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Original Research Article

Production of papaya seedlings using *Spirulina platensis* as a biostimulant applied on leaf and root

ABSTRACT

Aims: This study evaluates the influence of *Spirulina platensis* concentrations on the growth and quality of papaya (Formosa Group) 'Tainung-1'.
Study design: The experimental design was completely randomized, with plots subdivided over time.
Place and Duration of Study: From April to June 2017, two greenhouse experiments were carried out at the Agro-Food Science and Technology Center of the Federal University of Campina Grande, Pombal-PB, Brazil.
Methodology: We carried out two greenhouse experiments in completely randomized designs, one with the application of *S. platensis* on the leaf and other with application on the root. In both experiments, the treatments consisted of six biomass concentrations of *S. platensis* (0.0, 0.4, 0.8, 1.2, 1.6, 2.0%).
Results: At 52 days after sowing, we measured the following variables: growth, production of dry and fresh mass of roots and shoot, and the seedlings quality index. The modeling functions predict that the suspensions with 1.08% of *S. platensis* applied on root may provide the best growth and biomass production of the seedlings. However, suspensions of *S. platensis* applied on leaf were inefficient in the improvement of seedling quality.
Conclusion: When applied to the roots, a suspension of 1.08% *S. platensis* increases the growth and biomass production of the seedlings; and when used in the concentration of 0.88% improves the quality of the 'Formosa' papaya seedlings. Suspensions of *S. platensis* applied on leaves do not affect the growth and quality of seedlings of papaya.

Keywords: Carica papaya L.; seedling production; biofertilizer.

1. INTRODUCTION

The papaya (*Carica papaya* L.) has great importance in Brazilian agribusiness, with the main production occurring in Bahia and Espírito Santo states, comprising 794,565 and 399,790 t, respectively, which is 71% of national yield [1]. It is necessary to renovate the orchard in a period of two to four years to guarantee high productivity, depending on the cultivar and the growing conditions. Such a need for renovation generates a great demand for the production of good quality seedlings [2].

The search for ecologically sustainable technologies, such as biostimulants, aiming to enhance plant growth and productivity has increased in recent years [3, 4]. In this sense, the use of microalgae extracts or biomass in agriculture as a biostimulant has been extensively studied, especially in annual crops [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10].

Most research confirms the positive effect of microalgae on plant growth when supplied upon leaves or root suspensions. The bioactive compounds in the microalgae biomass can act through gene expression, signaling, and hormonal interactions [4]. For example, [9] demonstrated that *Arthrospira platensis* increases the polyamide contents in lettuce seedlings and raises the levels of chlorophyll, proteins, sugars, and free amino acids in beets.

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The *Spirulina platensis*, specially produced under Brazilian climatic conditions, is a microalga with high potential for use as a biostimulant since it has high levels of free amino acids, proteins, carbohydrates, lipids, hormones, and some mineral nutrients [11]. [7] observed that the foliar application of *S. platensis* in eggplant at the concentration of 1% (m/v) increased the fruit yield without influencing the N, P, K, and Na leaf contents, but the concentrations above 1% favored the vegetative growth of plants to the detriment of production. However, research involving seedling production is still scarce [8]. [10] observed an increase in growth, protein, and lipid contents in Trigonella foenum-graecum seedlings under root supply of *S. platensis*.

In the present work, we aimed to evaluate the influence of *S. platensis* concentrations, applied upon leaves and root, on the growth and quality of *papaya* (Formosa Group) 'Tainung-1'.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

From April to June 2017, two greenhouse experiments were carried out at the Agro-Food Science and Technology Center of the Federal University of Campina Grande, Pombal-PB, Brazil. The first experiment comprised the application of *Spirulina platensis* on leaves and the second the application on root.

The experiments were set up in a completely randomized design, with five replicates, each replicate consisting of three plants. In both experiments, the treatments consisted of six concentrations of *S. platensis* [0.0; 0.4; 0.8; 1.2; 1.6; 2.0% (m/v)]. We used the powder of *S. platensis* from Tamanduá® (Table 1 shows the composition) to prepare the concentrations.

Seedlings of the hybrid papaya (Formosa Group) 'Tainung-1' were produced from commercial seeds (ISLA ®) in black polyethylene bags (14 x 20 cm). The bags were filled with 1.0 dm³ of a substrate comprising a mixture of soil, bovine manure, and sand, in a ratio of 3:1:1 (Table 1). Before filling the bags, the substrate was autoclaved for one hour at 127°C under a pressure of 1.5 atm. Three seeds were sown in each sack, at a depth of 1.0 cm. Sixteen days after sowing (DAS), we performed the thinning of seedlings, leaving only one per bag.

Table 1. Composition of the *Spirulina platensis* biomass used in the experiments.

Physical-chemical characterization	Value	Organic composition (g/100g)	Value
Humidity and volatiles (g/100g)*	12.10	Aspartic acid	4.85
Ashes (g/100g)	9.00	Glutamic acid	7.99
Proteins (g/100g)	51.82	Serina	2.38
Nitrogen (g/100g)	8.29	Glycine	2.63
Carbohydrates (g/100g)	14.20	Histidine	0.75
Arsenic (mg/100g)	0.044	Arginine	3.45
Cadmium (mg/100g)	0.004	Threonine	2.63
Calcium (g/100g)	0.198	Alanine	3.72
Copper (mg/100g)	0.111	Proline	1.85
Chromium (mg/100g)	0.052	Tyrosine	2.50
Iron (mg/100g)	20.10	Valine	3.23
Phosphorus (g/100g)	1.58	Methionine	0.90
Magnesium (g/100g)	0.39	Cystine	0.21
Manganese (mg/100g)	3.26	Isoleucine	3.60
Potassium (mg/100g)	2.29	Leucine	4.47
Sodium (mg/100g)	1.297	Phenylalanine	2.29
Zinc (mg/100g)	0.84	Lysine	2.43
pH (2% suspension m/v)	5.85	Tryptophan	0.67

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EC (2% suspension, dS/m)	1.95	Total lipids (g)	6.90
-		Carbohydrates (g/100g)	14.2

*Analyses carried out at the Institute of Food Technology-ITAL; EC: Electrical conductivity.

The plants were grown in a greenhouse covered with shade cloth (50% of sunblock), at an average temperature of 29.2°C and a relative humidity of 65%. Manually irrigations were performed daily in the early morning and late afternoon, based on the water requirement of the plants to maintain the substrate close to the field capacity.

During the growing period, five applications of *S. platensis* suspensions were carried out (16, 23, 30, 37, and 42 DAS). In each period, the foliar supply was carried out with a hand sprayer until the point of drainage of the suspensions over the leaves. The root application was performed by the addition of 100 mL of the solution in each bag.

At 20, 28, 36, 44, and 52 DAS, the number of leaves (NL), the plants height (PH), stem diameter (SD), and leaf area (LA) were measured. The leaf area in cm² was estimated by the sum of the individual areas, using the equation proposed by [12] and cited by [13], from the measurement of the midrib (M), in cm, of each leaf, according to the following expression:

$$\mathrm{LA} = 0.0947\ \mathrm{M}^{2.7352}$$

At the end of experiments (52 DAS), we measured the length of the primary root (LR), and the fresh mass of shoot (FMS), roots (FMR), and the total (FMT). Subsequently, the plant material was dried in a forced air circulation oven at 60 to 65°C to obtain the dry mass of the shoot (DMS), roots (DMR), and the total (DMT). We calculated the root:shoot ratio (DMR/DMS) and the Dickson Quality Index (IQD) [14], according to the expression:

$$\mathrm{DQI} = \frac{\mathrm{DMT}}{(PH/SD) + (DMS/DMR)}$$

At the end of the experiment with the application of *S. platensis* on roots, we carried out the substrate characterization (Table 2) according to Embrapa [15].

Table 2. Characterization of the substrate used in the root experiment as a function of the *S. platensis* concentrations.

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S. platensis concentration (%)	pH	pH_{H2O}	ECes	Ca	Mg	Ca + Mg	N	P	O.M.
			~~dS m^{-1}~~	~~-----cmol$_c$ dm^{-3}-----~~			%	~~mg dm^{-3}~~	~~g kg^{-1}~~
0.0	7.96	8.63	0.32	6.20	5.70	11.90	0.7	280.77	8.68
0.4	6.85	8.43	0.25	6.30	5.00	11.30	0.7	388.52	7.57
0.8	6.32	8.87	0.15	5.50	5.40	10.90	0.6	237.79	8.28
1.2	6.29	8.66	0.24	6.50	4.60	11.10	0.7	301.48	8.38
1.6	5.92	8.59	0.20	6.90	5.50	12.40	0.8	444.21	8.50
2.0	5.85	8.95	0.18	5.90	4.90	10.80	0.6	301.48	7.17

Considering the high content of amino acids in the *S. platensis* biomass, at the end of experiments, the total nitrogen contents were determined according to Malavolta [16].

The data was analyzed through response surfaces adjustments for the variables plant height, stem diameter, and number of leaves over the experimental period, using SigmaPlot 11.0 software. For the variables obtained at the end of the experiments, we carried out analyses of variance and polynomial regressions, at 5% of probability, using the SISVAR statistical software [17].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The plants showed a linear growth over time, but the concentrations of *S. platensis* applied on leaves did not influence the growth. These relationships are shown in surface models for number of leaves (Fig~~ure~~ 1A), stem diameter (Fig~~ure~~ 1B), plant height (Fig~~ure~~ 1C), and leaf area (Fig~~ure~~ 1D).

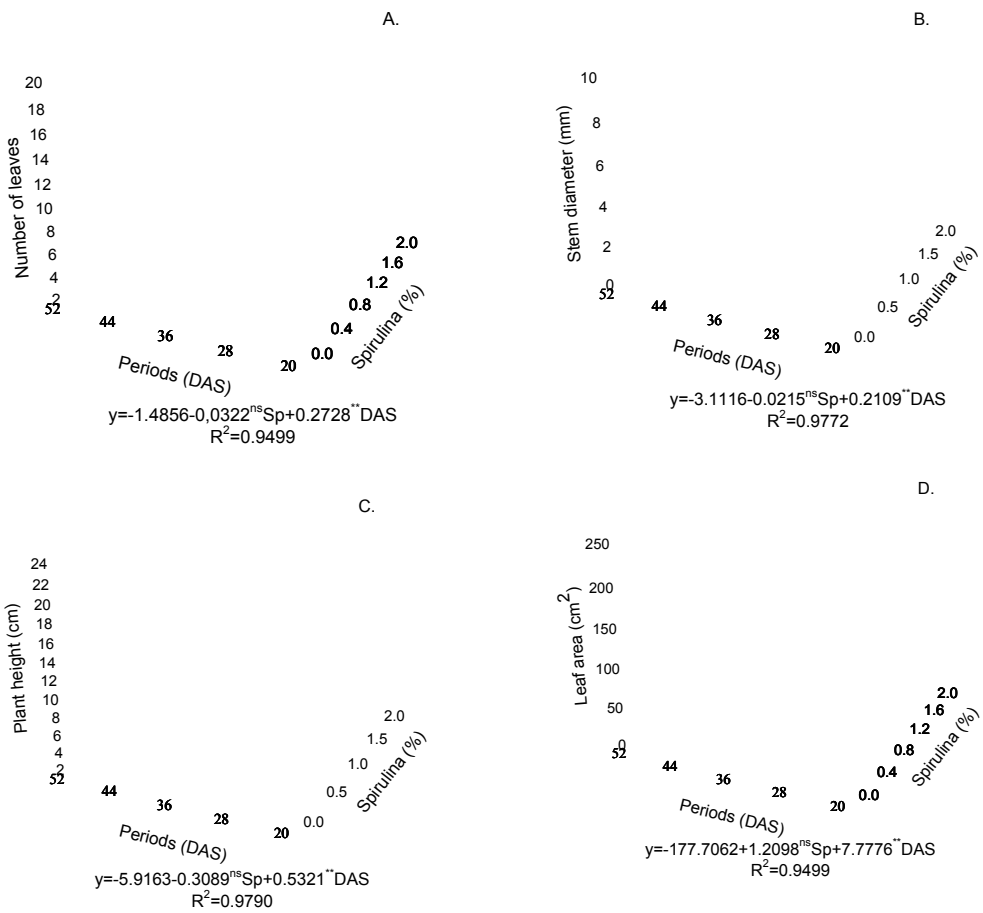

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Fig. 1. Response surface for number of leaves (A), stem diameter (B), plant height (C), and leaf area (D) of 'Formosa' papaya seedlings as a function of different concentrations of *Spirulina platensis* (Sp) and evaluation periods (DAS). **significant at 1% probability; (ns) not significant.

The application of *S. platensis* on leaves also did not affect the fresh mass production (Figure 2A), dry mass (Figure 2B), primary root length (Figure 3A), root:shoot ratio (Figure 3B), N-total (Figure 2C), and IQD values (Figure 3D). In papaya seedlings cultivated for 60 days, [18] applied weekly suspensions of a product based on *S. platensis* on leaves in concentrations ranging from 0 to 4%. The authors also did not observe any effect on growth or the gas exchange of plants.

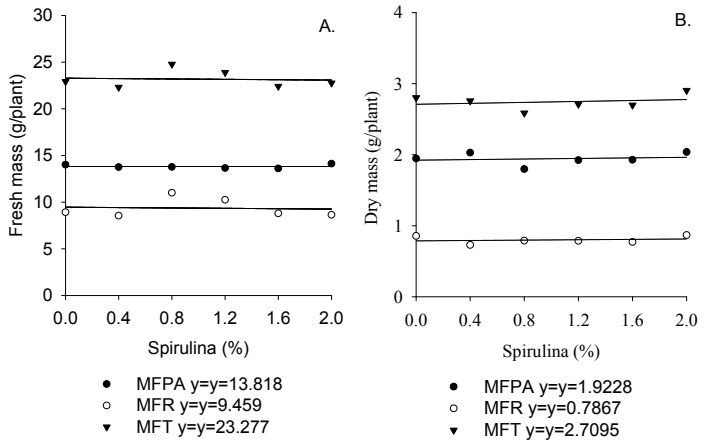

Fig. 2. Fresh mass (A), and dry mass (B) of 'Formosa' papaya seedlings as a function of different doses of *Spirulina platensis* and periods of evaluation.

The failure of *S. platensis* applied on leaves in promoting the growth and quality of papaya seedlings suggests that the plants did not absorb the organic and mineral components of the suspension in sufficient quantity to affect their metabolism. It may be associated with the small leaf area of the plants in the seedling stage. The magnitude of the values of the variables of plant growth is consistent with those obtained in other studies with papaya under similar conditions [19, 20, 21].

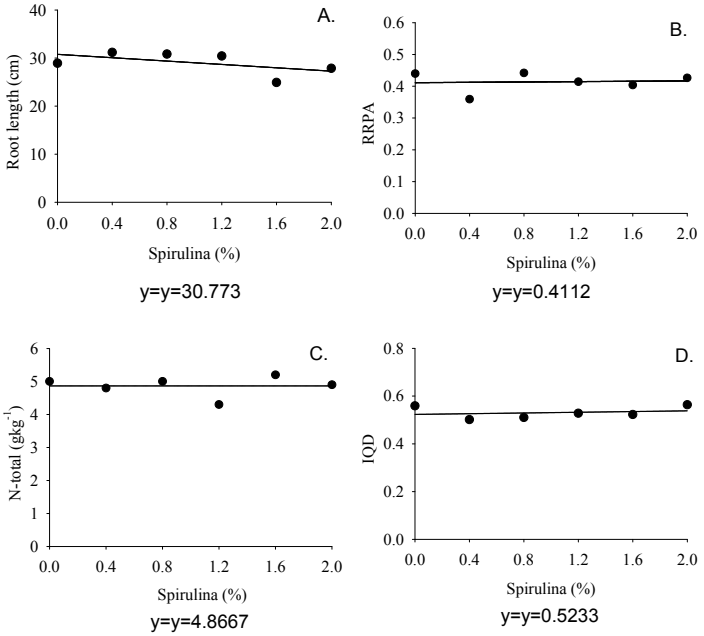

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Figure 3. Length of primary root (A), root:shoot ratio (B), N-total (C), and Dickson quality index (D) of 'Formosa' papaya seedlings as a function of different doses of *Spirulina platensis* and periods of evaluation.

The application of *S. platensis* on root positively affected all variables (Figures 4, 5, and 6). The number of leaves per plant (Figure 4A), stem diameter (Figure 4B), plant height (Figure 4C), and leaf area (Figure 4D) showed a quadratic response as a function of time and concentrations of *S. platensis*.

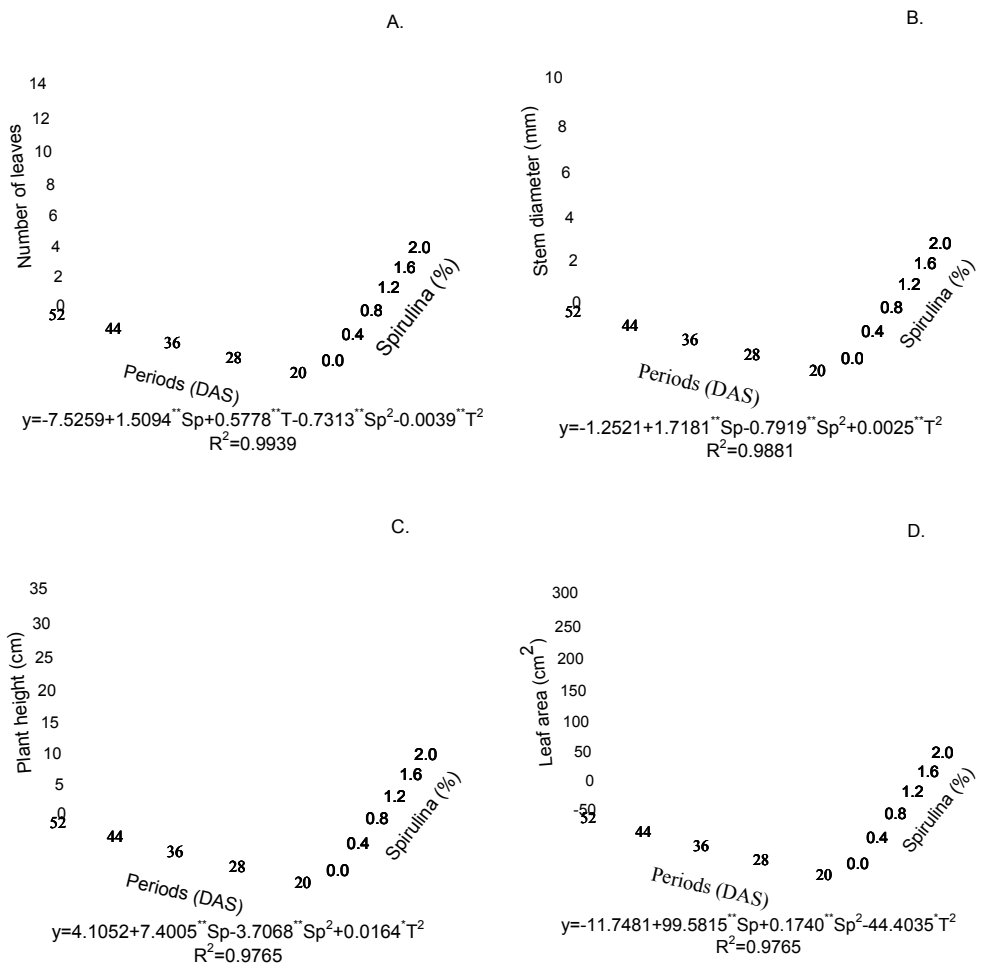

Fig. 4. Response surface for of leaves (A), stem diameter (B), plant height (C), and leaf area (D) of 'Formosa' papaya seedlings as a function of different doses of *Spirulina platensis* and periods evaluation.

The concentrations of *S. platensis* influenced the fresh mass (Figure 5A), dry mass (Figure 5B), primary root length (Figure 6A), root:shoot ratio (Figure 6B), and Dickson quality index (Figure 6D), all of which fitted to quadratic models. The N-total leaf contents adjusted to the increasing linear model (Figure 6C). The root dry mass was not affected by the use of *S. platensis* (Figure 5B).

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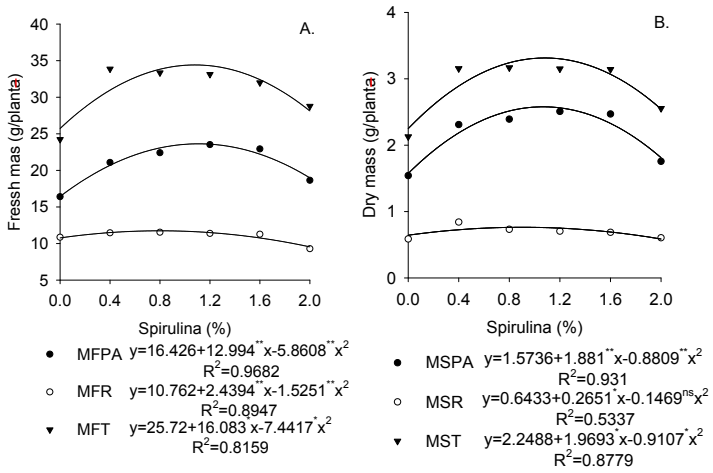

Fig. 5. Fresh mass (A), and dry mass (B) of 'Formosa' papaya seedlings as a function of different doses of *Spirulina platensis*. UFCG, Pombal-PB, 2018.

Using the model functions to estimate the ideal concentration of *S. platensis*, we found that the maximum total fresh mass and total dry mass was obtained at a concentration of 1.08%. Taking the 0.0% treatment as a reference, the ideal concentration promotes a gain of 34% and 50%, in the productions of total fresh mass and total dry mass, respectively. The maximum value of IQD was obtained with the concentration estimated at 0.88%, which is 0.2% lower than the estimated concentration for the maximum phytomass production. According to [22] the IQD values, regardless of the treatments 0.3 and 0.6 being considered above the ideal minimum that is 0.2. According to these authors, this index is among the best indicators of plant quality because it associates robustness parameter (PH/SD) and biomass production (DMS/DMR), avoiding, in the case of seedlings, the wrong choice of etiolated plants in detriment of shorter plants but with better potential for survival and sound development in the field.

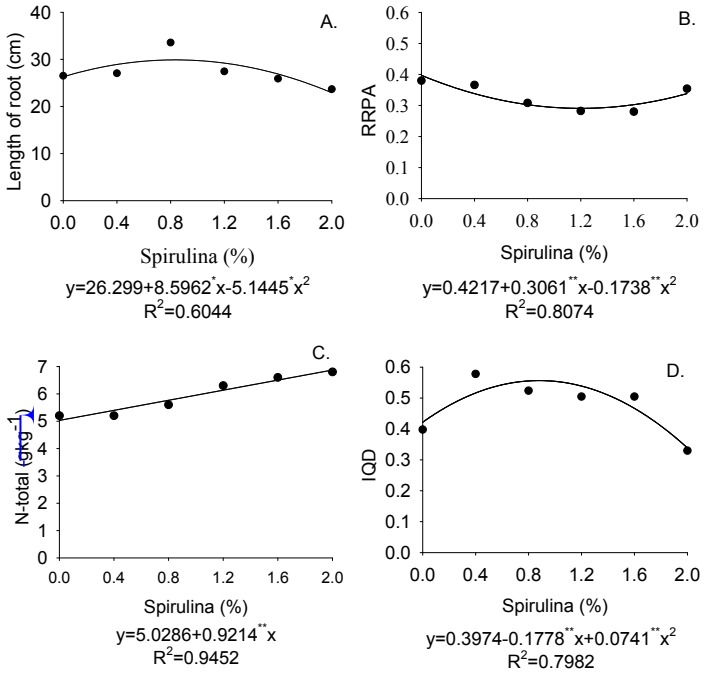

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Fig. 6. Length of root (A), root:shoot ratio (B), N-total (C), and Dickson quality index (D) of 'Formosa' papaya seedlings as a function of different doses of *Spirulina platensis*. UFCG, Pombal-PB, 2018.

Regarding quality (IQD), the application of the concentration of *S. platensis* at 0.88% represents a gain of 32%. If one considers half of this dose (0.44%), the increase in IQD, concerning the dose of 0.0%, will be 24%, which would represent a total of 2.2 g of *S. platensis* per plant, taking in to account the five applications. The economic viability of the application of these doses will depend on the acquisition price of the *S. platensis* biomass combined with the sale price of the seedlings produced.

Several studies report positive effects of suspensions of *S. platensis* or extracts of various species of algae applied on leaves [6, 7, 9, 10]. In our study, the effects of treatments on papaya seedlings cannot be directly explained by their influence on the composition of the substrate, considering its little alteration with the concentrations of *S. platensis* (Table 2). However, in addition to nitrogen, the biomass of *S. platensis* is rich in essential amino acids, such as aspartic acid, glutamic acid, arginine, threonine, alanine, isoleucine, and leucine (Table 1).

The increase in leaf N content (Fig~~ure~~ 6C) may be related to the influence of the *S. platensis* composition on nitrogen metabolism, increasing the plant's ability to absorb and assimilate this nutrient, even without increasing its contents in the substrate (Table 2). Amino acids can act by stimulating plant metabolism, raising the synthesis of proteins and some hormones responsible for plant growth [9, 10]. In this sense, [23] observed that the application of commercial biostimulants based on amino acids increases the productivity and quality of wheat grains. [9] report an increase in the chlorophyll, protein, sugars, and free amino acids contents in the beet grown organically by the application of *Arthrospira platensis* on leaves. Similarly, [9] observed an increase in spermine polyamide contents by the use of *Arthrospira platensis* in lettuce seedlings.

Finally, due to its richness in free amino acids, part of the positive effects of *S. platensis* could also be of indirect origin, through the activity of beneficial microorganisms in the rhizosphere [24]. The *S. platensis* may activate biochemical processes mediated by microorganisms in the substrate, stimulating the production of substances that promote plant growth.

4. CONCLUSION

When applied to the roots, a suspension of 1.08% *S. platensis* increases the growth and biomass production of the seedlings; and when used in the concentration of 0.88% improves the quality of the 'Formosa' papaya seedlings.

Suspensions of *S. platensis* applied on leaves do not affect the growth and quality of seedlings of papaya.

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