C A L I F O R N I A

Almond Productivity as Related to Tissue Potassium

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Heavy crop removal and inadequate soil potassium (K) availability could limit almond production in California. This research suggests that K deficiency is associated with higher mortality rates for fruiting spurs. Leaf K concentration from samples taken in July were found to be moderately correlated with yields in the following year. Leaf K concentration below 0.8 percent in July was associated with K deficiency. No yield benefit associated with leaf K concentrations greater than 1.4 percent was observed. Almond fruit (kernel, shell and hull) is a major K sink, containing the equivalent of about 55 lb K_2O/1,000 lb of harvested kernels.

Almond yield is the product of fruit number and fruit size, but fruit number is arguably the most important yield determinant. There is evidence, from other fleshy *Prunus* species, that K deficiency limits fruit size. Almond flowers are differentiated during the summer prior to anthesis, and almost all fruit is borne laterally on relatively long-lived spurs. Therefore, a nutrient deficiency may conceivably reduce potential future yields (in terms of flower/fruit number) by limiting growth of new shoots and spurs, by reducing the productivity of existing spurs, and by reducing the quality or quantity of floral differentiation.

Potassium fertilizer was applied to drip irrigated 'Nonpareil' almond trees in a Modesto, California, orchard at rates of 0, 240, 600, and 960 lb K_2O/A/year as potassium sulfate (K_2SO_4), beginning in 1998. The fertilizer was applied directly beneath six drip emitters per tree, split three times (May 23, June 17, and July 3) in 1998 and two times (February 26 and April 29) in 1999 and 2000 (February 2 and May 4). Forty individual branch units from trees in the control (0 K) and 960 lb K_2O/A rates ('low-K' and 'high-K', respectively) were selected to monitor yield determinants and individual spur longevity over several years. Yield and leaf K concentrations were also measured.

Differential K application rates were initiated during the summer of 1998 (year 1), July leaf K concentrations indicative of K deficiency were established during year 1999, and a statistically significant yield response to K fertilizer occurred in 2000 (**Table 1**). Our data indicate there is a time lag between establishment of K deficiency and yield reduction, that yield is a multi-component process, and these components vary both in sensitivity to K deficiency and the time frame over which they contribute to the yield reduction.

There was no yield reduction in 1999, despite K deficiency as determined by leaf K concentration. This indicates that some of the parameters influencing yield...namely percentage fruit set, the number of fruit, fruit growth, and total crop weight...are relatively insensitive to limited soil K availability. The insensitivity of percentage fruit set and fruit growth to low K availability was demonstrated in both 1999 and 2000 (**Table 2**).

Although overall percentage fruit set was not different among low-K and high-K trees in 2000, the return bloom (flower number in 2000 divided by flower number in 1999) was markedly lower on unfertilized trees (**Table 2**). The lower return bloom in low-K trees might have been caused by the death of existing spurs, decreased initiation of new spurs within the canopy, and/or a reduced number of flowers per spur. Our data from monitoring individual spurs from the low- and high-K trees suggest that the 27 percent increase in mortality of spurs that fruited in 1999 (**Table 3**) was a major factor in the lower return bloom and reduced yields of low-K trees in 2000. Tree K status did not influence the mortality of spurs that were non-fruiting in 1999 (**Table 3**), meaning that this effect of K-deficiency was localized to fruiting spurs.

Leaf K Critical Value. The concept of a leaf K critical value implies the existence of a relationship between leaf K concentration and yield. As noted above, we believe that the lower yields for untreated trees in 2000 were due to the persisting or carryover effects of K deficiency in 1999, while we expect that tree K status in 2000 would have no relationship to the crop harvested in 2000. Therefore, we correlated the 2000 yields with the 1999 leaf K concentration. This analysis indicated a moderate (60 percent), but significant relationship between leaf K concentration and future productivity. The relatively low variability in leaf K concentration and yield for untreated trees suggests leaf K concentrations are diagnostic for K deficiency (**Figure 1**). The highest yields among plots receiving fertilizer had leaf K concentrations ranging from 1.4 to 1.7 percent (**Figure 1**). There were also, however, plots within the latter leaf K concentration range that yielded no better than the controls. This suggests that factors other than K were limiting yield when K concentration in leaves exceeded 1.4 percent.

TABLE 1. Effects of K applications on leaf K concentrations and yields.

Treatment, lb K_2O/A	Leaf K, % dry wt.[1] 1998	1999	2000	Nut yield, meats, lb/A 1998	1999	2000
0	1.1	0.7	0.7	780	3,930	2,410
240	1.3	1.3	1.2	890	3,840	2,860
600	1.3	1.6	1.4	830	4,380	2,860
960	1.3	1.7	1.7	1,070	4,020	2,770
	**	**	**	ns	ns	*

*, **Significant differences among treatment means at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$, respectively. Not significant = ns.

[1]Samples taken in the last week of July.

TABLE 2. Effect of tree K status on yield determinants measured on individual branches, beginning eight months after differential K fertilization was initiated.[1]

Treatment, lb K_2O/A	Fruit set, % 1999	Fruit set, % 2000	Nodes/shoot 1999	Weight, 1999, g Embryo	Weight, 1999, g Whole fruit	Return bloom, % 2000
0	27 ± 2.4	21 ± 2.2	11.1 ± 0.86	0.95 ± 0.04	2.76 ± 0.05	23 ± 3.2
960	26 ± 1.8	25 ± 2.2	11.6 ± 0.43	1.01 ± 0.01	2.78 ± 0.09	33 ± 4.6
						*

[1]means ± Standard Error (SE).

*Denotes means which differ at $p < 0.10$.

Almond production requires substantial amounts of K, and deficiency can reduce future yield potential.

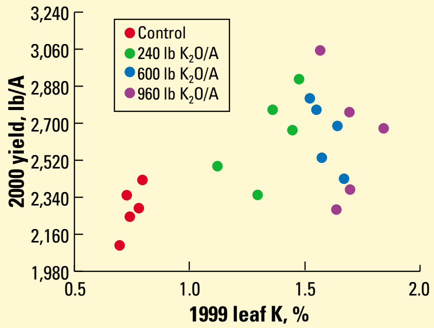

Figure 1. Almond yields as measured in August 2000 versus their leaf K concentration measured in July 1999.

We also determined the quantity of K removed per acre in the almond crop so that growers and consultants can better estimate the amount of K fertilizer required to avoid deficiency (**Table 4**). Based on 1999 data, the kernel contains the equivalent of about 8 lb K_2O/1,000 lb. The shell contains slightly more than the kernel, and the largest K sink is the hull, containing the equivalent of about 37 lb K_2O (high-K treatment). Since kernel, shell and hull are all removed from the field at harvest, the equivalent of approximately 55 lb K_2O was removed/1,000 lb of harvested kernels. Thus, a 3,000 lb crop would remove about 165 lb K_2O.

TABLE 3. Effect of tree K status on subsequent productivity of spurs tagged in 1999.

Treatment, lb K_2O/A	1999 status	Number of samples	Spur status in 2000, % of total sample: Vegetative	Fruiting	Dead
0	Fruiting	133	26	18	56
960	Fruiting	172	31	27	42
					*
0	Vegetative	113	21	77	2
960	Vegetative	138	16	77	7

*Denotes means which differ at $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 4. Total fruit K removed in 1999 per 1,000 lb of 'Nonpareil' almond kernels (meats)[1].

		Low K		High K	
Fraction	Weight, lb[2]	K conc., %	K removed, lb K_2O	K conc., %	K removed, lb K_2O
Kernel	1,000	0.7	8.4	0.7	8.4
Shell	400	1.5	7.2	2.0	9.6
Hull	1,200	1.7	24.0	2.6	37.2
Total			39.6		55.2

[1]Includes the mesocarp plus exocarp.
[2]There were no yield differences among treatments in 1999 (data not presented).

Conclusions

July leaf K concentration is moderately associated with future productivity. Maximum yields were correlated with leaf K values equal to or greater than 1.4 percent, but due to the lack of data points between 0.9 percent and 1.4 percent, we cannot clearly delineate the zone of sufficiency from that of deficiency.

Potassium deficiency will not affect yield in the year it is indicated by leaf testing, since percentage fruit set and fruit size are not influenced by K status in the current year. Very low July leaf K concentrations in a heavy-cropping year (below 0.7 to 0.8 percent for non-fruiting spurs) are associated with a K limitation to tree productivity. This will reduce yields in subsequent years as a result of decreased overall flower number due to increased spur mortality.

The effects of K application on leaf K concentrations observed in this study are site- and cultivar-specific and may vary according to soil type, application technique, and irrigation method. However, since most of the fruit K is contained in the hull and because 'Nonpareil' almond has a relatively large hull compared to other cultivars, it should be possible to match K fertilizer application to the predicted crop size. Also, growers and consultants should consider whether the soils in their area are likely to fix significant quantities of applied K and adjust fertilizer recommendations accordingly.

Although the data are not presented here, early spring is likely to be the most critical period for K availability because this is the period of rapid vegetative growth and fruit development. It makes sense to apply K so that it will be available at this time. BC

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Acknowledgments – *The authors thank the Almond Board of California and PPI for their generous financial support. The cooperation of Pete Mihelis of Mihelis Farms (Modesto, CA) and the assistance of Art Bowman of Salida Ag Chem (Salida, CA) are also greatly appreciated.*