Supply of Compost and Arbuscular Mycorrhizal Fungi for Enhancing Quality of *Ceiba pentandra* (Kapok Tree) Seedlings

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**Authors’ contributions**

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author BLAA conducted the study under the supervision of the authors ELB, KSBN and SA. Authors ELB and BLAA designed the study. Author BLAA wrote the protocol and the first draft of the manuscript under the supervision of authors ELB and SA. Authors BLAA and ELB managed the literature searches. All authors collaborated to the revision and improvement of the initial draft submitted. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

**Article Information**

DOI: 10.9734/IJPSS/2020/v32i930329

Editor(s): (1) Dr. Kofi Agyarko, University of Education, Ghana.

Reviewers: (1) Mariliane de Cássia Soares da Silva, Federal University of Viçosa (UFV), Brazil.
(2) Olajire Fagbola, Agronomy University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
(3) Swati Saha, Indian Agricultural Research Institute, India.

Complete Peer review History: [http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/57843](http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/57843)

Received 01 May 2020
Accepted 05 July 2020
Published 06 August 2020

**ABSTRACT**

The success of reforestation depends on the production of quality seedlings in nurseries. Initial fertilization and mycorrhization are determinants that improve the growth of plants. The purpose of this study was to improve the quality of *Ceiba pentandra* seedlings using fertilization and mycorrhization in nurseries. Seedlings of *C. pentandra* were subjected to various treatments (T1: Sterilized forest soil (100 %); T2: 90 % T1 + sterilized mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %); T3: 90 % T1 + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %); T4: 90 % T1 + compost (10 %); T5: 80 % T1 + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %) + compost (10 %)). The results showed an increase of 117.35 % in the dry stem weight of young *Ceiba pentandra* mycorrhizae (T3) seedlings compared to non-mycorrhizae (T2) seedlings. Growth parameters, roots, total leaf area were better with the treatment combining mycorrhization.

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and compost application. Furthermore, the sturdiness quotient was identical for all substrates. Seedlings of *Ceiba pentandra* are highly dependent on mycorrhization. For rapid production of quality seedlings, fertilization could be coupled with mycorrhization.

Keywords: *Ceiba pentandra*; arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi; forest seedlings; sturdiness quotient; fertilization.

1. INTRODUCTION

*Ceiba pentandra* (Kapok tree) is a tropical tree that can be used as fibre and timber. Today, production and trade is centred on timber, mainly for the production of plywood [1]. *Ceiba pentandra* is one of the largest trees in the Ivorian forest where it can reach 50 meters in height and 2 meters in diameter [2]. However, the massive harvest of timber due to the decline of noble species and strong market demand is contrasted by a limited supply from wild plantations. These spontaneous stands hardly guarantee a sustainable and consistent supply to industries. It is therefore necessary to think about a better management of this forest resource by reforestation. In Côte d’Ivoire, in order to achieve successful reforestation, the structures in charge of forest management have long relied on the choice of fast-growing species such as *Tectona grandis*, *Cedrela odorata* and *Acacias sp* [3,4].

Numerous studies have shown that the success of this operation depends on the production of quality seedlings and knowledge of the factors influencing their growth [5,6,7,8]. Indeed, the success of forest plantations depends on many genetic determinants inherent to the environment to be reforested, but also on the morphophysiological quality of the plants [9]. As a result, morphophysiological criteria for nursery-produced plants have been developed for successful reforestation programs [10,9,8]. With this in mind, nursery care such as fertilization and the use of adequate substrate is carried out [11,12, 13,14]. However, the use of these plants does not necessarily guarantee survival after planting. For good reason, the constraints inherent in environments such as humidity, temperature and physical stress are sometimes detrimental to the recovery and survival of seedlings [12]. Studies conducted in this direction have shown that nursery association of plants with mycorrhizal fungi improves growth in the nursery and in the field, while ensuring their survival after transfer to natural environments [15-20]. These advantages have led to the inclusion of mycorrhization of plants at the exit of the nursery among the quality criteria for forest plants [10,21]. Since then, mycorrhizal symbiosis has been considered a key factor in the success of reforestation programs [15].

Most environments are generally supplied with mycorrhizal propagules. However, degradation of the environment leads to a reduction in this potential [22,23]. The rarity and incompatibility of the strains encountered can constitute a real obstacle to the installation of new plants [24]. Also, the time required to establish a functional and effective association after transfer to the field can be detrimental to the survival of the young plant [25]. The production of mycorrhized plants in the nursery is therefore necessary. This operation can be carried out either by association with a well-defined strain (controlled mycorrhization), or through the management of mycorrhizal potential in situ using a mycotrophic plant [26,25,27]. According to the work of Khasa et al. [28] and Anguiby et al. [29], *Ceiba pentandra* is associated with endomycorrhizal fungi.

The aim of this work was to assess the influence of compost and arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi supply on the performance of *Ceiba pentandra* seedlings under nursery conditions.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Soil Sampling and Study Sites

Soil samples were collected under kapok trees at the Botanical Garden of Bingerville (JBB) in Côte d’Ivoire. The diameter at breast height (dbh) of these trees was equal to 1.36 ± 0.17 m. This garden is situted at 5°21’50.7”N latitude and 3°53’20.7”W longitude. The nursery was established under a shaded area covered with transparent polyethylene plastic and protected by a fine mesh fabric built at the National Floristic Center of the Félix Houphouët-Boigny University in Cocody (Côte d’Ivoire). The National Floristic Center is located at 5°20’47.9” N latitude and at 3°59’02.0” W longitude. The average temperature is between 25 and 29°C and rainfall is 1650 mm/year for both sites.
2.2 Production of Mycorrhizal Inoculum

The production of the inoculum consists of growing two mycotrophic plants on soil taken from under *Ceiba pentandra* tree. Through this process, the mycorrhizogenic potential (spore, mycelial hyphae) is improved. Spore abundance and diversity of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi in this soil have already been determined [29]. Sorghum plants (*Sorghum bicolor*) and Niebe (*Vigna unguiculata*) were chosen on the basis of their mycotrophic character. The seeds are of commercial origin. The growing medium consists of a 1:1 mixture of rhizospheric soil of *Ceiba pentandra* and sandy soil sterilized twice at 120 °C for 30 min at a pressure of 1 bar per 24 h interval. On these substrates, pre-germinated Sorghum and Niebe seeds were sown at a rate of two seeds/container. The experimental unit is a pot (5 litres), filled with 4 Kg of substrate. One treatment is represented by two containers. The trial lasted 90 days for *Sorghum* and 60 days for Niebe.

Watering was carried out 48 hours apart with tap water. Density of spores and plant mycorrhization indices (intensity and frequency) obtained with the grid of Trouvelot et al. [30] governed the choice of growth substrate used as mycorrhizal inoculum for the nursery inoculation of the kapok plants.

2.3 Compost Production

The fertilizer was made from a litter taken from a poultry farm. This litter was subjected to aerial composting for three months. Before use, the compost produced was sieved with a sieve with a mesh size of 2 mm and then sterilised in an oven maintained at 90 °C for 1 hour.

2.4 Treatments and Experimental Design

The nursery soil, a forest soil which was also sterilized had soil characteristics shown in Table 1. The total nitrogen and phosphorus in the soil were determined by the Kjeldahl method [31] and by colorimetry [32], respectively. The soil was sterilized in an oven maintained at 120 °C for 01 hour and 30 min. The soil was distributed in polyethylene bags (2 kg per bag). The experimental design is a Fisher block consisting of five treatments and three replicates:

- **T1**: Sterilized forest topsoil only (100 %);
- **T2**: 90 % T1 + sterilized mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %);
- **T3**: 90 % T1 + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %);
- **T4**: 90 % T1 + compost (10 %);
- **T5**: 80 % T1 + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %) + compost (10 %). This last treatment is called mixed treatment.

For T2, T3, T5 treatments, the amount of mycorrhizal or non-mycorrhizal soil applied corresponds to one tenth of nursery soil (1:10) to minimize the effect of the minerals content on plant growth [33].

2.5 Inoculation and Fertilization

*Ceiba pentandra* seeds were collected from one tree so as to limit intrinsic variation (Seed diameter= 4.39 ± 0.03 mm). These seeds were disinfected by soaking in 10 % sodium hypochlorite solution for 15 min and, then rinsed 3 times for 10 min with distilled water. They were pre-germinated for three days in a Petri dish (diameter= 19 cm) lined with a slice of blotting paper. Before sowing the seeds, the mycorrhizal inoculum was placed in a crater made in the center of the substrate contained in the bag. The pre-germinated seed was then sown in the centre of the nursery bag, taking care that the entire hypocotyl is immersed in the inoculum. The inoculum was covered with sterile forest soil. The compost was added two weeks after transplanting the seedlings (0.2 kg per plant).

2.6 Variables Assessed

2.6.1 Assessment of *Ceiba pentandra* seedlings roots colonized by AMF

The Philips and Hayman [34] staining method was used to stain fungal structures. The fine roots of three months seedlings were collected carefully. These roots were washed and then cut into fragments of at least 1 cm in length. They were then placed in tubes and covered with 10 % potassium hydroxide solution in a double boiler maintained at 70°C for 30 minutes. This treatment removed the cellular content of the roots. Then the structures formed by the fungi in the roots were colored with an ink blue solution. Mycorrhizal frequency and intensity were calculated as described by Trouvelot et al. [30].

2.6.2 Mycorrhizal Dependency Index (MDI)

This index was determined with the T2 and T3 treatments. It was determined with the following formula [35].
MDI (%) = \frac{[SdMyc (T3) - SdTnMyc (T2)] \times 100}{SdnMyc(T2)}

SdMyc: Stem dry weight of mycorrhizal seedlings; SdTnMyc: Stem dry weight of non-mycorrhizal seedlings.

To get the dry weight of the stems, the fresh stems were placed in a drying oven maintained at 80 °C for three days and weighed.

2.6.3 Growth assessment

The growth variables considered were height, and diameter of seedlings. These variables were taken weekly for three months commencing at one month after sowing. The height was, expressed in cm and, was measured from the collet to the apical meristem of the stem. The diameter was determined at two centimetres above ground level with a 0.01 mm precision electronic calliper. Leaf numbers were counted manually.

2.6.4 Morphological indices

The sturdiness quotient reflects the stocky or hail nature of the seedlings. It has been determined by measuring the height (h) in centimetres divided by the stem diameter (d) in millimetres (h/d) [10,14]. The ratio of stem (FWS) to root (FWR) fresh weight was also calculated. It measures the difference between the transpiration surface (stem), and the water absorption surface (root) of the plants produced.

2.6.5 Measurement of fresh roots weight of seedlings

The fresh weights of the stems (FWS) and roots (FWR) of the three-month-old seedling were determined by weighing.

2.6.6 Leaf area

This productivity parameter was determined by referring to the method described by Zraibi et al. [36]. The leaf blade was detached from the petiole and then weighed to obtain the fresh weight (LIW). Then one square centimetre (la) of leaf blade was cut off and weighed to obtain lw.

The leaf area of a leaf limb (La) was obtained by the following relationship:

\[ La = \frac{la \times LfW}{lfw} \]

Total leaf area was estimated by multiplying La by the number of leaves in each seedling. For this variable, the leaf in the middle position was selected.

2.6.7 Chlorophyll content

The chlorophyll content was measured with a device, the SPAD-502 Plus (KONICA MINOLTA). This instrument allows non-destructive measurement of chlorophyll pigment content in plants [37].

2.6.8 Leaf nutritional variables

The minerals determined were nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium and magnesium. The Kjeldahl method was used to determine nitrogen. Potassium and calcium were determined with the flame photometer [38]. Magnesium and phosphorus were measured by atomic absorption spectrometry (AAS) [38] and colorimetry respectively.

2.7 Statistical Analyses

Spore density, frequency and intensity of mycorrhization were treated with the Student t test. For the variables measured on the kapok seedlings, the Fisher's test (ANOVA) was used to test the hypothesis of equality of means. The Newman and Keuls test was used to determine groups of homogeneous means.

| Mineral elements | Nursery soil | Compost   |
|------------------|--------------|-----------|
| N (%)            | 0 < 1        | 3.15 ± 0.20 |
| P (%)            | 1.44 ± 0.14  | 1.26 ± 0.05 |

Table 1. N and P contents of forest soil and compost
3. RESULTS

3.1 Spores Density, Frequency and Intensity of Mycorrhization in *Sorghum bicolor* and *Vigna unguiculata*

An increase in spore density was noted after growing by counting. From 2.27 ± 0.22 spores per gram of original soil, the density increased to 7.47 ± 0.39 and 4.05 ± 0.12 for *Sorghum bicolor* and *Vigna unguiculata*, respectively (Table 2). The number was doubled for *Sorghum*. The difference between the densities of spores isolated under the two plants was significantly marked in favour of *Sorghum*. Root colonization was more intense in *Sorghum* roots (Table 2). As a result, the culture medium of *S. bicolor* was subsequently chosen as mycorrhizal inoculum.

3.2 Effects of Compost Supply and Mycorrhization on the Growth of *C. pentandra* Seedlings

3.2.1 Seedlings susceptibility to mycorrhization and Mycorrhizal Dependency Index (MDI)

The roots of *Ceiba pentandra* seedlings from treatments T1, T2 and T4 did not show any signs of mycorrhization. However, those from T3 and T5 showed susceptibility to mycorrhization. This is evidenced by the presence of spores, vesicles and mycelial hyphae that attest to arbuscular mycorrhization observed in the root cortex of the seedlings (Fig. 1).

The dependency index was assessed with T2 and T3 treatments. The mean dry weight of the stem was 1.21 ± 0.10 g and 2.64 ± 0.06 g for T2 and T3 respectively. The dry weight of young plants from T3 was almost double that of T2. Thus, the mycorrhization dependence (DMI) of the kapok seedlings was 117.35 % under the conditions of the study.

3.2.2 Effects of compost supply on plant mycorrhization

The results showed that the application of the compost involved in the treatment T5 did not significantly affect the frequency and intensity of root colonization of young plants (Table 3). In fact, the frequency and intensity of mycorrhization were statistically identical for T3 and T5 treatments. However, the proportion actually mycorrhized was higher for treatment T3.

3.2.3 Effects of treatments on average plant diameter

The mean diameter of the plants obtained at the end of the nursery monitoring period varied significantly (p < 0.01) with respect to the nature of the treatment (Fig. 2). Plants from the T1

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**Table 2. Spores density under Sorghum and Niebe, frequency (F) and intensity (I) of mycorrhization of these plants**

| Plants    | Density (Spore g⁻¹ of soil) | Frequency (%) | Intensity (%) |
|-----------|-----------------------------|---------------|--------------|
| *V. unguiculata* | 4.05 ± 0.12 b | 100 | 34.10 ± 4.85 a |
| *S. bicolor*    | 7.47 ± 0.39 a | 100 | 15.17 ± 1.97 b |
| Statistics test | t=69.09 (df=1); p=0.000 | - | t=2.31 (df=1); p=0.003 |

Means with different letter(s) in columns are significantly different at p ≤ 0.05

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Fig. 1. Roots cortexes of *C. pentandra* seedlings from T3 and T5 treatments coloured with ink blue
Table 3. Frequency (F) and intensity of mycorrhization (I) of *C. pentandra* seedlings

| Treatments | F (%)       | I (%)       |
|------------|-------------|-------------|
| T1         | -           | -           |
| T2         | -           | -           |
| T3         | 85.90 ± 4.90 a | 25.18 ± 7.76 a |
| T4         | -           | -           |
| T5         | 88.80 ± 10.96 a | 22.36 ± 6.79 a |

Test statistic

\[
t (df : 1) = 0.54 \quad ; \quad p = 0.6
\]

\[
t (df : 1) = -0.64 \quad ; \quad p = 0.54
\]

Means with different letter(s) in columns are significantly different at \( p \leq 0.05 \).

\( T_1 \): Sterilized forest soil (100 %),
\( T_2 \): 90 % \( T_1 \) + sterilized mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %),
\( T_3 \): 90 % \( T_1 \) + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %),
\( T_4 \): 90% \( T_1 \) + compost (10 %),
\( T_5 \): 80 % \( T_1 \) + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %) + compost (10 %)

**Fig. 2.** Effect of treatments on the average diameter of *Ceiba pentandra* seedlings

\( T_1 \): Sterilized forest soil (100 %),
\( T_2 \): 90 % \( T_1 \) + sterilized mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %),
\( T_3 \): 90 % \( T_1 \) + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %),
\( T_4 \): 90% \( T_1 \) + compost (10 %),
\( T_5 \): 80 % \( T_1 \) + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %) + compost (10 %)

**Fig. 3.** Growth of the diameter of *C. pentandra* seedlings

\( T_1 \): Sterilized forest soil (100 %),
\( T_2 \): 90 % \( T_1 \) + sterilized mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %),
\( T_3 \): 90 % \( T_1 \) + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %),
\( T_4 \): 90% \( T_1 \) + compost (10 %),
\( T_5 \): 80 % \( T_1 \) + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %) + compost (10 %)
treatment showed the lowest diameter values. Treatments T₂ and T₃, which received the sterilized mycorrhizal inoculum and unsterilized inoculum respectively, produced plants of different sizes. Indeed, those from T₃ are significantly larger in diameter (7.43 ± 0.20 mm) than those from T₂ (5.40 ± 0.19 mm). The mixed treatment, T₅ resulted in the best radial growth (10.79 ± 0.15 mm) followed by T₄ (10.01 ± 0.10 mm). The T₅ treatment stimulated radial growth of seedlings by 116.81 % compared to the T₁ treatments. From week 8 to the end of the study (week 12), the diameter of T₅ plants was greater than that of the other treatments (Fig. 3).

### 3.2.4 Effect of treatments on plant height

The average height of three-month-old *Ceiba pentandra* seedlings as affected by the applied treatments is shown in Figs. 4 and 5. Plant height varied significantly (p < 0.01) between treatments. The mixed treatment (T₅), combining fertilizer application and unsterilized mycorrhized soil, gave the best results (73.28 ± 2.79 cm) followed by compost supply treatment alone T₄ (66.52 ± 2.06 cm). Also the plants receiving the T₃ treatment showed significantly higher values than the T₂ and T₁ treatments. The height of the seedlings increased by 12.72 %, 62.92 %,
Fig. 6. Effect of treatments on the fresh root weight of *Ceiba pentandra* seedlings

| Treatments | Fresh root weight (g) |
|------------|-----------------------|
| T1: Sterilized forest soil (100 %) | 3.06 ± 0.24 |
| T2: 90 % T1 + sterilized mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %) | 4.23 ± 0.35 |
| T3: 90 % T1 + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %) | 6.57 ± 0.46 |
| T4: 90 % T1 + compost (10 %) | 11.69 ± 0.78 |
| T5: 80 % T1 + mycorrhizal inoculum (10 %) + compost (10 %) | 13.89 ± 0.90 |

116.90 % and 138.97 % respectively for the sterilized mycorrhized soil (T3), unsterilized mycorrhized soil (T5), compost application (T4) and compost + unsterilized mycorrhized soil (T3) compared to the treatment (T1).

3.2.5 Effect of treatments applied on the fresh weight of plant roots

Fresh root weight values ranged between 3.06 and 14.46 g (Fig. 6). The type of treatment applied significantly influenced the rooting of young plants \[ F (df: 4) = 140.54; p < 0.01 \]. In ascending order the fresh root weight followed the trend T1 < T2 < T3 < T4 < T5. Thus, treatments consisting of the sterilized substrate alone (T1) and that consisting of the addition of sterilized mycorrhizal soil (T2) produced plants with low fresh root weights.

3.2.6 Effect of treatments on the total leaf area of *Ceiba pentandra* seedlings

The leaf area of the plants from T3 was higher than that of T1 and T2 plants (Fig. 7). On all the treatments studied, the highest total leaf area was obtained in the plants subjected to treatment T5.

3.2.7 Sturdiness quotient and ratio of Fresh Weight of Stems (FWS) to Fresh Weight of Roots (FWR)

Plant height divided by diameter gave values between 6 and 7 (Table 4). Analysis of these data showed that this quotient was significantly impacted by substrate composition (p = 0.003). The mixed treatment gave the highest values.
Contents were influenced by the treatments that applied [F (df: 4) = 0.92; p < 0.01] (Table 4). The chlorophyll pigment concentration measured with SPAD units (Table 4). The chlorophyll pigment concentration measured with SPAD-502 Plus was between 47.18 and 51.23 SPAD units (Table 4). Phosphate content was higher with the addition from T4 treatment. Potassium content (3.46±0.12 %) was lower in treatment T4, and T5 group and the T3 and T2 group with high and low ratios respectively. The T1 treatment presented intermediate values to both groups.

3.2.8 Chlorophyll content

The chlorophyll pigment concentration measured with SPAD-502 Plus was between 47.18 and 53.44 SPAD units (Table 4). The chlorophyll pigment content of plants from the T3 treatment (mycorrhized soil) was observed to be the highest (53.44 ± 1.79 SPAD units). Nevertheless, the chlorophyll pigment richness of the leaves was not statistically different with all the treatments applied [F (df:4) = 0.924; p < 0.495].

3.2.9 Nutritional variables

Unlike N content of the leaves, P, K, Ca Mg contents were influenced by the treatments that were applied (Table 5). Phosphate content was higher with the addition from T4 treatment. Potassium content (3.46±0.12 %) was lower in the T3 treatment. Also, the leaves from T3 and T5 seedlings showed the highest calcium contents. Compared to T1 (sterilized forest soil) and T2 (T1+ sterilized mycorrhizal inoculum), the leaves of the seedlings from treatment T3 (T1 + mycorrhizal inoculum) showed highest values of minerals contents (N, P, Ca). However, except for the phosphorus content, the leaves of seedlings from T5 treatment showed the highest mineral content.

4. DISCUSSION

Mycotrophic plants have a "nurses" might, they are capable of creating an environment suitable for the growth of the following crop [39,40,41]. In this study, after planting of Sorghum bicolor and Vigna unguilata in soils collected under Ceiba pentandra trees, results showed that the number of spores doubled. However, spores of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi were more enhanced by S. bicolor than by V.unguillata. Indeed, according to Houngnandan et al. [42]
findings, Poaceae roots are suitable for the proliferation of mycorrhizal fungi. Thus in this study, the sorghum (Poaceae) seedlings were allowed to increase a density of AM fungal spores compared to V.unguiculata. These results showed that the choice of the mycotrophic plant in the improvement of the mycorrhizal potential of soils is a crucial step.

The results obtained showed the best growth variables with seedlings from the nursery substrate supplemented with unsterilized mycorrhized soil (T₃) compared to the substrate supplemented with the same mycorrhized but sterilized soil (T₂). This difference would be due to the presence of growth-promoting microorganisms, particularly endomycorrhizal fungi in the added soil. The soil used as an inoculum contains arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi dominated by the genus Glomus [29].

In addition, the present study showed that the roots of plants that received only the mycorrhizal inoculum (T₃) were endomycorrhized. A functional symbiosis was therefore established between the young plants and the AM fungi. These associations stimulate plant growth even in environments with constraints [43,44,45]. The improvement in the seedling growth resulted from a better absorption of nutrients, particularly phosphorus, by the mycorrhized roots [18]. Indeed, the mycelial hyphae of AM fungi increase the surface area for nutrient uptake. In addition, through enzymatic activities (phosphatases, phytases), mycorrhizae contribute to the release of insoluble minerals in the soil [46, 47,48,49]. Mrabet et al. [33] obtained similar results on the growth of Argania spinosa seedlings, after cultivation on soil with added mycorrhizal soil. Similarly, Droh et al. [50] noted improved nursery growth of cocoa plants following inoculation with 65 g of mycorrhizal soil from a cocoa orchard. Thus, native fungi are potentials which are to be explored to improve plant growth [51]. The 117 % increase in stem dry weight of mycorrhized seedlings (T₃) compared to non-mycorrhized seedlings (T₂), demonstrates that Ceiba pentandra seedlings are highly dependent on mycorrhization. Above all parameters evaluated, the treatment with the mycorrhized soil alone (T₃) allowed the best growth compared to T₂. Also, the mycorrhizal structures observed in the root system of the T₃ and T₅ treatments showed that three months were sufficient for effective root colonization under the conditions of the study. Thus, the seedlings of Ceiba pentandra were found to be receptive to mycorrhizal fungi.

C.pentandra seedlings, like those of Argania spinosa [33] and Tetraclinis articulata [15] were able to associate with AM fungi during their initial growth. However, there were no differences in the level of mycorrhizal root colonization between treatments with fertilizer(T₅) or without fertilizer (T₃). It is accepted that a soluble fertilizer application increases solubility but strongly reduces and even suppresses mycorrhizal symbiosis [52]. In the present study, the degree of root colonization was not impacted despite the application of organic fertilizer. This result is similar to that of Gosling et al. [53]. According to these authors, fertilizers that slowly release minerals (compost) do not seem to have negative effects on AM fungi and may even stimulate them. In addition, a synergistic effect of compost and mycorrhized soil resulting in improved plant growth was reported in this study. Compared to the mycorrhized soil treatment (T₃) and the compost treatment alone (T₄), the seedlings resulting from the composite treatments (T₅) showed the best values in terms of growth variables, rooting and above-ground dry biomass. This synergistic effect was observed by Guissou et al. [54] on the height of Zizyphus mauritiana seedlings but not on the total biomass. Jan et al. [55] also demonstrated this effect following inoculation with AM fungi combined with the addition of compost and phosphorous on the growth of Trifolium alexandrinum. This growth is also due to the high root biomass highlighted in this study and probably to the availability of mineral elements. The mineralization of the compost enriched the environment in mineral elements, while the mycelial hyphae facilitated their absorption. Through improved growth performance, the mixed treatment (T₃) reduced the production time of Ceiba pentandra seedlings. According to Adou [2], the required height at the nursery exit of C. pentandra seedlings should be between 20 and 30 cm. It took three months for the control plants (T₁) to attain that height. It took six weeks for T₄ and T₅ and eight weeks for T₃ to attain that height.

The sturdiness quotient and the FSW/FRW ratio are morphological indices that can predict seedlings survival after transfer to the wild [10, 56]. In this study, the robustness ratio values of Ceiba pentandra seedlings ranged from 6 to 7. For Lamhamedi et al. [57], this ratio should be less than 7 for Acacia cunaphylla plants. However, according to Thomson [10], a ratio higher than six is harmful to the growth of Epicea plants in water-deficient environments. In view of
the results obtained with regard to the ratio of fresh stem/root weight, the absorption area (fresh root weight) of the *Ceiba pentandra* seedlings produced is lower than that of transpiration regardless of the treatment. However, the high stem/root fresh weight ratio for plants from T5 and T6 treatments suggests better stem growth to the benefit of the root. This could be explained by the container (nursery bag) which is a potential obstacle to root system growth.

5. CONCLUSION

Young plants of *Ceiba pentandra* are highly dependent on arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi for their growth. Mycorrhization combined with the use of compost was responsible for the best values of growth and rooting variables. Also, these results reveal that soils collected under the trees of the species are potential sources of mycorrhizal inoculum. This method can be used in forest nurseries to reduce the production time of the seedlings while guaranteeing their quality. Given the importance of the sturdiness quotient, the seedlings produced should be sent to a natural environment to determine its value.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the commandant of the Botanical Garden of Bingerville for allowing sampling in the garden and the manager of the National Floristic Center of the Felix Houphouët Boigny University (Côte d’Ivoire) for nursery site.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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