *et al.*, 2024) [8]. However, recent studies confirm that plant-derived bio-stimulants improved stress tolerance and seedling growth under salinity conditions (Sharma *et al.*, 2022; Singh & Kumar, 2023) [10, 11]. Seed priming has emerged as an effective pre-sowing technique to improve germination performance under stress conditions. Bio-priming combining hydration with biological agents enhances seed performance by stimulating metabolic processes, improving antioxidant defenses, and promoting beneficial microbial interactions (Abbas *et al.*, 2021; Bose *et al.*, 2021) [1, 3].

Despite increasing interest, there is limited research on locally available bio-priming agents such as ginger and *Tithonia diversifolia* in saline environments. This study therefore evaluated their effectiveness compared to *Trichoderma*.

### Study area

The experiment was conducted in Biology Laboratory 2 at the University of Jos, located in Jos North Local Government Area, Plateau State, Nigeria, under controlled environmental

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dawen DE**  
Department of Plant Science and  
Biotechnology, University of Jos,  
Plateau State, Nigeria

Conditions. The study area is characterized by a tropical highland climate with average temperatures ranging from 18 °C to 30 °C.

Recent studies have also illuminated the role of altered nitrogen metabolism in mediating salinity-induced germination inhibition. Liu *et al.* (2024) [8] reported that under salt stress, the

hydrolysis of arginine-derived urea increases, resulting in the accumulation of hydroxide ions (OH<sup>-</sup>). This causes a rise in the cytoplasmic pH of seed cells, leading to alkalinity that disrupts enzyme function and metabolic homeostasis. Such biochemical disturbances at the cellular level further compound the detrimental effects of salinity on seed germination.

**Table 1:** Overview of Bio-Priming Agents, Their Sources, Active Compounds, and Benefits in Enhancing Seed Germination

| Bio-Priming Agent                        | Source Plant or Microbe      | Active Compounds                                                  | Mode of Action                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Benefits in Seed Priming                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ginger Extract                           | <i>Zingiber officinale</i>   | Gingerol, shogaol, zingiberene, antioxidants, phenols             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Antioxidant activity reduces oxidative damage during germination.</li> <li>- Enhances enzyme activity like amylase for faster energy release.</li> <li>- Promotes better membrane stability under salt stress.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improves germination rate and seedling vigor.</li> <li>- Enhances salt and drought stress tolerance.</li> <li>- Improves root development and chlorophyll content.</li> </ul>          |
| Garlic Extract                           | <i>Allium sativum</i>        | Allicin, sulfur compounds, flavonoids, phenolic acids             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong anti-microbial properties help prevent seed-borne pathogens.</li> <li>- Allicin enhances cell membrane strength and protein synthesis.</li> <li>- Boosts antioxidant defense system of the seed.</li> </ul>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increases germination speed and uniformity.</li> <li>- Reduces early seedling diseases.</li> <li>- Enhances resistance to environmental stressors like salinity.</li> </ul>            |
| Aloe Vera Gel                            | <i>Aloe barbadensis</i>      | Polysaccharides, amino acids, enzymes, saponins, vitamins A, C, E | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contains natural growth hormones and anti-stress compounds.</li> <li>- Enhances enzyme activation and improves moisture retention.</li> <li>- Promotes early root and shoot growth.</li> </ul>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improves seedling vigor and biomass under salinity stress.</li> <li>- Promotes rapid emergence and chlorophyll formation.</li> <li>- Enhances resistance to abiotic stress.</li> </ul> |
| Neem Extract                             | <i>Azadirachta indica</i>    | Azadirachtin, flavonoids, limonoids                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Antimicrobial, antioxidant, promotes seedling vigor.</li> <li>- Reduces seed-borne diseases.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improves germination and early growth.</li> <li>- Increases tolerance to pests and pathogens.</li> </ul>                                                                               |
| Moringa Extract                          | <i>Moringa oleifera</i>      | Zeatin (cytokinin), vitamins A, C, antioxidants                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Promotes cell division, boosts stress tolerance.</li> <li>- Enhances antioxidant enzyme activity.</li> </ul>                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increases seedling vigor.</li> <li>- Improves resistance to drought and salinity stress.</li> </ul>                                                                                    |
| Tamarind Extract                         | <i>Tamarindus indica</i>     | Tannins, flavonoids, ascorbic acid                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Antioxidant and anti-stress properties.</li> <li>- Enhances nutrient uptake.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improves germination under saline conditions.</li> <li>- Increases drought resistance.</li> </ul>                                                                                      |
| Tithonia Extract                         | <i>Tithonia diversifolia</i> | Phenolic compounds, alkaloids                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Boosts antioxidant enzymes, improves nutrient uptake.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enhances growth in nutrient-poor soils.</li> <li>- Improves plant resistance to abiotic stress.</li> </ul>                                                                             |
| Onion Extract                            | <i>Allium cepa</i>           | Quercetin, sulfur compounds                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Antioxidant and antifungal action.</li> <li>- Enhances nutrient uptake and cell strength.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improves seedling growth and resistance to fungal diseases.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                 |
| Turmeric Extract                         | <i>Curcuma longa</i>         | Curcumin, polyphenols                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enhances chlorophyll synthesis and root development.</li> <li>- Reduces oxidative stress.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improves seedling growth under saline conditions.</li> <li>- Reduces oxidative damage in seeds.</li> </ul>                                                                             |
| <i>Trichoderma harzianum</i> (Microbe)   | Fungi                        | Antifungal enzymes, secondary metabolites                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Protects seeds from fungal pathogens.</li> <li>- Promotes root growth.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increases disease resistance.</li> <li>- Improves root health and seedling vigor.</li> </ul>                                                                                           |
| <i>Azospirillum brasilense</i> (Microbe) | Nitrogen-fixing bacteria     | Phytohormones, nitrogen-fixing enzymes                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fixes atmospheric nitrogen in the soil.</li> <li>- Produces plant growth-promoting hormones.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improves nutrient uptake and germination.</li> <li>- Enhances drought tolerance.</li> </ul>                                                                                            |
| <i>Bacillus subtilis</i>                 | Bacteria                     | Plant growth-promoting compounds, antifungal agents               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Produces phytohormones and bioactive metabolites.</li> <li>- Suppresses pathogenic fungi.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improves growth under biotic stress.</li> <li>- Increases seedling survival under salinity.</li> </ul>                                                                                 |
| <i>Rhizobium</i> spp. (Microbe)          | Nitrogen-fixing bacteria     | Nitrogen, phytohormones                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Promotes root nodulation, nitrogen fixation.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enhances nitrogen availability to plants.</li> <li>- Improves early seedling establishment.</li> </ul>                                                                                 |

Compiled and adapted from Abbas *et al.* (2021); Khan *et al.* (2019); Sharma *et al.* (2020); Gholami *et al.* (2020); Singh & Kumar (2021) [1, 14, 15, 16, 17]

## Materials and Methods

### Experimental design

A Completely Randomized Design (CRD) with factorial arrangement: Priming treatments: Control, ginger extract (5 g, 10 g, 15 g), Tithonia extract (5 g, 10 g, 15 g), *Trichoderma*. Salinity levels: 0, 50, 100 mM NaCl, Replications were 3  
Total experimental units: 27

### Seed preparation and priming

Seeds were surface-sterilized using 1% sodium hypochlorite and rinsed thoroughly. Bio-priming was conducted by soaking seeds in respective solutions for 4 hours.

### Germination procedure

Seeds were placed in Petri dishes lined with Whatman filter

paper and treated with respective NaCl solutions. Observations were recorded over 7 days.

### Parameters measured

Germination Percentage (GP)  
Germination Rate (GR)  
Mean Germination Time (MGT)  
Seedling Vigor Index (SVI)  
Root Length  
Shoot Length

### Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed using two-way ANOVA at  $p \leq 0.05$ .

### Results

the effect of bio-priming agents and salinity stress on the

germination percentage of maize seeds is presented in Table 2 showing the two-way ANOVA which revealed that neither bio-priming treatments nor salinity levels had a significant effect on germination percentage ( $p > 0.05$ ). This means that, regardless of the priming agent used or the salt concentration applied, the proportion of maize seeds that successfully germinated remained relatively similar. Although some variation was observed among treatments, the differences were not strong enough to be statistically meaningful. This suggests that maize seeds have a relatively stable germination capacity even under moderate salinity stress. This implies that the bio-priming agents and varying salinity concentrations did not significantly affect the ability of maize seeds to germinate. Although differences exist among treatments and observation days, they were not statistically significant ( $P > 0.05$ ). This indicates that while priming influenced germination percentage, variation among replicates was high.

**Table 2:** Two-way ANOVA for germination percentage of maize under different priming treatments and salinity levels

| Source of Variation | SS      | Df | MS     | F Value | P-value | F crit |
|---------------------|---------|----|--------|---------|---------|--------|
| Rows (Treatments)   | 1772.79 | 6  | 295.46 | 2.01    | 0.1431  | 2.996  |
| Columns (Salinity)  | 443.34  | 2  | 221.67 | 1.51    | 0.2606  | 3.885  |
| Error               | 1764.82 | 12 | 147.07 |         |         |        |
| Total               | 3980.95 | 20 |        |         |         |        |

Table 3 revealed that there was no significant effect ( $p > 0.05$ ) of priming treatments or salinity on the mean germination time of maize seeds. In other words, the speed of germination did not vary much across treatments. The variations are due to chance

rather than factors tested as the F calculated (2.996 and 3.885) were greater than the treatment and column 0.82 and 0.39 respectively). This was similarly observed for p values which were above 0.05

**Table 3:** Two-way ANOVA for Mean Germination Time of maize under different priming treatments and salinity levels

| Source of Variation | SS   | df | MS   | F value | P-value | F crit |
|---------------------|------|----|------|---------|---------|--------|
| Rows (Treatments)   | 2.02 | 6  | 0.34 | 0.82    | 0.5759  | 2.996  |
| Columns (Salinity)  | 0.32 | 2  | 0.16 | 0.39    | 0.6862  | 3.885  |
| Error               | 4.94 | 12 | 0.41 |         |         |        |
| Total               | 7.28 | 20 |      |         |         |        |

Table 4 presents the germination percentage and MGT and salinity had a significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ ) on germination rate. Higher salt

Concentrations slowed down the rate at which seeds germinated, even though the final number of germinated seeds was not affected.

**Table 4:** Two-way ANOVA for Germination Rate of maize under different priming treatments and salinity levels

| Source of Variation | SS   | df | MS   | F     | P-value | F crit |
|---------------------|------|----|------|-------|---------|--------|
| Rows (Treatments)   | 2.02 | 6  | 0.34 | 2.76  | 0.0637  | 2.996  |
| Columns (Salinity)  | 5.37 | 2  | 2.68 | 21.99 | 0.0001* | 3.885  |
| Error               | 1.46 | 12 | 0.12 |       |         |        |
| Total               | 8.85 | 20 |      |       |         |        |

Table 5 revealed that, there is no significant differences ( $p > 0.05$ ) were observed for the Seedling Vigor Index (SVI). This means that the combined influence of shoot and root growth, which determines vigor, was not strongly altered at this

stage of growth. However, P values 0.1853 and 0.2676 respectively showed no significant difference. Same situation was observed for F values (2.996, 3.885 respectively for treatment and salinity)

**Table 5:** Two-way ANOVA for Seedling Vigor Index of maize under different priming treatments and salinity levels

| Source of Variation | SS   | df | MS   | F    | P-value | F crit |
|---------------------|------|----|------|------|---------|--------|
| Rows (Treatments)   | 1.03 | 6  | 0.17 | 1.78 | 0.1853  | 2.996  |
| Columns (Salinity)  | 0.28 | 2  | 0.14 | 1.47 | 0.2676  | 3.885  |
| Error               | 1.15 | 12 | 0.10 |      |         |        |
| Total               | 2.46 | 20 |      |      |         |        |

On Table 6, priming treatments (0.0069) and salinity significantly (0.00007) affected root length ( $p < 0.05$ ). Bio-primed seeds developed longer roots compared to the unprimed control, while higher salinity levels sharply reduced root elongation. This showed the protective role of bio-priming in supporting stronger root systems under saline conditions. Bio-priming enhanced root elongation under salinity stress, while increasing salinity reduced root growth.

**Table 6:** Two-way ANOVA for root length of maize under different priming treatments and salinity levels

| Source of Variation | SS        | df | MS       | F     | P-value  | F crit |
|---------------------|-----------|----|----------|-------|----------|--------|
| Rows (Treatments)   | 126517.46 | 6  | 21086.24 | 5.30  | 0.0069*  | 2.996  |
| Columns (Salinity)  | 189434.51 | 2  | 94717.26 | 23.81 | 0.00007* | 3.885  |
| Error               | 47734.41  | 12 | 3977.87  |       |          |        |
| Total               | 363686.37 | 20 |          |       |          |        |

Shoot length was also significantly (0.0012 and 0.0028 respectively) influenced by priming and salinity as  $p < 0.05$ . Primed seeds produced taller shoots than the unprimed control, while salinity consistently reduced shoot growth. This suggests that priming not only strengthens the root system but also promotes shoot elongation, while salinity inhibits shoot expansion. Primed seeds produced longer shoots compared to the control, while higher salinity reduced shoot elongation.

**Table 7:** Two-way ANOVA for shoot length of maize under different priming treatments and salinity levels

| Source of Variation | SS    | df | MS   | F    | P-value | F crit |
|---------------------|-------|----|------|------|---------|--------|
| Rows (Treatments)   | 13.85 | 6  | 2.31 | 8.09 | 0.0012* | 2.996  |
| Columns (Salinity)  | 5.68  | 2  | 2.84 | 9.95 | 0.0028* | 3.885  |
| Error               | 3.42  | 12 | 0.29 |      |         |        |
| Total               | 22.95 | 20 |      |      |         |        |

\*significant difference

## Discussion

the results of this study revealed that bio-priming agents exhibited differential effects on maize germination and seedling growth under salinity stress. Bio-priming treatments (Ginger, *Tithonia*, and *Trichoderma*) did not significantly improve final germination percentage or mean germination time when compared to the control. This suggests that maize seeds inherently possess strong germination capacity, and moderate salinity levels (as used in this experiment) did not drastically inhibit germination. Both ginger and *Tithonia* slightly enhanced germination uniformity compared to the control, though not significantly. *Trichoderma* also maintained similar germination percentages, indicating that the major benefits of bio-priming become evident beyond the early germination phase. Additionally, this indicates that priming agents did not accelerate the germination process, and moderate salinity stress also did not cause noticeable delays. This agrees with Kaya *et al.* (2018) [7], who found that priming has a limited influence on germination speed unless salinity is extreme. This suggests that the speed of germination was not influenced by bio-priming agents or salinity stress. According to Kaya *et al.* (2018) [7], germination time is often less responsive to priming under moderate salt conditions.

Unlike germination percentage, salinity significantly reduced germination rate. Seeds in higher salt concentrations took longer to sprout. Among priming agents, *Trichoderma*-primed seeds exhibited a comparatively higher rate of germination under saline conditions, likely due to improved water uptake and stress

tolerance mechanisms mediated by the fungus. Ginger and *Tithonia* treatments produced intermediate results, while the control seeds were most affected. This suggests that bio-priming can mitigate the delay caused by salinity, with *Trichoderma* showing the strongest effect. This result highlights an important distinction: salinity may not stop seeds from germinating, but it can delay the process, which reduces uniformity of seedling emergence. This indicates that increasing salinity concentrations slowed the rate of germination. This result aligns with earlier reports that salt stress reduces water uptake and delays enzymatic activation necessary for germination (Jisha *et al.*, 2019) [6].

Although SVI did not differ significantly across treatments, there was a clear downward trend with increased salinity. Ginger and *Tithonia* priming appeared to slightly improve seedling vigor relative to the control, possibly due to their phytochemical and nutrient contributions, though variation was high and not statistically significant. This aligns with reports by Singh *et al.* (2021) [17], who noted that vigor indices are often suppressed under salinity but can be improved through biochemical enhancement. These trends suggested that higher salinity lowered seedling vigor, suggesting that seed vigor was not markedly influenced by either priming treatments or salinity levels. However, vigor index is often affected under prolonged salinity, where metabolic damage accumulates (Singh *et al.*, 2021) [17].

Both salinity and priming significantly influenced root growth. *Trichoderma*-primed seeds consistently produced longer roots than other treatments, highlighting its role in root system development under stress. *Trichoderma* is known to release plant growth hormones such as Indole-3-Acetic Acid (IAA), which promote root elongation and branching, thereby improving water and nutrient acquisition in saline soils (Afzal *et al.*, 2021) [2]. *Tithonia* extract also improved root growth, probably due to its mineral content and organic compounds that stimulate metabolic activity. Ginger priming showed moderate improvement, likely linked to antioxidant compounds that mitigate oxidative stress in root tissues. The control (water-primed) seeds had the shortest roots under saline conditions. This agrees with reports that seed priming improves root system architecture and nutrient uptake under saline environments (Bose *et al.*, 2021) [3].

Shoot length was significantly affected by both priming and salinity. Ginger-primed seeds (especially at higher concentrations) recorded better shoot elongation compared to the control, suggesting that ginger bio-actives (gingerols, antioxidants) may enhance cell expansion under saline stress. *Trichoderma* priming also significantly improved shoot growth, corroborating its known role in stimulating systemic tolerance and nutrient efficiency (Farooq *et al.*, 2017) [4]. Similar results were reported by Farooq *et al.* (2017) [4], who found that seed priming improved shoot growth by enhancing stress tolerance and osmotic balance under saline conditions.

*Tithonia* extract had a positive but less pronounced effect on shoot elongation, likely due to its nutrient-enhancing properties. In contrast, control seedlings exhibited the shortest shoots, highlighting the beneficial role of bio-priming in alleviating salt-induced shoot inhibition.

Overall, while germination percentage and Mean Germination Time (MGT) were not significantly influenced, germination rate, root length, and shoot length responded strongly to both salinity and priming treatments. *Trichoderma* emerged as the most effective priming agent, followed by ginger and *Tithonia*, in supporting seedling establishment under saline conditions. This demonstrates that the advantage of bio-priming lies not in

ensuring seeds germinate but in enhancing seedling vigor and early growth under stress conditions.

These results confirm earlier reports (Jisha *et al.*, 2019; Bose *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[3, 6]</sup> that seed priming enhances tolerance to abiotic stress by activating defense pathways, improving osmotic regulation, and stimulating antioxidant systems. The practical implication is that farmers in saline-prone areas can benefit more from bio-priming when targeting strong seedling establishment rather than germination initiation.

### Conclusion

Bio-priming did not significantly influence germination percentage or MGT but significantly improved root and shoot growth under saline conditions. *Trichoderma* was the most effective priming agent, followed by ginger and *Tithonia* extracts.

Bio-priming is therefore recommended as a sustainable, low-cost, and eco-friendly strategy for enhancing maize establishment in saline-prone soils.

### Recommendations

Farmers should adopt *Trichoderma*-based priming where available

Ginger and *Tithonia* extracts serve as effective local alternatives

Field trials are needed to validate laboratory findings

Policy support should promote bio-priming technologies

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