INTRODUCTION

Chilli (Capsicum annum L.) is the second-ranked spice crop after onion in Bangladesh cultivated year round. In Bangladesh, the annual production of chilli was 1, 05,764 and 31,108 metric tons in the Rabi and Kharif season, covering 2, 11,824 and 43,637 acres of agricultural land, respectively [1]. However, the potential yield of chilli in Bangladesh is far low in comparison to other chilli producing countries. For the potential yield of chilli in Bangladesh is far low in comparison to other chilli producing countries. For the purpose of controlling the crop diseases without chemicals.

Biological control of plant diseases using different beneficial fungi and bacteria has gained significant interest as an effective alternative to chemical due to their durability, cost-effectiveness, and environmental safety nature [5, 6]. Trichoderma is one of the most studied and available fungus popularly used as a biological control agent against different crop diseases including damping off and foot rot caused by Sclerotium, Fusarium, Rhizoctonia, Phytophthora, etc. [7-9]. Trichoderma sp. employs various mechanisms like competition, antibiosis, parasitism, mycoparasitism, secretion of various enzymes, and hyphal interaction to combat different plant pathogens [10]. Along with the antagonistic efficacy against the respective pathogen, Trichoderma also plays the role in the increasing of seed germination, crop growth, and yield of the crop plants [11]. However, the repeated and long time using of the same strain of Trichoderma leads to the loss of its potentiality as a biocontrol agent. Hence, it needs to keep searching other beneficial fungi and bacteria to explore alternative ways of controlling the crop diseases without chemicals.

Traditionally the growers use chemicals to control crop diseases and the long time injudicious using of chemicals showed hazardous impacts on the environment and human health [4]. However, now the consumers are very concern about the health and environmental impact of the chemicals and therefore, researchers are moving to explore alternative ways of controlling the crop diseases without chemicals.

Abstract: Damping off and foot rot caused by Sclerotium rolfsii and Fusarium oxysporum, respectively are the two deadly diseases in chilli occur at the seedling stage. In the present study, the formulated indigenous Trichoderma harzianum and its spore suspension alone or in combinations were used to control damping off and foot rot diseases of chilli in net house conditions. The combined application of chickpea based formulated T. harzianum and its spore suspension was found to reduce damping off by 75.02-86.96% and foot rot by 74.29-89.28% over control caused by both the fungi. The combined application of the treatment was also found to increase seed germination by 66.23-90.57% over control. Furthermore, the combined application of formulated T. harzianum and its spore suspension also resulted higher shoot length (9.33 cm and 7.88 cm), root length (4.03 cm and 3.95 cm), and vigor index (1097% and 1010%) at 14 days after sowing over S. rolfsii and F. oxysporum inoculated plants, respectively. Based on the present investigation, the chickpea bran-based Trichoderma harzianum formulation and suspension might be exploited for the management of damping off and foot rot diseases of chilli.

Keywords: Damping off, Foot rot, Chilli, Biological control, Trichoderma.
for new potential strains with good efficacy of controlling damping off and foot rot diseases. Therefore, the present study has been designed to investigate the bio-efficacy of indigenous *Trichoderma* sp. against damping off and foot rot in chilli in the northern region of Bangladesh.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The net house study of the bio-efficacy of *Trichoderma* sp. against damping off and foot rot of chilli was carried out in the Department of Plant Pathology, Hajee Mohammad Danesh Science and Technology University (HSTU), Dinajpur during 2017-2018.

**Collection of the antagonist**

*T. harzianum* was collected from the Department of Plant Pathology, which was previously isolated, identified, and preserved at 4 °C.

**Collection, isolation, and identification of Sclerotium rolfsii and Fusarium oxysporum**

Chilli plants having characteristic damping off and foot rot symptoms were collected, washed thoroughly with running tap water, and cut into small pieces with the help of scissors. The cut pieces were then surface sterilized with 0.1% mercuric chloride solution for a min. following three times washing with sterilized double-distilled water. The pieces were then aseptically placed on Petri plates containing potato dextrose agar (PDA) and incubated for 7 days at 28±2 °C. After colonization, the superficial growth of the fungi was sub-cultured for purification and identified morphologically under a compound microscope [12, 13] and preserved at 4 °C until further use.

**Preparation of *T. harzianum* formulation**

The commonly available substrate, chickpea brans were used to formulate the indigenous *T. harzianum*. In brief, 200g of overnight soaked chickpea bran were taken in 500 mL Erlenmeyer flasks and autoclaved for 15 min at 121 °C with 15 psi. Subsequently, chickpea bran was inoculated with actively growing 10-12 mycelial discs of *T. harzianum* (6 mm in dia). After vigorous mixing, the flasks were left undisturbed for 21 days at 28±2 °C. Finally, the colonized substrates were taken out and kept in a laminar air flow chamber for drying and stored in sterile poly bags at 4 °C until further use.

**Preparation of *T. harzianum* suspension**

For the preparation of spore suspension, 10 mL sterilized double distilled water was poured onto fully-grown *T. harzianum* Petri plates and the surface was scraped smoothly with the help of a sterilized glass rod. The suspension was then sieved carefully using a double-layered sterile muslin cloth and taken in a 400 mL beaker containing double distilled water. Later, a drop of Tween-20 was added to the suspension and the spores were counted to make 2.45×10⁷ conidia/mL using a hemocytometer [14].

**Preparation of *S. rolfsii* and *F. oxysporum* inoculum**

Overnight soaked wheat grains were used for the preparation of both *S. rolfsii* and *F. oxysporum* inoculum. In brief, 100 g moisten wheat grains were taken in a 500 mL Erlenmeyer flask and autoclaved for 15 min at 121 °C with 15 psi. After that, 7-10 mycelial discs (6 mm in dia) of vigorously growing culture of both the fungi were transferred aseptically to the flasks, mixed, and left undisturbed for 21 days at 28±2 °C. After colonization, the flasks were taken out and allowed to dry in a laminar air flow chamber and stored in a refrigerator at 4 °C for further use by using polybags [15].

**Net house study to control damping off and foot rot of chilli**

To evaluate the bio-efficacy of native *T. harzianum* against damping off and foot rot of chilli, two sets of experiments were conducted separately for *S. rolfsii* and *F. oxysporum*. A mixture of 1:2 ratios of sterilized soil (4 kg) and well-decomposed cow dung was used to fill the individual pots (18×12×4 cm³). The treatment combinations used for both the fungal pathogens were as follows: healthy control (without fungal pathogen and *Trichoderma*); control (only fungal pathogen); formulated *T. harzianum* + fungal pathogen; *T. harzianum* spore suspension + fungal pathogen and formulated *T. harzianum* + *F. oxysporum* + fungal pathogen. Fifty chilli seeds were sown in each pot and all the treatments applied thrice following a completely randomized design. Formulated *T. harzianum* and the fungal pathogens were applied (@ 20 g/kg of soil) before 7 days of sowing where *T. harzianum* spore suspension was sprayed (@ 2.45×10⁷ cfu/mL) after three days of sowing. Data were recorded on damping off (%), foot rot (%), and seed germination (%) at 7 and 14 days after sowing (DAS). While data on different growth attributes [shoot length (cm), root length (cm), and vigor index (%)] were collected at 14 DAS. Vigor index was computed following the equation [16]:

\[
\text{Vigor index} (%) = \frac{\text{Mean shoot length} + \text{Mean root length}}{2} \times \% \text{ Germination}
\]

**STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

Collected data were analyzed using the MSTAT-C package program. The means were estimated by DMRT (Duncan Multiple Range Test) at 5% level of significance [17].

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The disease management potentiality of indigenous *T. harzianum* was evaluated against damping off and foot rot diseases of chilli caused by both *S. rolfsii* and *F. oxysporum*. The used formulated
T. harzianum alone or in combination with its spore suspension were found to reduce both damping off and foot rot of chilli. Besides, the application of T. harzianum also increased the seed germination and other agronomic traits that have a direct link to the yield of chilli.

When the plants inoculated with S. rolfsii, the combined application of formulated T. harzianum and its spore suspension was found to show minimum damping off (1% and 2.33%) and foot rot (1.33% and 3%) in comparison to formulated T. harzianum (3.67% and 4.67% of damping off and 3.67% and 5.67% of foot rot); T. harzianum spore suspension (5.33% and 6% of damping off and 7% and 7.67% foot rot) alone at 7 and 14 DAS, respectively. The combined treatment also yielded the maximum seed germination (80.67% and 82%) in comparison to formulated T. harzianum (59% and 61.33%) and T. harzianum spore suspension (51% and 54.33%) alone at 7 and 14 DAS, respectively (Table 1 and Table 2).

Table-1: Effect of different combinations of T. harzianum on the germination (%), damping off (%) and foot rot (%) of chilli at 7 DAS as affected by S. rolfsii and F. oxysporum

| Treatments                      | S. rolfsii | F. oxysporum |
|---------------------------------|------------|-------------|
|                                 | Damping off (%)* | Foot rot (%)* | Germination (%)* | Damping off (%)* | Foot rot (%)* | Germination (%)* |
| T. harzianum formulation        | 3.67b       | 3.67c       | 59.00c          | 7.67c           | 5.00c         | 62.33a          |
| T. harzianum suspension         | 5.33e       | 7.00d       | 51.00d          | 8.67d           | 7.33d         | 54.67d          |
| T. harzianum formulation +      | 1.00b       | 1.33c       | 80.67a          | 2.00d           | 1.00d         | 83.33a          |
| Control (without pathogen)      | 2.33a       | 3.00d       | 71.33b          | 6.33c           | 3.67c         | 73.33b          |
| Control (only pathogen)         | 7.67a       | 9.67d       | 42.33c          | 13.33e          | 9.33d         | 49.00d          |
| LSD                             | 1.24        | 1.490       | 5.40            | 1.69            | 1.627         | 6.63            |
| CV %                            | 17.08       | 15.70       | 4.87            | 12.25           | 16.98         | 5.64            |

*The average of three replications; means followed by the same superscript letter in a column are not significant at 5% level by Duncan’s multiple range test (DMRT).

In case of F. oxysporum inoculated plants, the combined application of formulated T. harzianum and its spore suspension was found to show minimum damping off (2% and 2.67%) and foot rot (1% and 2.33%) in comparison to the single application of formulated T. harzianum (7.67% and 9.3% of damping off and 5% and 6.33% of foot rot); T. harzianum spore suspension (8.67% and 10.67% of damping off and 7% and 7.67% foot rot) alone at 7 and 14 DAS, respectively. The combined treatment also resulted the higher seed germination (83.33% and 85.33%) in comparison to formulated T. harzianum (62.33% and 64.67%) and, T. harzianum spore suspension (54.67% and 59.67%) alone at 7 and 14 DAS, respectively (Table 1 and Table 2).

Table-2: Effect of different combinations of T. harzianum on the germination (%), damping off (%) and foot rot (%) of chilli at 14 DAS as affected by S. rolfsii and F. oxysporum

| Treatments                      | S. rolfsii | F. oxysporum |
|---------------------------------|------------|-------------|
|                                 | Damping off (%)* | Foot rot (%)* | Germination (%)* | Damping off (%)* | Foot rot (%)* | Germination (%)* |
| T. harzianum formulation        | 4.67bc      | 5.67c       | 61.33c          | 9.33bc          | 6.33c         | 64.67c          |
| T. harzianum suspension         | 6.00c       | 7.67bc      | 54.33c          | 10.67c          | 8.67c         | 59.67c          |
| T. harzianum formulation +      | 2.33d       | 3.00c       | 82.00a          | 2.67d           | 2.33a         | 85.33a          |
| Control (without pathogen)      | 3.33cd      | 3.67d       | 76.33b          | 7.67c           | 5.00c         | 76.33b          |
| Control (only pathogen)         | 9.33d       | 11.67c      | 45.00e          | 14.67d          | 11.67e        | 51.33d          |
| LSD                             | 1.69        | 1.69        | 4.38            | 1.94            | 2.05          | 4.04            |
| CV %                            | 18.14       | 14.70       | 3.77            | 11.83           | 16.55         | 3.29            |

*The average of three replications; means followed by the same superscript letter in a column are not significant at 5% level by Duncan’s multiple range test (DMRT).

Along with the reduced damping off and foot rot, the single or combined use of formulated T. harzianum and its spore suspension was also remarkably increased the shoot length, root length, and vigor index caused by both S. rolfsii and F. oxysporum inoculated plants. The combined application of formulated T. harzianum and its spore suspension was increased shoot length by 91.58% and 31.99%, root length by 65.84% and 28.66% and, vigor index by 233.13% and 117.77% in S. rolfsii and F. oxysporum inoculated plants, respectively at 14 DAS over control (Table 3).
Table-3: Effect of different combinations of T. harzianum on the growth parameters of chilli at 14 DAS as affected by S. rolfsii and F. oxysporum

| Treatments                           | S. rolfsii | F. oxysporum |
|--------------------------------------|------------|--------------|
|                                      | *Shoot length (cm) | *Root length (cm) | *Vigor index (%) | *Shoot length (cm) | *Root length (cm) | *Vigor index (%) |
| T. harzianum formulation             | 7.33^a     | 3.23^a       | 648.8^a          | 6.83^a            | 3.60^a           | 674.5^a          |
| T. harzianum suspension              | 6.90^a     | 3.16^a       | 546.9^a          | 6.32^a            | 3.50^a           | 585.8^a          |
| T. harzianum formulation + suspension| 9.33^b     | 4.03^b       | 1097^b           | 7.88^b            | 3.95^b           | 1010^b           |
| Control (without pathogen)           | 7.17^b     | 3.70^ab      | 830.1^b          | 7.17^b            | 3.82^ab          | 838.8^ab         |
| Control (only pathogen)              | 4.87^c     | 2.43^c       | 329.5^d          | 5.97^c            | 3.07^a           | 463.8^a          |
| LSD                                  | 0.63       | 0.53         | 107.5            | 0.42              | 0.23             | 59.43            |
| CV %                                 | 4.91       | 8.86         | 8.56             | 3.41              | 3.53             | 4.57             |

*The average of three replications; means followed by the same superscript letter in a column are not significant at 5% level by Duncan’s multiple range test (DMRT)

Different beneficial fungi and bacteria are considered as the major tools of biological control worldwide. However, the field application of biological controlling agents is getting popular for their effective and environmental friendly nature for the management of plant diseases in the last decade [18, 19]. Among the beneficial fungi, Trichoderma is one of the most effective and common biocontrol agents to manage crop diseases caused by Fusarium, Sclerotium, Rhizoctonia, Phytophthora, etc. [20]. Trichoderma can act against the plant pathogen in numerous ways including competition, antibiotic, mycoparasitism, inducing systemic host resistance, secretion, and production of chitinolytic enzymes, inhibitory compounds, etc. [21, 22]. Along with the super-fast growing ability in comparison to the other rhizospheric fungi, Trichoderma also secretes various enzymes like β-1-3-glucanase, indole-3-acetic acid, gibberellins, siderophores, etc., which might have the suppressing ability of growth of the pathogen results in reduced plant diseases with increased plant growth [23-25]. In addition to the suppression of plant pathogens, the single or combined use of Trichoderma spp. also proved to increase the percent germination, shoot length, root length, and vigor index in various crop plants [26-28]. Moreover, Trichoderma spp. activates the plant’s inherent immunity and enhances nutrient uptake efficiency from the soil, which may trigger higher plant growth and yield in crop plants [29].

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Cite This Article: Mukul Islam et al (2021). Biological Control of Damping off and Foot Rot of Chilli Using an Indigenous Trichoderma Harzianum. East African Scholars J Agri Life Sci, 4(4), 101-105.