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Original Research Article

NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF COWPEA PLANTS INOCULATED ~~AND COINOCULATED~~ WITH ~~RIZOBACTERIAS IN~~ ASSOCIATED WITH PHOSPHATE FERTILIZATION

ABSTRACT

Biological nitrogen fixation (BNF) plays an important role in cowpea cultivation. Thus, the present study aimed to evaluate the effects of inoculation and co-inoculation of rhizobacteria associated with phosphate fertilization on biometric parameters and absorption and use of nutrients by different cowpea genotypes. The experimental design was randomized blocks in a 4x3x2 factorial scheme, corresponding to four rates of phosphorus (0, 80, 120 and 160 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5), absence, inoculation and co-inoculation with rhizobacteria; two cowpea genotypes (White and Butter), with four replicates. The results ~~allowed to conclude that there is~~ variability between the cowpea genotypes with respect to efficiency and response to phosphorus application. Inoculation of *Bradyrhizobium sp.* associated with 120 and 160 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5 increase~~s~~ plant height and P and S contents in the shoots of cowpea plants. Increase in P ~~rates~~ leads to increments in dry matter production and content~~s~~ of N, P and K in cowpea plants. Co-inoculation of *Bradyrhizobium sp.* and *Azospirillum brasilense* did not influence any of the variables studied. Cowpea has potential to be used as green fertilizer ~~in~~ short period of cultivation, due to the accumulation of nutrients in its leaves and shoots.

KeyWords: Vigna unguiculata, Bradyrhizobium, *Azospirillum brasilense,* phosphorus, rhizobacteria, symbiosis, nutritional status.

INTRODUCTION

The area planted with cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata* (L.) Walp) in the world is 10.4 million hectares and is mainly located in tropical and subtropical regions of America, Asia and Africa. The global production of cowpea grain~~s~~ is about 5.5 million tons, and Nigeria is the largest producer in the world (Fao, 2016). In Brazil, cowpea cultivation is estimated to be approximately 1.442 million hectares, with mean yield of about 496 kg ha^{-1} (Conab, 2018), which allows the crop to be among the

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main leguminous crops cultivated in the country, predominantly in the North and Northeast regions, which ~~are responsible for~~ 1.192 million hectares of cowpea in the 2017/18 season (Conab, 2018). Nevertheless, low yields have been observed in production areas and one of the main causes is the low availability of nutrients in the soil, particularly due to the insufficient supply of nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) (Araújo et al. 2012). In tropical soils, the ~~practice~~ of N and phosphate fertiliz~~ation~~s are essential to obtain adequate yields for most crops of economic interest (Karikari et al. 2015).

The cowpea crop, through symbiosis with bacteria from the genera *Bradyrhizobium* and *Azospirillum*, can obtain N through biological fixation of N_2 (BNF), which is one of the ways to increase the yield of leguminous plants~~,~~ avoiding costs ~~with~~ soluble N fertilizers (Araújo et al. 2017). BNF is known to be efficient in cowpea, which can reach high yields when well nodulated (Rumjanek et al. 2005). P is fundamental for cowpea yield because it stimulates growth, initiates the formation of nodules and influences the efficiency of rhizobium-plant symbiosis (Nkaa et al. 2014). Studies conducted by Karikari et al. (2015) revealed high potential ~~of~~ response to phosphate fertilization by the cowpea crop in soils characterized by low P availability, significantly contributing to the increase in vegetative growth, nodulation and grain yield. Araújo et al. (2017) observed that *Bradyrhizobium sp*. inoculation increases dry matter production and N and P absorption efficiency in cowpea plants. Guimarães et al. (2015) report that cowpea responded significantly to inoculation, with increments in its biometric parameters to or higher than those obtained with N fertilization. N_2 fixation efficiency depends on P availability, due to its participation in the symbiotic process (Burity et al. 2000).

~~The obtention of~~ higher efficiency in N use has been the goal of both capitalized and low-input agriculture. In this sense, for high productivity of cowpea beans ~~is required~~, in addition to the use of phosphate fertilization selecting efficient genotypes ~~and~~ the use of ~~the~~ symbio~~sis~~ of rhizobacteria ~~that~~ enable greater economic returns, ~~which can~~ become a fundamental alternative in the substitution in whole or in part of nitrogenous fertilizers and better use of available phosphorus. And, although the application of N_2-fixing bacteria in cowpea is promising, ~~are~~ scarce work on phosphate fertilization in association with rhizobacteria for culture in the northern region, ~~which indicates the need to conduct studies to support more accurate and efficient recommendations~~.

Given the above, the present study aimed to evaluate the effects of inoculation and co-inoculation of rhizobacteria associated with phosphate fertilization on biometric parameters and absorption and use of nutrients by different cowpea genotypes.

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MATERIAL AND METHODS

The experiment was carried out from October 2017 to January 2018 in the experimental area of the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Amazonas, Campus of Lábrea, municipality of Lábrea, AM, Brazil, at geographic coordinates 7° 15' 18.02'' S and 64° 46' 58'' W, with altitude of 65 m, in a dystrophic Red Yellow Latosol. According to Köppen's classification, the climate of the region is Am, hot and humid tropical with two well-defined seasons. Mean data of temperature and rainfall along the experiment were obtained from the database of the National Institute of Meteorology (INMET).

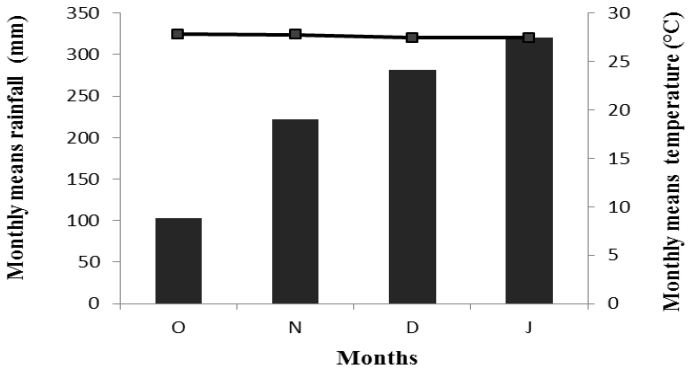

Fig. 1. Monthly means of rainfall (mm) and temperature (°C) recorded at the meteorological station of the National Institute of Meteorology from October to January in the 2017/18 agricultural year.

Soil chemical analysis in the 0-20 cm layer, carried out in the area before the experiment, resulted in the following values: O.M.: 14.2 g dm^{-3}; pH ($CaCl_2$): 5.7; P: 12 mg dm^{-3}; K: 0.8 $mmol_c$ dm^{-3}; Ca: 128 $mmol_c$ dm^{-3}; Mg: 40 $mmol_c$ dm^{-3}; Al: 50 $mmol_c$ dm^{-3}; H+Al: 168 $mmol_c$ dm^{-3}; SB: 336.8 $mmol_c$ dm^{-3}; CEC: 168.8 $mmol_c$ dm^{-3}, base saturation: 50.11%. Granulometric analysis showed 463 g dm^{-3} of clay, 423 g dm^{-3} of sand and 114 g dm^{-3} of silt. Soil correction was performed thirty days before sowing, considering soil analysis results, to increase base saturation to 60%.

The experimental design was randomized blocks in 4x3x2 factorial scheme, corresponding to four P rates; absence, inoculation and co-inoculation with rhizobacteria; and two cowpea genotypes

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(White and Butter), with four replicates. P rates consisted of 0, 80, 120 and 160 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5, applied in the planting furrow. The source of P_2O_5 was single superphosphate (21% P_2O_5). Basal fertilization consisted of N and K, using 30 kg ha^{-1} of N and 60 kg ha^{-1} of K_2O, in the form of urea (45% N) and potassium chloride (56% K_2O), respectively, incorporated to the soil.

Cowpea seeds were inoculated with the commercial inoculant Total Nitro Feijão-Caupi (concentration of 10^9 cells g^{-1}), which contains strains of *Bradyrhizobium sp.* (Semia 6462 and Semia 6463), in the peat formulation. The applied dose was 100 g of the peat inoculant for 50 kg of seeds. Co-inoculation was performed using the commercial product, containing a combination of *Azospirillum brasilense* strains in inoculant with liquid formulation. The applied dose was 150 mL for 50 kg of seeds. Co-inoculation was performed by using combinations of different microorganisms, in mixed inoculation. Both inoculants were produced and provided by the company Total Biotecnologia®.

Soil tillage consisted in harrowing (disc harrow) ~~until~~ 15 cm depth. Planting and fertilization furrows were manually opened using a hoe, with depths between 5 and 10 cm. Sowing was performed manually using a hand-held planter known as 'matraca', by placing four seeds per hole, leaving five plants per linear meter after thinning. Each experimental unit was composed of four 3-m-long rows spaced by 0.50 m between rows and 0.20 m between plants. The two central rows, disregarding 0.5 m on each end, were used for evaluations. At 10 and 30 days after emergence (DAE), an insecticide was applied with the active ingredients Imidacloprid 100 g/L and Beta-cyfluthrin 12.5 g/L, from the chemical groups Neonicotinoid (Imidacloprid) and Pyrethroid (Beta-cyfluthrin), recommended for the cowpea crop at dose of 750-1000 mL/ha to control *Diabrotica speciosa*.

At 45 DAE, at full flowering, 20 trifoliate leaves were collected per plot in the middle third of the plants to determine the leaf contents of N, P, K, Ca, Mg and S. All plant material collected was washed in running water and deionized water, and the samples were stored in paper bags, dried in a forced-air oven at 65 ºC for 72 hours and then ground. Ground samples were subjected to sulfuric digestion and nitric-perchloric digestion, using the methodology described in Embrapa (2009). In this same phenological stage, the following parameters were determined: plant height, measured from the base to the apical meristem using a tape measure; stem diameter, measured 2 cm above the base of the plant with a digital caliper; and number of leaves, obtained by counting.

At 60 DAE, shoot and root dry matter production and contents of macronutrients in shoots and roots were determined. Plant dry matter was determined by drying the samples in a forced-air oven at

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temperature of 65 ºC for 72 hours, and the data were expressed in g/plant. After drying, the dry matter was weighed and ground in Wiley mill and the samples were subjected to sulfuric digestion and nitric-perchloric digestion to determine the contents of macronutrients, according to the methodology described in Embrapa (2009). In this same period, plant roots were collected and washed in running water, and the nodules were counted.

Indices of nutrient absorption efficiency, ratio between total content of the nutrient in the plant and root dry matter, was calculated according to Swiader et al. (1994), whereas the indices of nutrient use, ratio between total dry matter produced and total accumulation of nutrient in the plant, were calculated according to Siddiqi; Glass (1981).

The data were subjected to normality test (Shapiro Wilk) and analysis of variance using the statistical analysis program Sisvar. Effects between inoculation and co-inoculation, for each genotype, were evaluated by Scott-Knott test at 0.05 probability level. For variables with statistical significance as a function of P rates, regression analysis was used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interaction between genotypes (G) and rates (D) had significant effect on plant height, number of nodules, S content in the leaves at full flowering and S content in the shoots of cowpea plants (Tables 1 and 2). On the other hand, the interaction between genotype (G) and bacteria (B) influenced the number of nodules, N content in the plant, N absorption efficiency, contents of K, Ca and Mg in the leaves at full flowering, and contents of N, P, K, Mg and S in the shoots of cowpea plants (Tables 1 and 2). The interaction between rates (D) and bacteria (B) influenced only plant height, P content in the leaves at full flowering and S content in the shoots of cowpea plants (Tables 1 and 2). The other results showed no significant effect ~~of the interaction~~ and were independently presented for each genotype, rate and bacteria. There was no significance ($p \leq 0.05$) of the triple interaction of treatments for any of the parameters evaluated (Tables 1 and 2).

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Table 1. F values, means and coefficients of variation for plant height (PH), stem diameter (SD), number of leaves (NLv), number of nodules (NN), shoot dry matter (SDM), root dry matter (RDM), total dry matter (TDM), nitrogen content in the roots (NR), nitrogen content in the plant (NP), nitrogen absorption efficiency (NAE) and nitrogen use efficiency (NUE) by cowpea genotypes inoculated and co-inoculated with rhizobacteria associated with phosphate fertilization. Lábrea, AM, Brazil (2018).

Source of variation	GL	Pr > F										
		PH	SD	MLv	NN	SDM	RDM	TDM	NR	NP	NAE	NUE
Genotypes (G)	1	0.00*	0.00*	0.78	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.12
Rate (D)	3	0.00*	0.00*	0.03*	0.00*	0.01*	0.20	0.03*	0.08	0.01*	0,16	0.18
Bacteria (B)	2	0.25	0.41	0.01*	0.00*	0.40	0.08	0.79	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.04
G x D	3	0.00*	0.18	0.07	0.00*	0.34	0.25	0.16	0.26	0.46	0.63	0.56
G x B	2	0.49	0.74	0.12	0.00*	0.37	0.08	0.18	0.24	0.01*	0.00*	0.19
D x B	6	0.02*	0.16	0.06	0.25	0.08	0.21	0.18	0.08	0.22	0.11	0.87
G x D x B	6	0.09	0.90	0.21	0.06	0.53	0.81	0.95	0.08	0.18	0.43	0.70
Residue	72											
Average		58.03	7.66	21.93	43.09	23.41	10.00	33.41	36.43	53.20	255.68	0.65
CV (%)		18.60	17.13	20.97	23.82	20.76	21.71	28.66	11.29	22.92	26.53	26.91

* – significant by Skott and Knott a 5% probability. CV – coefficient of variation.

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Table 2. F values, means and coefficients of variation for the contents of nitrogen (NL), phosphorus (PL), potassium (KL), calcium (CaL), magnesium (MgL) and sulfur (SL) in the leaves at full flowering, and contents of nitrogen (NS), phosphorus (PS), potassium (KS), calcium (CaS), magnesium (MgS) and sulfur (SS) in the shoots of cowpea genotypes inoculated and co-inoculated with rhizobacteria associated with phosphate fertilization. Lábrea, AM, Brazil (2018).

Source of variation	GL	Pr > F											
		NL	PL	KL	CaL	MgL	SL	NS	PS	KS	CaS	MgS	SS
Genotypes (G)	1	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.68	0.05	0.00*	0.02*	0.00*
Rate (D)	3	0.70	0.00*	0.02	0.00*	0.19	0.00*	0.03*	0.00*	0.46	0.79	0.97	0.31
Bacteria (B)	2	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.09	0.14	0.14	0.00*	0.00*	0.64	0.00*	0.89	0.18
G x D	3	0.20	0.25	0.31	0.39	0.27	0.02*	0.55	0.43	0.70	0.32	0.31	0.04*
G x B	2	0.89	0.22	0.00*	0.04*	0.01*	0.06	0.00*	0.00*	0.01*	0.19	0.00*	0.04*
D x B	6	0.05	0.00*	0.30	0.83	0.14	0.03*	0.12	0.01*	0.88	0.95	0.64	0.27
G x D x B	6	0.51	0.70	0.66	0.32	0.75	0.45	0.08	0.60	0.62	0.36	0.99	0.59
Residue	72												
Average		25.78	2.17	18.95	15.80	4.43	2.50	41.90	2.48	20.58	10.30	4.63	3.73
CV (%)		18.10	17.58	16.28	20.55	16.39	22.72	24.95	16.64	21.75	27.44	15.88	20.45

* – significant by Skott and Knott a 5% probability. CV – coefficient of variation.

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The genotype White was statistically superior ($p \leq 0.05$) to Butter with respect to plant height, stem diameter, number of leaves, number of nodules, root dry matter, shoot dry matter, total dry matter, N absorption efficiency, N content in the roots, N content in the shoots, N content in the plant, and contents of N, P and K in the leaves at full flowering (Tables 3 and 4). Opposite results were found for the other variables, in which the contents of Ca, Mg and S in the leaves at full flowering and the contents of Ca, Mg and S in the shoots of the cowpea genotype Butter were higher than those of the genotype White (Table 4). Karikari et al. (2015) and Nkaa et al. (2014) observed significant difference between cowpea genotypes with respect to plant height, leaf area, number of leaves and dry matter production, demonstrating that growth and development were different between the genotypes.

N contents in the roots, shoots and in the plant for the genotype White were higher than those for Butter, demonstrating that the former is more efficient in N absorption (Tables 3 and 4), which can be related to the higher number of viable nodules. N absorption by the cowpea genotypes ranged from 32.83 and 18.30 mg of dry weight per g of N absorbed. Araújo et al. (2012) ~~confirmed~~ the different responses between cowpea genotypes regarding growth and contents of nutrients in the shoots. This fact is usually ~~due~~ to the existence of nutritional ~~behavior~~ differentiated by genetic factors of adaptability.

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Table 3. Plant height (PH), stem diameter (SD), number of nodules (NN), shoot dry matter (SDM), root dry matter (RDM), total dry matter (TDM) and nitrogen absorption efficiency (NAE) by cowpea genotypes. Lábrea, AM, Brazil (2018).

Genotypes	PH	SD	NN	SDM	RDM	TDM	NAE
	(cm)	(mm)	(un.)	(g)			(mg g^{-1})
White	67.43 a	8.39 a	77.75 a	27.75 a	15.54 a	41.30 a	32.83 a
Butter	48.62 b	6.93 b	8.47 b	21.07 b	5.46 b	26.53 b	18.30 b

~~Medium~~ followed by the same letter in the column, do not differ statistically ~~between themselves~~ by Scott and Knott a 5% probability

Table 4. Nitrogen content in the roots (NR), nitrogen content in the shoots (NS), nitrogen content in the plant (NP), contents of nitrogen (NL), phosphorus (PL), potassium (KL), calcium (CaL), magnesium (MgL) and sulfur (SL) in the leaves at full flowering, and contents of calcium (CaS), magnesium (MgS) and sulfur (SS) in the shoots of cowpea genotypes. Lábrea, AM, Brazil (2018).

Genotypes	NR	NS	NP	NL	PL	KL
			(g kg^{-1})			
White	13.59 a	46.43 a	60.03 a	28.06 a	2.33 a	20.94 a
Butter	8.99 b	37.38 b	46.37 b	23.50 b	2.00 b	16.96 b

Genotypes	CaL	MgL	SL	CaS	MgS	SS
			(g kg^{-1})			
White	13.49 b	4.03 b	2.03 b	8.02 b	4.46 b	4.02 b
Butter	18.11 a	4.82 a	2.98 a	12.58 a	4.81 a	4.44 a

~~Medium~~ followed by the same letter in the column, do not differ statistically ~~between themselves~~ by Scott and Knott a 5% probability

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Inoculation with rhizobacteria influenced the number of nodules, N contents in the roots, leaves, shoots and in the plant, N absorption efficiency, N use efficiency, K content in the leaves, and P and Ca contents in the shoots of cowpea plants (Table 5). The number of nodules in the inoculated treatment was 52.26 nodules/plant, which was more than 100% higher compared with the control and did not differ statistically from the co-inoculated treatment (*Bradyrhizobium sp.* + *Azospirillum brasilense)* (Table 5 and Figure 2). These values for the number of nodules demonstrate a satisfactory inoculation in both cowpea genotypes, suggesting that plants with higher number and mass of nodules fix more N.

Plants inoculated with *Bradyrhizobium sp*. showed increments of about 22.66%, 23.58%, 55.31%, 47.95%, 65.66% and 20%, respectively, in the N contents in the roots, leaves, shoots and plant, N absorption efficiency and N use efficiency, not differing statistically from the co-inoculated treatment (*Bradyrhizobium sp.* + *Azospirillum brasilense)* (Table 5). Corroborating with the results found, Araújo et al. (2017) observed that inoculation with *Bradyrhizobium sp.* in the presence of humic acids influenced the number of nodules, N contents in roots and plant, and N absorption efficiency by cowpea plants cultivated in the North region of Brazil; and Nioky et al. (2014) found increased number of nodules and N content in cowpea plants cultivated under field conditions in Tanzania. Thus, it has been ~~proven~~ that the population of rhizobia inoculated and indicated for cowpea is able to ~~perform~~ ~~symbiosis and~~ provide the N necessary for crop development, and that the inoculant was effective in the process of biological fixation because it promoted greater N fixation by roots and plant, when compared with the control treatment (not inoculated), presenting itself as a viable alternative for N fertilization in the crop.

In addition, co-inoculation (*Bradyrhizobium sp.* + *Azospirillum brasilense*) did not increase N and P accumulation in cowpea plants, not differing statistically ($p \leq 0.05$) from the treatment inoculated with *Bradyrhizobium sp.* (Table 5), which suggests that this treatment has somehow helped native rhizobia fix more N in symbiosis with the cowpea crop. Inoculation of only one bacterium in the seed promotes greater potential of the inoculum, i.e., greater amount of bacteria is added to the soil through the seed. Regarding N absorption and use efficiency, as well as K accumulation in the leaves and Ca accumulation in the shoots, the co-inoculated treatment did not differ from the control (not inoculated and not fertilized) (Table 5).

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Table 5. Number of nodules (NN), nitrogen content in the roots (NR), nitrogen content in the leaves at full flowering (NL), nitrogen content in the shoots (NS), nitrogen content in the plant (NP), nitrogen absorption efficiency (NAE), nitrogen use efficiency (NUE), potassium content in the leaves at full flowering (KL), phosphorus content in the shoots (PS) and calcium content in the shoots (CaS) of cowpea plants inoculated (*Bradyrhizobium sp.)* and co-inoculated (*Bradyrhizobium sp.* + *Azospirillum brasilense)*. Lábrea, AM, Brazil (2018).

Bacteria	NN	NR	NL	NS	NP
	__un.__	_____(g kg^{-1})_____			
No inoculated	23.75 b	9.31 b	23.36 b	32.00 b	41.31 b
Inoculated	52.26 a	11.42 a	28.87 a	49.70 a	61.12 a
Co-inoculated	53.33 a	13.25 a	25.00 a	43.30 a	56.55 a
Bacteria	NAE	NUE	KL	PS	CaS
	_____mg g^{-1}_____		_____(g kg^{-1})_____		
No inoculated	164.54 b	0.60 b	17.97 b	2.28 b	8.81 b
Inoculated	272.59 a	0.72 a	20.60 a	2.64 a	12.61a
Co-inoculated	177.07 b	0.58 b	18.13 b	2.48 a	9.52 b

Medium followed by the same letter in the column, do not differ statistically ~~between themselves~~ by Scott and Knott a 5% probability
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Fig. 2. Roots of cowpea plants inoculated with *Bradyrhizobium sp.* (Semia 6462 and Semia 6463) (B), compared with the absolute control (not inoculated and not fertilized) (A).

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P rates had a significant ($p \leq 0.05$) increasing linear~~ and~~ effect on plant height, stem diameter, number of leaves, shoot dry matter and total dry matter (Figure 3A, 3B, 3C, 3E and 3F). This demonstrates that this crop is highly efficient in absorbing soil-P, originate~~d~~ from phosphate fertilization. Higher P availability may trigger changes in photosynthesis, due to greater capture of solar radiation and increase in the production of photoassimilates, because P acts as an ATP molecule-forming agent and, under conditions of low ATP production, plant growth is directly affected (Rocha, 2016). In the present study, soil P content considering the percentage of clay was equal to 12 mg dm^{-3}, which is regarded as low, justifying the increasing linear response of the production variables shoot dry matter and total dry matter as a function of increasing P_2O_5 doses applied at sowing.

The production of viable nodules responded quadratically to the increase in P rates, with maximum production at the P_2O_5 rates of 120 kg ha^{-1}, 53.16 nodules/plant, decreasing at higher rates (Figure 3D). This occurs because P ~~is source of energy to the plant (ATP), which, when well nurtured, provides~~ carbohydrates to rhizobium bacteria, thus helping the development of the nodules, up to a certain limit of fertilization (Rocha, 2016). Above this level of fertilization, the plant no longer ~~performs~~ symbio~~sis with the~~ bacteria~~ as it understands that it no longer needs this mechanism, which leads to energy expenditure, since there is adequate~~ availability of nutrients in the soil for ~~its~~ development, ~~reducing~~ the number of nodules produced. Thus, besides being important for nodule formation, P influences the rhizobium-plant symbiosis efficiency, hence reinforcing N fixation (Haruna; Aliyu, 2011). Similar results were reported by Araújo et al. (2017), Karikari et al. (2015), Nkaa et al. (2014) and Nyoki et al. (2013), who found significant increase in vegetative growth and number of nodules of cowpea plants in response to phosphate fertilization, ~~and~~ the lowest result ~~was~~ observed in the treatment of 0 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5. Despite the limited amount of this nutrient in the soil, nodule development was still possible (27.33 nodules/plant) most likely because of the rhizobium capacity to solubilize non-labile phosphate from the soil and release it to the plant.

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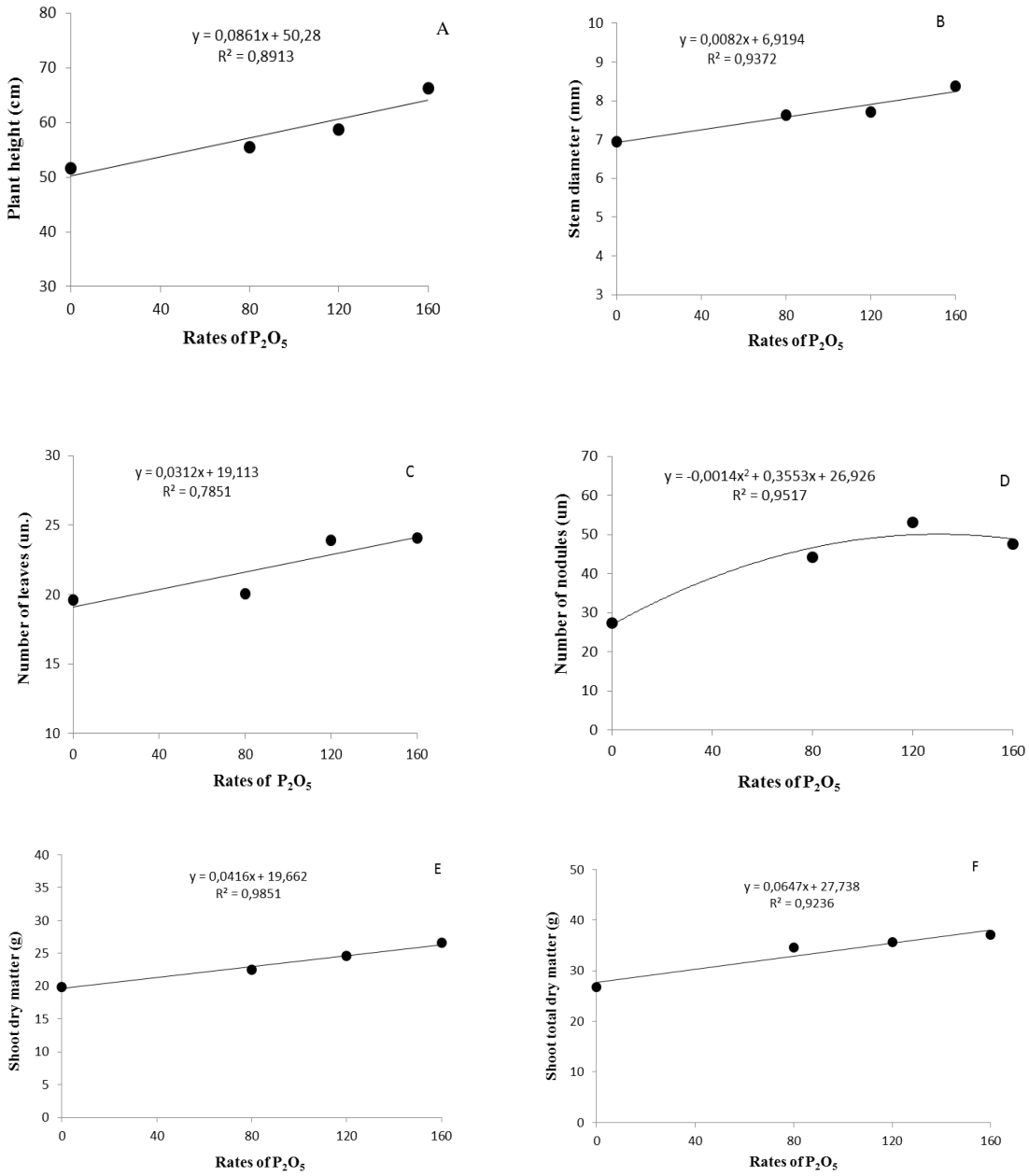

Fig. 3. Plant height (A), stem diameter (B), number of leaves (C), number of nodules (D), shoot dry matter (E) and total dry matter (F) of cowpea plants in response to increasing rates of phosphorus.

The cowpea crop has low demand for P but it has shown ~~higher and frequent~~ response when cultivated in soil with good P availability. N contents in the shoots and in the plant responded quadratically to the increase in P rates, and maximum N contents in the shoots (46.24 g kg^{-1}) and in

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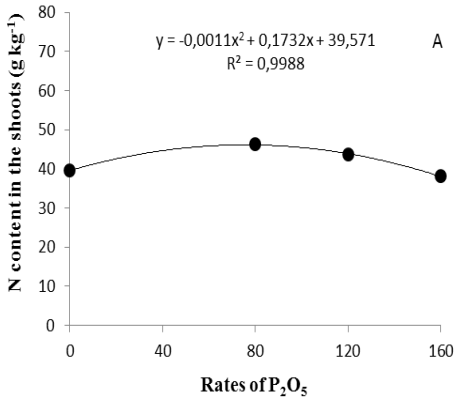
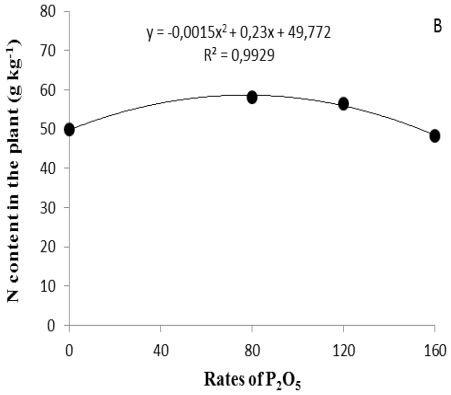
the plant (58.23 g kg^{-1}) were obtained at the rate of 80 kg ha^{-1} (Figure 4A and 4B). Taffouo et al. (2014) found leaf N contents in cowpea ranging from 30.51 to 35.01 g kg^{-1} in the vegetative stage and from 18.05 to 22.19 g kg^{-1} in the pod filling stage, indicating that young plants exhibit higher leaf contents of this macronutrient.

On the other hand, P contents in the shoots and leaves and K and S contents in the leaves of cowpea plants were linearly influenced by P rates (Figure 4C, 4D, 4E and 4F). Thus, highest P contents in the shoots and leaves and highest K and S contents in the leaves were obtained with the application of 160 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5, higher than the recommended rate for maintenance fertilization of cowpea in Amazonian soils. These contents are within the range considered as adequate by the literature for cowpea, which is from 2.6 to 5.0 g kg^{-1} of P, 14.4 to 17.8 g kg^{-1} of K, and from 1.5 to 2.5 g kg^{-1} of S. Similar P contents in cowpea leaves were observed by Souza Rosal (2013), who obtained maximum P content of 2.8 g kg^{-1} in broadcast application, using doses that varied from 0 to 160 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5. Increase of P content in cowpea leaves in response to P rates was also observed by Silva et al. (2010a), studying P doses and forms of application in Yellow Latosol in the Roraima state. Such increase in leaf P content with the application of phosphate fertilization may explain a future increase in grain production observed when the crop is ~~conducted~~ until this phenological stage, considering that there are reports in the literature on the close correlation between leaf contents of nutrients and yield of crops (Araújo et al. 2017).





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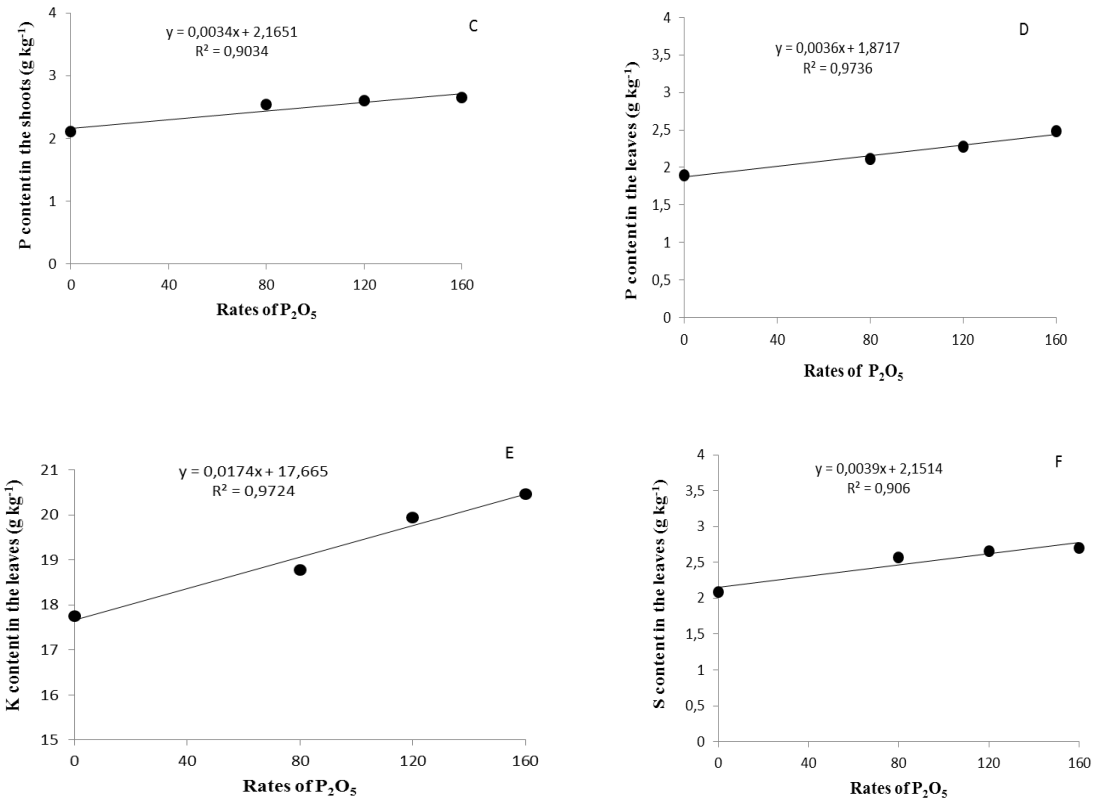

Fig. 4. N content in the shoots (A), N content in the plant (B), P content in the shoots (C), P content in the leaves (D), K content in the leaves (E) and S content in the leaves (F) of cowpea plants in response to increasing rates of phosphorus.

There was ~~effect of the~~ interaction between cowpea genotypes (G) and P rates (D) on plant height, number of nodules and S content in the shoots. The genotype White in the absence of phosphate fertilization had lowest values of plant height, number of nodules and S accumulation in the shoots, statistically differing ($p \leq 0.05$) from the genotype Butter (Table 6). In addition, increasing P rates led to significant difference ($p \leq 0.05$) only for plant height and contents of P and S in the shoots of the genotype White, not influencing the genotype Butter (Table 6). Mawo et al. (2016) and Ndor et al. (2012) observed a significant variation in the growth of cowpea varieties in response to P rates.

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Table 6. Plant height, number of nodules and sulfur content in the shoots of cowpea genotypes in response to increasing rates of phosphorus. Lábrea, AM, Brazil (2018).

Genotypes	Rates de P_2O_5 (kg ha^{-1})			
	0	80	120	160
	Plant height (cm)			
White	54.19 aC	67.67 aB	68.31 aB	79.57 aA
Butter	48.93 bA	43.40 bA	49.20 bA	52.97 bA
	Number of nodules (un.)			
White	49.66 aC	82.58 aB	95.75 aA	83.00 aB
Butter	5.00 bA	5.83 bA	10.88 bA	12.33 bA
	Sulfur content in the shoots (g kg^{-1})			
White	2.34 aB	3.13 aA	3.39 aA	3.05 aA
Butter	1.83 bA	2.01 bA	1.94 bA	2.34 bA

The lowercase letters separate averages in each column and the case separate the medium in~~side~~ the ~~line~~. Same letters do not differ by Skott and Knott a 5% probability.

There was significant interaction between bacteria (B) and P rates (D) for plant height and contents of P and S in the shoots of cowpea plants (Table 7). Inoculation of *Bradyrhizobium sp.* associated with 160 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5 led to increase of about 17.75% in plant height, in comparison to the control not inoculated; however, compared with the control not fertilized, this increase was higher than 63% (Table 7). P and S contents in the shoots of cowpea plants positively responded to the inoculation of *Bradyrhizobium sp.* associated with 120 and 160 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5, statistically differing from the treatment not inoculated (Table 7).

Regarding P rates, significant difference ($p \leq 0.05$) was observed only in the inoculated treatment + 0 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5 and not inoculated treatment + 0 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5 (Table 7). It should be highlighted that inoculation of *Bradyrhizobium sp.* in the presence of P_2O_5 rates of 80, 120 and 160 kg ha^{-1} proved to be efficient for the plant-bacteria system when compared with co-inoculation and with control (not fertilized and not inoculated). Thus, the effect of inoculation was higher when associated with P rates, with significant difference between treatments co-inoculated (*Bradyrhizobium sp.* + Az*ospirillum brasilense*) and not inoculated.

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Table 7. Plant height, P content in the shoots and S content in the shoots of cowpea plants inoculated (*Bradyrhizobium sp.)* and co-inoculated (*Bradyrhizobium sp.* + Az*ospirillum brasilense*) associated with phosphate fertilization. Lábrea, AM, Brazil (2018).

Bacteria	Rates de P_2O_5 (kg ha^{-1})			
	0	80	120	160
	Plant height (cm)			
No inoculated	44.75 bC	57.32 bB	56.71 bB	62.22 bA
Inoculated	57.52 aC	61.62 aB	61.55 aB	73.27 aA
Co-inoculated	48.17 bB	50.71 bB	57.81 bB	63.32 bA
	P content in the shoots (g kg^{-1})			
No inoculated	1.85 aB	2.54 bA	2.50 bA	2.52 bA
Inoculated	2.33 aA	2.80 aA	3.00 aA	2.92 aA
Co-inoculated	2.09 aA	2.28 bA	2.38 bA	2.34 bA
	S content in the shoots (g kg^{-1})			
No inoculated	1.93 aB	2.37 aB	2.31 bA	2.30 bA
Inoculated	2.19 aB	2.84 aA	2.93 aA	3.15 aA
Co-inoculated	2.22 aA	2.50 aA	2.75 aA	2.71 aA

The lowercase letters separate averages in each column and the case separate the medium inside the line. Same letters do not differ by Skott and Knott a 5% probability.

The interaction between genotype (G) and bacteria (B) influenced the number of nodules, N contents in the shoots and in the plant, N absorption efficiency, contents of P, K and Mg in the shoots and contents of K and Ca in the leaves of cowpea at full flowering (Table 8). The genotype White was superior to the genotype Butter with respect to nodule production, N content~~s~~ in the shoots and in the plant, and P content in the shoots when inoculated with the strain of *Bradyrhizobium sp.*, statistically differing ($p \leq 0.05$) from the co-inoculated treatment (*Bradyrhizobium sp.* + Az*ospirillum brasilense)* and from the control (not inoculated and not fertilized) with respect to ~~the~~ nodule production and contents of N and P in the shoots (Table 8). There are reports that certain cowpea genotypes have higher capacity of nodulation and BNF efficiency, which indicates the possibility of optimizing the responses related to BNF by using increasingly more efficient genotypes. Opposite results were obtained for N absorption efficiency, K and Mg contents in the shoots and K and Ca contents in the leaves at full

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flowering, in which the genotype Butter was superior to the genotype White for all above-mentioned variables when inoculated with the strain of *Bradyrhizobium sp.*, statistically differing from the control (not inoculated and not fertilized) (Table 8). No significant difference ($p \geq 0.05$) was found between the co-inoculated treatment (*Bradyrhizobium sp.* + Az*ospirillum brasilense*) and the control (not fertilized and not inoculated) for the genotypes White and Butter with respect to N contents in the shoots and in the plant, P, K and Mg contents in the shoots and Ca content in the leaves at full flowering (Table 8).

The lack of significant effect for the use of *Azospirillum brasilense* on the parameters evaluated in the present study can be attributed to the efficiency of the bacterium *Bradyrhizobium sp.* when compared with the genus *Azospirillum*. For the inoculation with bacteria from the genus *Azospirillum* to be effective, these bacteria must be able to compete with native diazotrophic bacteria, because cowpea is a host plant that can be easily nodulated by the soil-native rhizobium, which could hamper plant nodulation by more efficient strains introduced by inoculation. In addition, in inoculum quality, the inoculation process is of fundamental importance to reach a high number of viable bacteria. Thus, there might have been competition between bacteria from the genus *Bradyrhizobium* or even of native species, avoiding the beneficial effect of *Azospirillum brasilense* on growth, development, nodulation and nutritional status of the cowpea crop under the studied conditions.

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Table 8. Number of nodules (NN), nitrogen content in the shoots (NS), nitrogen content in the plant (NP), nitrogen absorption efficiency (NAE), phosphorus content in the shoots (PS), potassium content in the shoots (KS), magnesium content in the shoots (MgS), potassium content in the leaves (KL) and calcium content in the leaves (CaL) of cowpea plants inoculated (*Bradyrhizobium sp.)* and co-inoculated (*Bradyrhizobium sp.* + A*zospirillum brasilense).* Lábrea, AM, Brazil (2018).

Bacteria	Genotypes		Genotypes		Genotypes	
	White	Butter	White	Butter	White	Butter
	NN (un.)		NS (g kg^{-1})		NP (g kg^{-1})	
No inoculated	44.68 cA	5.23 bB	41.94 bA	37.67bA	57.25 aA	32.21 bB
Inoculated	99.29 aA	5.81bB	52.43 aA	46.96 aB	63.02 aA	54.97 aA
Co-inoculated	88.60 bA	5.08 bB	41.71 bA	41.29 aA	57.67 aA	50.84 aA
	NAE (mg g^{-1})		PS (g kg^{-1})		KS (g kg^{-1})	
No inoculated	150.47 bB	314.90 bA	2.39 bA	2.34 aA	19.02 bB	21.05 bA
Inoculated	219.43 aB	408.49 aA	2.94 aA	2.38 aB	21.92 aB	23.19 aA
Co-inoculated	218.07 aB	324.99 bA	2.44 bA	2.13 aA	18.02 bB	20.28 bA
	MgS (g kg^{-1})		KL (g kg^{-1})		CaL (g kg^{-1})	
No inoculated	3.96 bB	4.44 bA	15.55 bB	18.48 bA	11.95 bB	15.14 bA
Inoculated	4.15 aB	5.29 aA	18.09 aB	23.10 aA	15.00 aB	19.23 aA
Co-inoculated	3.98 bB	4.71 bA	17.46 aB	21.11 aA	13.62 bB	15.64 bA

The lowercase letters separate averages in each column and the case separate the medium inside ~~the line~~. Same letters do not differ by Skott and Knott a 5% probability.

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CONCLUSIONS

There is variability between the cowpea genotypes regarding efficiency and response to phosphorus application. The genotype White was superior with respect to growth and development, and more efficient in N absorption by roots, leaves, shoots and plant.

Cowpea plants inoculated with *Bradyrhizobium sp*. showed increments of approximately 22.66%, 23.58%, 55.31%, 47.95%, 65.66% and 20%, respectively, in N contents in the roots, leaves, shoots and in the plant, N absorption efficiency and N use efficiency.

Inoculation of *Bradyrhizobium sp.* associated with 120 and 160 kg ha^{-1} of P_2O_5 increases plant height and P and S contents in the shoots of cowpea plants.

Increasing P rates lead to increment in dry matter production and N, P and K contents in cowpea plants.

Coinoculation of *Bradyrhizobium sp.* and Az*ospirillum brasilense* did not influence any of the variables studied.

Cowpea has potential to be used as green fertilizer in short period of cultivation, due to the accumulation of nutrients in its leaves and shoots.

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