The Effect of Plant Weight on Estimations of Stalk Lodging Resistance

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Abstract

Background: Stalk lodging (breaking of agricultural plant stalks prior to harvest) is a multi-billion dollar a year problem. Stalk lodging occurs when bending moments induced by a combination of external loading (e.g. wind) and self-loading (e.g. the plant’s own weight) exceed the stalk bending strength of plant stems. Previous studies have investigated external loading and self-loading of plants as separate and independent phenomena. However, these two types of loading are highly interconnected and mutually dependent. The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to investigate the combined effect of external loads and plant weight on the flexural response of plant stems, and (2) to provide a generalized framework for accounting for self-weight during mechanical phenotyping experiments used to predict stalk lodging resistance.

Results: A mathematical methodology for properly accounting for the interconnected relationship between self-loading and external loading of plants stems is presented. The method was compared to numerous finite element models of plants stems and found to be highly accurate. The resulting interconnected set of equations from the derivation were used to produce user-friendly applications by presenting (1) simplified self-loading correction factors for common loading configurations of plants, and (2) a generalized Microsoft Excel framework that calculates the influence of self-loading on crop stems. Results indicate that ignoring the effects of self-loading when calculating stalk flexural stiffness is appropriate for large and stiff plants such as maize, bamboo, and sorghum. However, significant errors result when ignoring the effects of self-loading in smaller plants with larger relative grain sizes, such as rice (8% error) and wheat (16% error).

Conclusions: Properly accounting for self-weight can be critical to determining the structural response of plant stems. Equations and tools provided herein enable researchers to properly account for the plant’s weight during mechanical phenotyping experiments used to determine stalk lodging resistance.

Keywords: bending, biomechanics, computational, flexural, plant, lodging, stalk, stem, stiffness, strength, weight
Background

Yield losses due to stalk lodging (breakage of crop stems or stalks prior to harvest) are estimated to range from 5-20% annually [1,2] resulting in billions of dollars of lost revenue. *Stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength* (see box 1 for definitions) are key mechanical phenotypes that govern stalk lodging resistance [3–7, 22]. These key phenotypes are measured with the aid of mechanical phenotyping devices [24]. However, a method to properly account for plant weight when measuring *stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength* has not been presented. Consequently, the effect of self-weight is typically neglected in mechanical tests used to quantify these phenotypes. Neglecting self-weight during mechanical phenotyping experiments can introduce significant errors in *stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength* measurements which in turn result in inaccurate predictions of stalk lodging resistance.

Properly accounting for self-weight during mechanical phenotyping experiments requires (1) a basic understanding of the types of mechanical forces plants experience, (2) clear definitions of the mechanical phenotypes being measured and (3) a conceptual understanding of how mechanical phenotyping devices work and the types of forces present during mechanical phenotyping experiments. Each of these three requirements is discussed in the paragraphs that follow. An explanation of the basic types of forces plants experience is presented first, followed by definitions for *stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength*. Finally, a discussion of the basic principles of mechanical phenotyping devices used to measure *stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength* is presented.

**Types of Forces experienced by Plants**
Plants are subjected to three principle types of forces, namely: (1) **Contact Forces**, (2) **Surface Forces** and (3) **Body Forces**. *Contact Forces* occur when solid materials ‘contact’ (i.e., push on) one another. Most mechanical phenotyping devices impart *Contact Forces* (i.e., they physically contact and push on the plant). *Contact Forces* can also occur when an adjacent plant or a researcher contacts a plant and pushes on it. *Surface Forces* are forces that are distributed across a plant’s surface. The wind is an example of a *Surface Force*. Both *Contact Forces* and *Surface Forces* are commonly referred to as *External Forces* or externally applied loads as they originate from external objects. The last type of mechanical force plants are subjected to is **Body Forces**. *Body Forces* are forces due to gravity (i.e., the plant’s weight). It is important to note that all plants are constantly subjected to *Body Forces* whereas they are only intermittently subjected to *External Forces* (e.g., *Contact Forces* and *Surface Forces*). In other words, *Body Forces* (i.e., self-weight) are always present in any mechanical phenotyping test and as such need to be accounted for.

**Box 1: Glossary of Terms**

| Term                | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bending Moment      | The result of multiplying a force by the perpendicular distance from the force to the axis about which the bending moment is being calculated. Conceptually can be thought of as a torque.                                      |
| Bending Stress      | A measure of the force experienced by the plant tissues that is normalized to size and geometry.                                                                                                            |
| Body Forces         | Forces acting on the plant due to the gravity.                                                                                                                                                           |
| Contact Forces      | Forces that occur when other solid materials contact the plant.                                                                                                                                          |
| External Forces     | Forces that are applied to the plant from an external source (e.g. *Contact Forces* or *Surface Forces*). *Body Forces* are not an *External Force*.                                                             |
| Stalk Flexural Stiffness | Flexural stiffness is a standard structural engineering quantity for measuring the flexural (i.e., bending) deformability of objects. It is equal to the elastic                                                   |
modulus of the material multiplied by the moment of inertia (a geometric term which quantifies the distribution of mass about the object’s centroid). During mechanical phenotyping tests of plant stalks flexural stiffness is typically calculated by applying a force, measuring deflection and using Castigliano’s energy method to indirectly solve for flexural stiffness.

| **Stalk Bending Strength** | The maximum bending moment the plant can support before structural failure occurs (i.e., before breaking). |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Surface Forces**         | Forces that are distributed across the plant’s surface.                                                 |

### Bending Strength and Flexural Stiffness Definitions

Determining the bending strength and flexural stiffness of plant stems requires the calculation of “bending moments” (see [17] for a complete discussion of bending moments). Bending moments arise from any force (either **External Forces** or **Body Forces**) that cause a plant to bend or flex and can be conceptually thought of as a torque. A bending moment is calculated by multiplying a force by the perpendicular distance from the force to the axis about which the bending moment is being calculated. In most plant studies bending moments are typically calculated about the base of the plant (i.e., at the stalk – soil interface) as this is where bending moments are the largest. Both **External Forces** and **Body Forces** (i.e., self-weight) create bending moments in plant stems.

We now proceed to provide definitions for **stalk bending strength** and **stalk flexural stiffness**. Note these terms are sometimes used incorrectly and interchangeably in the mechanical plant phenotyping literature. However, they are structural engineering terms with precise and distinct definitions. The **stalk bending strength** of a plant is defined as the maximum bending moment the plant stalk can support before structural failure occurs (i.e., before breaking). In contrast **stalk flexural stiffness** is a measurement of the flexural (i.e., bending) deformability of the
plant. In other words, *stalk flexural stiffness* is a measure of a plant’s resistance to bending deformations, whereas *stalk bending strength* is a measure of a plant’s resistance to breaking. The flexural stiffness of standard engineering structures is defined as the elastic modulus of the material the structure is composed of multiplied by the moment of inertia of the structure. The moment of inertia is a geometric term that quantifies the distribution of mass about an object’s centroid [17]. However, plant stalks are often composed of multiple materials and are non-prismatic (i.e., tapered) thus their moment of inertia changes as a function of length along the stalk. This complicates the calculation of *stalk flexural stiffness*. Consequently, most studies utilize engineering beam equations to indirectly solve for *stalk flexural stiffness* (e.g., [4,17]). The process of indirectly solving for *stalk flexural stiffness* is explained in detail in the methods section.

**Mechanical Phenotyping Principles**

Several mechanical phenotyping devices have been developed to measure *stalk flexural stiffness* and/or *stalk bending strength* [6,22,24,42,43]. A review of these devices is presented in [24]. In general, all these devices apply an external load (e.g., a *contact force*) to either a single plant or to a group of plants and measure the accompanying deflection of the plant stem(s). Standard engineering beam equations are then used to calculate the *flexural stiffness* and *bending strength* of the plant sample (e.g. [6,24]). However, the standard engineering beam equations used in these analyses ignore the effect of *Body Forces* (i.e. self-weight) and are therefore error prone.

It is important to note that the bending moments induced from *Body Forces* are inextricably connected to *External Forces*. In particular, the bending moment induced from *Body Forces* (i.e., self-weight) is a function of the distance between the plant’s base and its center of gravity. As *External Forces* from a phenotyping device displace the center of gravity of the plant away from
the base of the stem, the bending moment induced from Body Forces increases. Previous studies have examined the influence of Body Forces (i.e., self-weight) on stalk bending strength in the absence of External Forces while others have examined the influence of External Forces on stalk bending strength while ignoring Body Forces [3,4,8–15]. However, a method for simultaneously accounting for both External Forces and Body Forces during mechanical phenotyping experiments has not been presented. Consequently, Body Forces are ignored in mechanical phenotyping studies which leads to inaccuracies in stalk lodging resistance predictions.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a generalized framework to simultaneously account for both Body Forces and External Forces when taking measurements of stalk flexural stiffness and stalk bending strength. A derivation of the governing engineering equations used to calculate these mechanical phenotypes are presented. The derivations are validated by comparing their results to those of several nonlinear finite element models of plant stems. In addition, a user-friendly Microsoft Excel spreadsheet is developed and presented to aid researchers in determining the effect of self-weight in mechanical phenotyping experiments. The spreadsheet does not require an advanced understanding of engineering mechanics and was developed to aid researchers from various non-engineering disciplines to determine the necessity of accounting for plant weight in mechanical phenotyping experiments. Finally, several case studies are presented to demonstrate the type of error present in mechanical phenotyping tests that do not account for Body Forces.

Methods
The sections that follow detail the methods used to investigate the effect of self-weight on measurements of *stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength* of plant stems. For clarity, the methods are broken into five distinct subsections. First, the traditional approach (which ignores *Body Forces*) to calculate bending strength and flexural stiffness is presented, and its limitations are discussed. Second, a derivation of a more accurate approach to calculating bending strength and flexural stiffness that simultaneously accounts for both *Body Forces* and *External Forces* is presented. The derivation is predicated upon engineering solid mechanics theory. The third section describes how this new approach was parametrically investigated and validated by comparing its results to those of engineering finite element models of plant stems. In the fourth section the development of a user-friendly Excel spreadsheet is explained. The spreadsheet was developed to
help researchers without a background in engineering mechanics successfully apply the new
approach to calculating *stalk bending strength* and *stalk flexural stiffness*. The last section explains
a series of three case studies. These case studies were conducted to illustrate how the equations
presented in the current work can be applied to investigate the effects of self-weight.

*Traditional Solution (Ignoring Body Forces)*

Traditionally, the bending strength of a plant stem is calculated as the maximum externally
applied moment ($M_{\text{ext}}$) (applied from a phenotyping device) that the stem can withstand prior to
structural failure, i.e., bending strength = Maximum ($M_{\text{ext}}$). Using traditional methods, the flexural
stiffness ($EI$) of a plant is solved for indirectly by relating the externally applied moment ($M_{\text{ext}}$)
induced by a phenotyping device to the resulting deflection of the stem ($\delta$) using Castigliano’s
energy method [24,42,43]. In this way, the deflection of the plant is equal to the partial derivative
of the internal potential energy of the system with respect to the applied load ($F$) from the
phenotyping device [17]:

$$EI = \int M_{\text{ext}} \frac{dM_{\text{ext}}}{dF} dx \frac{2\delta}{\delta}$$ (1)

Unfortunately, the effect of *Body Forces* is ignored in these traditional approaches. In other
words, these analyses consider only the external bending moment ($M_{\text{ext}}$) applied by the
phenotyping device. In reality the total bending moment ($M_{\text{TOTAL}}$) which is the combination of
both the externally applied bending moment ($M_{\text{ext}}$) and the bending moment resulting from *Body
Forces* ($M_{\text{body}}$) should be considered (i.e., $M_{\text{TOTAL}} = M_{\text{ext}} + M_{\text{body}}$). Thus, to more accurately quantify
*stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength* the traditional approach must be modified to use
$M_{\text{TOTAL}}$, and not just $M_{\text{ext}}$. 
Derivation of New Approach That Accounts for Both Body Forces and External Forces

Properly accounting for Body Forces when calculating stalk bending strength and stalk flexural stiffness requires derivation of a closed form solution for the total bending moment of the stem ($M_{\text{total}}$). The derivation is presented in this section for completeness. However, it should be noted that the derivation is based upon engineering solid mechanics theory and those from a non-engineering background may therefore find parts of the derivation difficult to follow. For this reason, the authors have incorporated the resulting sets of equations from the derivation into a user-friendly excel spreadsheet that can be used by the plant research community. The derivation is presented below followed by an explanation of the excel spreadsheet.

Consider Figure 1, which depicts the free body diagram of a plant stem with an arbitrary loading applied at two locations. The figure depicts two weights ($w$) (e.g. stem weight, grain weight), as well as two externally applied Contact Forces ($F$) and two externally applied moments ($M$). Note that as mentioned before the externally applied loads and moments can be arise from any external object. Commons sources of externally applied forces include phenotyping devices, wind, and adjacent plants.

Bending moments induced from self-weight (i.e., Body Forces) will increase with increased stem deflection. For the weight ($w$) at each location, we can calculate the induced bending moment from self-weight ($W$) as the product of the weight and the weight’s offset (i.e., the deflection of the stem at the location of the weight ($\delta$)). Thus for the two locations shown in Figure 1, we have:

$$W_1 = \delta_1 w_1$$

(2)
It should be noted that Equations 2 and 3 assume that the maximum bending moment induced by self-loading is applied to the entire length of the stem. Details regarding this assumption are presented in the Limitations section.

The offsets ($\delta_1$ and $\delta_2$) used in equations 2 and 3 to calculate the bending moments induced from self-weight are unknowns and are a function of the externally applied moments and forces. Using engineering theory for beam deflection and the theory of superposition of loading [17], we can calculate the deflection of the stem at height $h_1$ (i.e., location 1) as a function of the applied forces, applied moments, and weight-induced moments. Equation 4 shows this calculation, where the first row of equation 4 concerns loads, moments and weights at location 1 (i.e., at height $h_1$) and the second row of equation 4 concerns forces, moments and weights at location 2 (i.e., at height $h_2$).

$$W_2 = \delta_2 w_2$$  

Equation 4 shows this calculation, where the first row of equation 4 concerns loads, moments and weights at location 1 (i.e., at height $h_1$) and the second row of equation 4 concerns forces, moments and weights at location 2 (i.e., at height $h_2$).

$$\delta_1 = \frac{F_1}{3EI} \cdot \frac{h_1^3}{3} + \frac{M_1}{2EI} \cdot \frac{h_1^2}{2} + \frac{W_1}{2EI} \cdot \frac{h_1^2}{2}$$

$$F_2 \cdot \frac{3h_1h_2 - h_2^2}{EI} + M_2 \cdot \frac{2h_1h_2 - h_2^2}{2EI} + W_2 \cdot \frac{2h_1h_2 - h_2^2}{2EI}$$

Similarly, we can write the deflection of the stem at $h_1$ as:
Thus we have four linearly independent equations (Equations 2 through 5) allowing us to solve for four unknown values ($W_1, W_2, \delta_1, \delta_2$). It should be emphasized that for all equations in this manuscript (including equations 4 and 5) locations are numbered from the top of plant down (i.e., location 1 is above location 2 which is above location 3…)

Equations 2 through 5 can be generalized to account for any number of locations ($n$) along the length of the stalk. First, for any loading location $L$, at a height $h_L$ along the stalk, deflected by $\delta_L$, Equations 2 and 3 can be generalized as:

$$W_L = \delta_L W_L$$  \hspace{1cm} (6)

Next, Equations 4 and 5 can be generalized by noting that each force, moment or weight ($F$, $M$, or $W$, shown in bold in Equations 4 and 5) is multiplied by a geometric coefficient. The geometric coefficient for each term is a function of the height where the deflection is measured and the height at which the loading is applied. This geometric coefficient can be denoted as either $f_F$ (for forces) or $f_M$ (for externally applied moments or internal weight-induced moments). As such, for any vertical location $Z$ at a height of $h_Z$, the deflection $\delta_Z$ is calculated by summing the product of each load, moment or weight ($F$, $M$, or $W$) and its corresponding geometric coefficient ($f_F$ or $f_M$) at every loading location (from $L=1$ to $L=n$). Note that this geometric coefficient assumes
a constant flexural stiffness (EI), as discussed in the Limitations section. Thus the generalized form of Equations 4 and 5 can be written as:

\[
\delta_p = F_1 \cdot f_F(Z, 1) + M_1 \cdot f_M(Z, 1) + W_1 \cdot f_M(Z, 1) + F_2 \cdot f_F(Z, 2) + M_2 \cdot f_M(Z, 2) + W_2 \cdot f_M(Z, 2) + \ldots + F_L \cdot f_F(Z, n) + M_L \cdot f_M(Z, n) + W_L \cdot f_M(Z, n)
\]

(7)

Where “location 1” is the most apical location of interest and “location L” is the most basal location of interest. Equation 7 can now be consolidated into a fully generalized form of:

\[
\delta_p = \sum_{i=1}^{n} F_i f_F(Z, i) + \sum_{i=1}^{n} M_i f_M(Z, i) + \sum_{i=1}^{n} W_i f_M(Z, i)
\]

(8)

Where the geometric coefficients for the forces and moments are defined as [18]:

\[
f_F(p, L) = \begin{cases} 
3 h_L^2 h_p^2 - \frac{(h_L - h_p)^2}{6EI}, & h_p \geq h_L \\
\frac{h_L^2(3h_L - h_p)}{6EI}, & h_p < h_L
\end{cases}
\]

(9)
Equations 6 through 9 can also be put into a generalized matrix form. From Equations 6 and 8 we see that for any number of weights at any number of locations \( n \), we will have \( 2n \) unknown values \( (\delta_1, \delta_2, \ldots, \delta_n, W_1, W_2, \ldots, W_n) \), and \( 2n \) linearly independent equations. By rearranging these equations and converting them to matrix notation we can write:

\[
\begin{bmatrix}
1 & 0 & \ldots & 0 & -f_{w}(1,1) & -f_{w}(1,2) & \ldots & -f_{w}(1,n) \\
0 & 1 & \ldots & 0 & -f_{w}(2,1) & -f_{w}(2,2) & \ldots & -f_{w}(2,n) \\
\vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots & \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\
0 & 0 & \ldots & 1 & -f_{w}(n,1) & -f_{w}(n,2) & \ldots & -f_{w}(n,n) \\
\end{bmatrix}
\begin{bmatrix}
\delta_1 \\
\delta_2 \\
\vdots \\
\delta_n \\
\end{bmatrix}
= 
\begin{bmatrix}
\sum_{i=1}^{n} E_{I} f_{w}(1,i) + \sum_{i=1}^{n} M_{I} f_{w}(1,i) \\
\sum_{i=1}^{n} E_{I} f_{w}(2,i) + \sum_{i=1}^{n} M_{I} f_{w}(2,i) \\
\vdots \\
\sum_{i=1}^{n} E_{I} f_{w}(n,i) + \sum_{i=1}^{n} M_{I} f_{w}(n,i) \\
\end{bmatrix}
= 
\begin{bmatrix}
W_1 \\
W_2 \\
\vdots \\
W_n \\
\end{bmatrix}
\]

(11)

Where the first matrix in the equation is a square matrix of size \( 2n \times 2n \), and the second and third matrices in the equation are column matrices of size \( 2n \times 1 \). Within the square matrix, the top left and bottom right \( n \times n \) submatrices (shown in green text) are identity matrices, the bottom left \( n \times n \) submatrix (shown in blue text) is a diagonal matrix of the negative weights \(-w\), and the top right \( n \times n \) submatrix (shown in orange text) is the negative geometric coefficients of the weight-induced moments, as calculated by Equation 10. We can then solve this matrix equation by taking the inverse of the multi-colored matrix and multiplying by the right-most vector to calculate the deflections and moments induced by Body Forces:
We can now look at the total bending moment ($M_{\text{TOTAL}}$) of any cross-section along the length of the stem. In particular, $M_{\text{TOTAL}}$ can be written as a function of $h_P$ and $h_L$, by considering all of the loads that are applied to the stem above the cross-section of interest (i.e., for $h_L \geq h_P$),

$$M_{\text{TOTAL}}(h_P) = \sum_{L=1}^{n} F_L (h_L - h_P) + \sum_{L=1}^{n} M_L + \sum_{L=1}^{n} W_L$$

(13)

Now that we have derived a closed form solution for $M_{\text{TOTAL}}$ (eq 13) we can calculate the *stalk flexural stiffness* and the *stalk bending strength* of the plant stem. Additionally, we can now calculate the value of bending stress. Bending stress is a useful measure of the loading of the plant tissue that is normalized to size and geometry. The larger the bending stress in the tissue, the closer it is to tissue fracture and structural failure. We can write the bending stress in the stem in this case as a function of the total bending moment and the section modulus of the cross-section ($S(h_L)$):

$$\sigma_{\text{bending}}(h_P) = \frac{M_{\text{TOTAL}}(h_P)}{S(h_P)}$$

(14)
Note that “section modulus” is an engineering term used to quantify the cross-sectional distribution of mass about its centroid and can be used in making stalk flexural stiffness and stalk bending strength predictions [17]. It should be noted that the section modulus is constant for a given plant stem cross-section. Therefore, there exists a 1:1 correlation between the total bending moment, and the bending stress. As such, all comparisons performed between total bending moments can also be conceptualized as being comparisons in stalk bending strength or bending stress.

Table 1 shows a comparison between the equations used to calculate stalk flexural stiffness, stalk bending strength and bending stress for the new method which accounts for Body Forces and the traditional method which does not account for Body Forces.

Table 1: Comparison of equations used to calculate stalk flexural stiffness, stalk bending strength and bending stress for the traditional method and the new approach derived in this study

|                      | Traditional Method     | New Approach           |
|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Stalk Flexural Stiffness | $\frac{M_{\text{ext}}}{\delta}$ | $\frac{M_{\text{TOTAL}}}{\delta}$ |
| Stalk Bending Strength | $\max (M_{\text{ext}})$ | $\max (M_{\text{TOTAL}})$ |
| Bending Stress        | $\frac{M_{\text{ext}}(h_p)}{S(h_p)}$ | $\frac{M_{\text{TOTAL}}(h_p)}{S(h_p)}$ |
Finite Element Modeling to Confirm Accuracy of New Closed Form Solution Method

The new approach to calculating *stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength* outlined in the previous section was derived based on governing physical principles and well-established engineering equations. Special care was taken to ensure no algebraic mistakes were made during the derivation and that any assumptions were properly considered. Nonetheless, as a form of data triangulation [18] to confirm the accuracy of the new approach it was compared to a series of nonlinear finite element models of plant stems. A basic description of the Finite Element Method and the construction of the specific finite element models of plant stems used in this study are presented below.

The Finite Element Method is a standard numerical technique used by engineers to quantify the detailed mechanical response of complex structures and materials [44]. Finite Element Models are commonly used calculate the flexural stiffness of complex structures which violate basic assumptions made in closed form engineering equations. It should be noted that nonlinear finite element models (i.e. “large deflection” simulations) are valid for both small and large deflections. Comparing the new closed from solution approach which accounts for *Body Forces* to nonlinear finite models of plant stems thus enables us to check the accuracy of the new approach.

To this end a series of 768 non-linear finite element models of plant stems were developed, analyzed, and compared to the new approach derived in the previous section. The models were developed in Abaqus/CAE 2019 [19,20] and analyzed in Abaqus/Standard 2019 using a direct, full Newton solver [19,20]. A mesh convergence study was performed to ensure adequate mesh density of all models. Analyses were run non-linearly, recalculating the system stiffness matrix at each solution increment. In other words, the models were fully capable of accounting for nonlinear
effects due to large deformations. Model development and post-processing were automated through a series of custom Python scripts which can be obtained upon reasonable request to the authors. A brief description of the models is given below.

In these simulations the stems were modeled as 2-noded linear beam elements in a 2-dimensional analysis [19,20]. In each of these models the bottom node of the stem was fixed in all degrees of freedom (U1 = U2 = UR3 = 0). Stems were modeled with a weight at height h1, applied force at height h2, and applied moment at height h3. It should be noted that because 2-noded beam elements were used, the model was partitioned at h3 so that moments could be directly applied to nodes. The plant stem was modeled with the radius values such that the resulting moments of inertia were as presented in Table 2 using the equation $I = \frac{\pi}{4} r^4$ [17]. As the models allowed for free expansion in the radial direction, Poisson’s ratio was found to be negligible based on preliminary parametric analyses and was set to a value of 0.3 for all analyses.

A factorial design of experiments was used to compare the results of the new approach derived above to the results of the finite element models. In particular, the stalk flexural stiffness and stalk bending strength of each finite element model was compared to the corresponding values calculated using the new approach derived in the previous section. A full parametric sweep of all relevant input parameters (i.e. factors) was conducted to ensure the accuracy of new approach for a broad range of plant species. In particular, a factorial design of experiments was utilized with 8 factors to compare the two methods. The factors were the elastic moduli of the stem (E), the moment of inertia (I) of the stem, the heights of the applied moments, forces and weights (h1, h2 and h3), the magnitude of the applied moment (M), the magnitude of self-weight (W), and the magnitude of the applied force (F). The moduli, moment of inertia, heights, weights, and moments
were evaluated at two different levels. The force was evaluated at 6 levels. Thus a total of 768
unique models were constructed covering every combination of factors and levels (i.e., \(2E's \times 2I's \times 2h_1's \times 2h_2's \times 2h_3's \times 2M's \times 2W's \times 6F's = 768\) models). Table 2 presents each of these factors
and the levels of each factor used in the experiment. The level of each factor (i.e., the value of
input parameters to the model) were based on previous studies of plant stem material properties
[21, 22].

**Table 2**: Each input parameter (i.e., factor) and value of each input parameter (i.e., level) for the
finite element analyses. The number of levels for each factor noted as \(n\) is presented in the
bottom row of the table. The force \((F)\) had 6 levels \((0, 2, 4, 6, 8, \text{ and } 10\) Newtons). All other
factors had 2 levels (a maximum value and a minimum value). A total of 768 finite element
models were evaluated \((2E's \times 2I's \times 2h_1's \times 2h_2's \times 2h_3's \times 2M's \times 2W's \times 6F's = 768\)
models).

| Value | E (N/mm\(^2\)) | I (mm\(^4\)) | h\(_1\) (mm) | h\(_2\) (mm) | h\(_3\) (mm) | M (Nmm) | W (N) | F (N) |
|-------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Minimum | 1.00E+03 | 1.00E+04 | 800 | 400 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Maximum | 1.00E+08 | 1.00E+05 | 1200 | 700 | 300 | 100 | 2 | 10 |
| n = | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 |

**Development of Excel Spreadsheet to Calculate Stalk Flexural Stiffness and Stalk Bending
Strength**

An Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft Corporation, 2019) was developed to help researchers
without a background in engineering mechanics successfully apply the new approach to
calculating *stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength*. The spreadsheet was developed
using the equations presented in Table 1 and is included as Additional File 1. The spreadsheet allows the user to input the flexural stiffness of the plant stem as well as the magnitude of externally applied forces and moments, and weights. Input values can be given for up to ten locations of interest along the length of the plant stem. The spreadsheet calculates the weight induced moments (\( M_{\text{body}} \)) and deflections as well as the total induced moment (\( M_{\text{tot}} \)) at all locations. The spreadsheet makes the calculation both with and without self-loading considered. In addition, the error induced by ignoring the self-loading is calculated for the deflections and total induced moments. More details about the spreadsheet and use instructions are provided in Additional File 2.

Case Studies

To provide further insights and to demonstrate how to effectively use the equations derived above three separate case studies were conducted. The primary purpose of the first case study was to demonstrate how researchers can determine if the influence of self-weight is a significant factor in a given experiment. In this case study, two loading configurations commonly used to measure stalk bending strength and stalk flexural stiffness are presented [24]. Figure 2 displays these two test configurations. The equations derived above are applied to each test configuration and are used to develop simple correction factors to account for the moments induced by Body Forces that are typically ignored in mechanical phenotyping experiments. These correction factors can be used to determine the magnitude of error introduced if Body Forces are ignored.

To provide general insights into the effect of Body Forces on several plant species a second more generalized case study was conducted. Five plants species were included in this
case study: maize (*Zea mays*), wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), sweet sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), bamboo (*Bambusoideae*), and rice (*Oryza sativa*). Average mechanical properties and biomass distributions for each plant species were attained from the literature and were used as inputs to the Excel spreadsheet provided in Additional File 1. The spreadsheet was then used to determine the impact of self-weight on measurements of stalk flexural stiffness and stalk bending strength (i.e., to quantify the amount of error introduced when *Body Forces* are ignored).

For the third case study a detailed experimental analysis of a commercially available wheat variety was conducted. In this study, the Excel spreadsheet provided in Additional File 1 was used to determine the effects of self-loading on the flexural response of wheat stems throughout a growing season. The methods and results of this third case study are presented in Additional File 3.

**Results**

*Comparison of Finite Element and Closed Form Solutions*

As a form of data triangulation finite element models of plant stems were compared to the new closed form solution which accounts for *Body Forces* that is presented in the methods section. In other words, the closed form solution was evaluated using the same inputs as each of the 768 finite models and the solutions from the closed form equations and the finite element models were compared. The finite element models were found to be in good agreement with the closed form solutions. In particular, the median error between the 768 finite element models and the closed form equations was found to be 0.126% for deflection at the top of the specimen, and 0.0003% for the total bending moment at the base of the specimen. Figure 3 displays these comparisons in terms
of calculations of *stalk bending strength* and *stalk flexural stiffness*. As shown in the figure the closed form solution method can accurately account for both *Body Forces* and *External Forces* when calculating *stalk flexural stiffness* and *stalk bending strength*. These data imply that for the ranges evaluated, the closed form solution is providing accurate results and no mistakes were made during its derivation.

The engineering theory used to derive the closed form solution presented above contains several inherit assumptions. These assumptions gradually become less valid as deflections become very large. Therefore, to determine the maximum range of applicability for the closed form solutions one additional finite element model was created and subjected to extremely large deflections. In particular, the model was created with the following input parameters: 

\[ E = 5.00E+07 \text{ Nmm}^2, \ I = 5.50E+04, \ EI = 2.8E12, \ h_1 = 1000 \text{ mm}, \ h_2 = 550 \text{ mm}, \ h_3 = 200 \text{ mm}, \ M = 1000 \text{ Nmm} @ h_1, \ W = 100 \text{ N} @ h_3, \ F = \text{Ramped up to } 5.00E+07 \text{ at } h_2. \]

It should be noted that this loading scenario exceeds the realistic range of forces and deflections a plant stem would be subjected to. In other words structural failure of the stem would occur far before such high forces and deflections could be achieved. This extreme model was used to investigate the extent of validity of the closed form solution for very large deflections. Agreement between this finite element model and the closed form solutions is strong at small deflections (as expected). At very large deflections (greater than \(\sim 45^\circ\) angle at the tip of the stem), geometric nonlinearities that are not captured by the closed form engineering beam equations become more influential [4]. That is to say that the closed form solution is accurate so long as the linear closed form engineering beam equations upon which it is predicated are accurate. For more discussion on this topic, see the Limitations section. Figure 4 depicts the comparison between the extremely large deflection finite
element model and the closed form solution. Figure 4 displays a maximum horizontal deflection equal to the height of the stem.

**A Computational Tool for Accounting for Weights**

To make the closed form solutions derived in the methods section more amenable to researchers without a structural engineering background (i.e., plant scientists, agronomists, and other end-users), an Excel (Microsoft Corporation, 2019) spreadsheet was developed, and is included as Additional File 1. The user simply inputs the stalk flexural stiffness of the plant stem, the heights to each location of interest, the magnitude of externally applied forces and moments, and the weights at each location. The spreadsheet calculates the weight induced moments ($M_{body}$) and deflections as well as the total induced moment ($M_{total}$) at all locations. The spreadsheet makes the calculation both with and without self-loading considered. In addition, the error induced by ignoring the self-loading is calculated. Figure 5 shows an example of the spreadsheet in which 3 externally applied forces, 2 externally applied moments, and 3 weights are considered. This tool can be used by researchers to determine the necessity of including self-loading in their studies.

For example, if this spreadsheet were used to determine the necessity of including self-weight in a mechanical phenotyping study (e.g., a study using the device as presented in [6]), the following would be performed: (1) A non-destructive, small deflection, flexural test as described in [6] would be performed, to determine the specimen’s stalk flexural stiffness; (2) a destructive, large deflection bending strength test as described in [6] would then be performed on the same specimen; (3) the specimen would then be weighed and the center-of-gravity would be determined; (4) the specimen weight, center-of-gravity, and stalk flexural stiffness as well as the
magnitude and location of the load applied to the plant by the phenotyping device from the destructive bending strength test would be input into the spreadsheet; (5) the spreadsheet would report out the amount of error in the stalk flexural stiffness and stalk bending strength if the weight of the specimen was ignored. This procedure would then be repeated for several representative specimens. This data could then be used to inform the researchers if self-weight induced loadings are significant and need to be accounted for in phenotyping experiments or if the amount of error introduced by neglecting self-weight is negligible. If self-weight was determined to be significant then the spreadsheet could be used to properly account for self-weight of measured samples.

Case Study Results

Results from the first and second case studies are presented below. Results from the third case study (experimental analysis of wheat throughout a growing season) are found in Additional File 3.

With regards to the first case study, Figure 2 displays two common loading configurations used during mechanical phenotyping experiments. The first test configuration represents that of a typical stalk flexural stiffness test for maize [6,45] and applies a Contact Force at the top of the specimen, while the stalk’s center of gravity is below the loading point. The second test configuration shown in Figure 2 represents a typical stalk flexural stiffness test for wheat [25, 26] and applies a Contact Force below the grain head but near the top of the specimen.

During these types of mechanical phenotyping tests the Contact Force (F) applied by a phenotyping device and the deflection of the stem at the point of loading (\(\delta_i\)) are recorded. Ignoring the weight of the stalk, the stalk flexural stiffness (EI) is then typically
calculated from the test data by rearranging the following engineering beam equation to solve for $EI$:

$$\delta_t = \frac{Fh_t^3}{3EI}$$  \hfill (15)

To account for the weight of the stalk when calculating \textit{stalk flexural stiffness}, we must modify Equation 15 to include the stalk weight ($w$) as discussed in the methods section. For example:

\textit{Configuration 1: Load at Top, Weight at Midspan}

First, solving Equation 11 for loading configuration 1 results in:

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & -h_2 \\ -w & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} \delta_2 \\ W \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} Fh_2^2(3h_1 - h_2) \\ 6EI \end{bmatrix}$$

Where the two unknowns are the deflection at the weight ($\delta_2$) and the weight-induced moment ($W$). From this equation, the weight-induced moment can be calculated as:

$$W = \frac{Fh_2^2w(3h_1 - h_2)}{6EI - 3w h_2^2}$$  \hfill (17)

Finally, we can solve Equation 5 at the point of loading ($\delta_1$) to find a relationship between the test data and the deflection:

$$\delta_1 = \frac{Fh_1}{3EI} + \frac{Fwh_2^2(3h_1 - h_2)(2h_1 - h_2)}{6EI(2EI - wh_2^2)}$$  \hfill (18)

Where Equation 15 is shown in black, and the correction factor for the weight-induced moment is shown in blue. This newly calculated deflection can then be substituted into the corresponding equation in Table 1 to calculate the corrected \textit{stalk flexural stiffness}.
Configuration 2: Load at Midspan, Weight at Top:

As before, solving Equation 11 for loading configuration 2 at the weight’s location results in:

\[
\begin{bmatrix}
1 & -\frac{h_1}{2EI} \\
-w & 1
\end{bmatrix}
\begin{bmatrix}
\delta_2 \\
W
\end{bmatrix}
= \begin{bmatrix}
\frac{Fh_2^3(3h_1 - h_2)}{6EI} \\
0
\end{bmatrix}
\]

\[(19)\]

Solving for the weight-induced moment and solving for Equation 5 for the point of loading \(\delta_1\) to find a relationship between the test data and the deflection:

\[
\delta_2 = \frac{Fh_2^3}{3EI} + \frac{Fwh_2^4(3h_1 - h_2)}{6EI(2EI - wh_2^2)}
\]

\[(20)\]

Where Equation 15 is shown in black, and the correction factor for the weight-induced moment is shown in blue. This newly calculated deflection can then be substituted into the corresponding equation in Table 1 to calculate the corrected stalk flexural stiffness.

It should be noted that Equations 18 and 20 are simply Equation 15 with the addition of a correction factor that accounts for the influence of the weight-induced bending moment. Thus by comparing the results of Equation 15 with either Equation 18 or 20, the influence of the weight-induced bending moment on the deflection of the stem can be calculated. Additionally, the results of Equation 18 and 20 (i.e., the deflections) can be input into Equation 6 to determine the magnitude of the weight-induced moment. The weight induced bending moment \(W\) can then be compared to the bending moment induced from the applied force \(M_{ext}\) to determine the effect of self-weight on the stalk bending strength. Using the methods presented in this case study researchers can easily determine if weight-induced bending moments are negligible or if they need to be incorporated into their mechanical phenotyping studies.
A second case study was conducted to determine the general influence of Body Forces on several plant species. The values shown in Table 3 represent typical values reported in the literature for the five plants species included in this case study. It should be noted that these are average single data points and a significant amount of variation in heights, weights, and flexural stiffnesses is expected within a given plant species. This information is presented here as an accessible reference for researchers to develop an understanding of the types of plants that are more or less affected by self-loading.

Table 3: Self-loading related properties and the % error introduced when self-loading is ignored in calculations of stalk bending strength and stalk flexural stiffness. The center of gravity of the plant was assumed to be halfway up the stem.

| Plant       | Plant Height (mm) | Grain Height (mm) | Plant Weight (N) | Grain Weight (N) | Flexural Stiffness (Nm²) | Error of Stalk Bending Strength (%) | Error of Stalk Flexural Stiffness (%) | References              |
|-------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Maize       | 2250              | 1125              | 7.595            | 2.874            | 79.17                   | < 1%                                | < 1%                                  | [5,22,27–29]             |
| Wheat       | 638               | 638               | 0.016            | 0.021            | 0.027                   | 12%                                 | 16%                                   | [23,30,31]               |
| Sweet Sorghum | 2650             | 2650              | 9.64             | 0.346            | 137.1                   | 1%                                  | 1%                                    | [32–34]                  |
| Bamboo      | 10,774            | N/A               | 138.02           | N/A              | 229                     | < 1%                                | < 1%                                  | [35,36]                  |
| Rice        | 969               | 969               | 0.0635           | 0.028            | 0.17                    | 6%                                  | 8%                                    | [37,38]                  |

A key factor in determining the influence of Body Forces in different plant species is the ratio of the weight of a plant to its flexural stiffness. While this ratio does not include all of the factors that influence self-loading, it can be used as a quick evaluation tool for researchers to determine the general amount of influence self-loading may have. Figure 6 depicts the influence...
of this ratio on stalk flexural stiffness and stalk bending strength, with the plant varieties in Table 3 shown as data points. In general, it can be seen from the figure that Body Forces (i.e., self-weight) has a negligible effect on stiff and strong stems (i.e., bamboo and maize) but becomes more influential in smaller stems (i.e., rice, wheat).

Discussion

Mechanical measurements of plants have been used to investigate stalk lodging resistance for over a century. However, engineers or mechanical measurement experts have typically not been involved in past studies. Consequently, very few previous studies have attempted to account for the complex influence of the plant’s own weight (i.e., Body Forces) on mechanical measurements. The studies that have attempted to account for self-weight typically normalized bending strength measurements by specimen weight [e.g., 46,47]. This was an important first step and raised general awareness of the need to somehow account for self-weight during mechanical phenotyping studies. However, the effect of self-weight on stalk bending strength and stalk flexural stiffness is complex and is not fully captured by normalizing stalk bending strength measurements by specimen weight.

This is the first report the authors are aware of that presents a method to properly account for plant weight when calculating stalk bending strength and stalk flexural stiffness. Results demonstrate the equations derived herein to account for the complex effects of self-weight during mechanical phenotyping experiments are accurate. The authors therefore recommend that future studies utilize the equations, corrections factors and Excel spreadsheet presented herein to account for the effects of self-weight during mechanical phenotyping experiments. More
specifically, based on prior experience and the results presented in Table 3 and Figure 8, the authors recommend that self-weight be accounted for when testing small grain stems. However, the effect of self-weight on large grain stems that possess a small ratio of plant weight to stalk flexural stiffness (e.g., mature maize stalks) is minimal and for many intents and purposes is most likely negligible.

More broadly the authors would advocate for increased collaboration between plant scientist and engineers. The mechanical response of plant stems is complex and requires specific expertise to fully understand. While the Excel spreadsheet and equations derived above have been made as approachable as is feasible to non-experts, they will be most useful to engineers and structural mechanics experts who fully comprehend the inherent assumptions and limitations of the tools.

Finally, it should be noted that the association between stalk flexural stiffness, stalk bending strength, and stalk lodging resistance are plant- and time-specific. For instance, in late-season lodging of maize stalks, previous studies have found that plants experience a predominantly linear-elastic response prior to failure, and that stalk flexural stiffness tends to strongly correlate with lodging resistance [5]. In such a case, Equation 14 demonstrates that the total bending moment and bending stress are directly linear, e.g. a 10% increase in the total bending moment will result in a 10% increase in stress. Therefore, the authors hypothesize that increasing the stalk bending strength will decrease the lodging resistance at a ratio of -1:1, e.g. a 10% increase in the induced bending moment from self-loading will result in a 10% decrease in the lodging resistance of the stalk. However, for less linear material responses (e.g. during green-snap), these relationships will be less direct. For stems with nonlinear material responses,
researchers will need to incorporate these self-loading equations into their biomechanical models which contain non-linear material responses.

**Limitations**

The primary limitation of the current study is that the stalk was assumed to be in-line with the assumptions made for pure bending, including maintaining a constant cross-section with homogeneous, isotropic, linear elastic material subjected to pure bending [4]. It should be noted that the finite element models were also only valid for linear elastic materials. The inclusion of the changes in cross-sectional geometry along the lengths of the stalk [22], material heterogeneity and anisotropy, or non-linear material properties would likely change the behavior of the analytical system. Further discussion of the influence of such material assumptions on equations has been investigated in a previous study by the authors [4]. These assumptions, when combined with the assumption of a single cross-section along the entire length of the stalk, results in a single flexural stiffness parameter for the entire stalk. However, the flexural stiffness of plants changes constantly along the length of the stalk (i.e., the diameter of most plant stems are large near the base of the plant and smaller near the top of the plant). The simplifying assumption of a single flexural stiffness parameter was deliberately made to allow for an easily-used generalized equation. This assumption is routinely made in phenotyping studies as well. If researchers need to incorporate changes in flexural stiffness along the length of the stalk, the approach presented in this study can be incorporated into a full Castigliano’s method beam approximation [17]. Additionally, the equations used in this study assume small strains and small deflections. As such, these equations carry the same limitations as standard engineering beam bending equations, and are not suitable to predict post-failure loading conditions or deflections. When post-buckling analyses are required,
non-linear finite element modeling approaches are recommended. In summary, the analyses in this study are only valid for conditions in which traditional phenotyping methods are considered valid.

Finally, Equations 1, 2, and 6 assume that the maximum moment induced by self-loading is applied to the entire length of the stem below the weight, which is not accurate, and is used as a simple estimation of the moment induced by self-loading. In reality, self-loading is not a constant moment along the length of the stalk, but instead is an axial compressive load that induces a moment that varies along the length of the stalk. However, modeling loading as an axial compressive load greatly increases the complexity of the equation, to the point that the matrix equations presented in this study would not be practical. Therefore, Equation 6 presents an upper-bound of the influence of self-loading by simply applying the maximum moment along the entire length of the stem. As shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4, this assumption is reasonable for the parameter space explored.

**Conclusions**

Equations were derived to account for the influence of self-loading on measurements of stalk flexural stiffness and stalk bending strength of plant stems. The derived equations were parametrically validated against hundreds of nonlinear finite element models of plant stems. The closed form equations are accurate and showed good agreement with the finite element models (median error < 0.2%). The equations were incorporated into a user-friendly spreadsheet that can be used by the research community to account for self-loading of plants during mechanical phenotyping studies. Results indicate that ignoring self-weight can lead to significant errors in phenotyping measurements of small grains (e.g. 16% error in stalk flexural stiffness for wheat).
It is the recommendation of the authors that self-loading be taken into account for plants such as wheat and rice that have a large ratio of weight to flexural stiffness.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

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Authors’ Contributions

All authors were fully involved in the study and preparation of the manuscript. The material within has not been and will not be submitted for publication elsewhere.

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**Figure 1:** The loading diagram of a deflected stem, showing two loading locations with all three types of loading (an applied force, an applied moment, and a weight).

**Figure 2:** The loading diagrams for two common mechanical phenotyping test protocols used to determine flexural stiffness; a typical maize phenotyping protocol (left), and a typical wheat phenotyping protocol (right).

**Figure 3:** A comparison between the closed form solution and finite element models for stalk flexural stiffness (a) and stalk bending strength (b), n= 768; A histogram of the error between the closed form solution and the finite element models for stalk flexural stiffness (c) and for stalk bending strength (d), n= 768.

**Figure 4:** A comparison between the closed form solution and finite element model for deflections beyond loading that would typically be seen in the field. Plots depict the stalk flexural stiffness (a) and stalk bending strength (b); the error in the closed form stalk flexural stiffness and stalk bending strength for large deflections, with the finite element model deflections shown (c).

**Figure 5:** An example of the Excel spreadsheet (see Additional File 1), showing loading at three locations, and calculating deflection and induced moments at four locations: the three loading locations and the base of the plant. Note that error in deflection is not calculated at the base, as deflection at the base is zero regardless of loading condition.

**Figure 6:** The error of stalk flexural stiffness (left) and stalk bending strength (right), as a function of the ratio between the combined weight of the grain and plant and the flexural stiffness of the stem.