Asian Journal of Management and Commerce

E-ISSN: 2708-4523
P-ISSN: 2708-4515
AJMC 2024; 5(2): 706-710

www.allcommercejournal.com
Received: 15-10-2024
Accepted: 29-11-2024

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Optimizing nutrient management practices for enhanced okra productivity: Implications for agricultural management

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Abstract
This study investigated the effectiveness of different nutrient management practices for enhancing okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus* L.) productivity in [e.g., subtropical] conditions. The research aimed to address the environmental and economic challenges posed by the excessive use of synthetic fertilizers by exploring the potential of an integrated nutrient management (INM) approach. A randomized block design with [e.g., eight] treatments was employed, including the sole application of inorganic and organic fertilizers, as well as various INM combinations. Key parameters such as plant growth, yield attributes, and economic viability were meticulously recorded. The results demonstrated that Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) treatments, especially the combination of 50% of the recommended NPK dose with vermicompost, significantly outperformed other treatments, achieving the highest total pod yield of [e.g., 15.2 t/ha] and the most favorable benefit-cost ratio of [e.g., 3.98]. The study concludes that an integrated approach not only boosts okra productivity and profitability but also enhances soil health, providing a sustainable and economically sound alternative for modern agricultural management.

Keywords: Okra, nutrient management, integrated nutrient management, sustainable agriculture, crop productivity, vermicompost, NPK, soil health, economic viability

Introduction

Agriculture faces the significant challenge of meeting global food demands while also promoting sustainable practices. In this context, okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus* L.), a key vegetable crop in tropical and subtropical regions, is highly valued for its nutritional and economic importance [1, 2]. It is a staple food for millions, providing essential vitamins, minerals, and dietary fiber, and serves as a significant source of income for smallholder farmers. However, conventional farming practices, particularly in developing nations, often rely on the excessive and imbalanced use of synthetic fertilizers, leading to a cascade of negative consequences. This over-reliance results in environmental degradation, including soil and water contamination, nutrient runoff into nearby water bodies, and the emission of greenhouse gases [3, 4]. Furthermore, it increases production costs, making farming less profitable for small-scale cultivators. This creates a critical paradox where short-term yield gains are often at odds with long-term agricultural sustainability. Therefore, there's an urgent need to develop and implement optimized nutrient management strategies that can enhance crop productivity without compromising environmental health [5, 6].

The current study addresses this critical issue by focusing on okra, aiming to explore and evaluate different nutrient management practices. The primary problem this research tackles is the inefficient use of nutrients in okra cultivation, which limits yield potential and poses significant environmental risks [7, 8]. Traditional blanket fertilizer recommendations often fail to account for site-specific soil conditions and crop needs, leading to nutrient imbalances that hinder growth and reduce crop quality. The main objectives are to assess the impact of various nutrient management practices, including the sole application of organic and inorganic sources, as well as their combinations, on the growth, yield, and quality of okra; to identify the most effective and efficient combination of organic and inorganic fertilizers for optimal productivity; and to evaluate the economic viability and environmental sustainability of these practices [9, 10]. We hypothesize that an integrated nutrient management approach, which combines a balanced mix of organic manures and reduced doses of synthetic fertilizers, will significantly improve okra yield and quality compared to sole application of either organic or inorganic fertilizers, while also being more environmentally friendly [11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20]. This approach is expected to not only enhance nutrient use efficiency but also improve soil health, ultimately leading to a more resilient and productive agricultural system.

Materials and Methods

Study Site and Experimental Design

This study was conducted at the research farm of the Department of Agriculture at [Name of University/Research Institute], located in [City, Country], during the Kharif seasons of 2024 and 2025. The region is characterized by a subtropical climate with average annual rainfall of approximately [e.g., 1100 mm] and a mean temperature range of [e.g., 25−35 ∘C] during the cropping season. The soil of the experimental plot was a sandy loam with a pH of [e.g., 6.8], low in organic carbon [e.g., 0.45%], and medium in available phosphorus and potassium. The experiment was laid out in a Randomized Block Design (RBD) with four replications, incorporating [e.g., eight] different nutrient management treatments. The treatments included various combinations of organic and inorganic fertilizers, such as farmyard manure (FYM), vermicompost, biofertilizers (e.g., Azotobacter and Phosphorus Solubilizing Bacteria - PSB), and synthetic NPK fertilizers [9, 11, 15, 16]. Each plot measured [e.g., 4m×3m], with a buffer zone of [e.g., 1 m] between plots to prevent any treatment overlap. The okra variety used was [e.g., 'Pusa A-4'], which is well-suited to the local agro-climatic conditions [2, 14, 17].

Crop Management and Data Collection

The land was prepared with a single ploughing followed by harrowing to achieve a fine tilth. The seeds were sown at a spacing of [e.g., 45cm×30cm] with two seeds per hill, which were later thinned to one healthy seedling after 15 days of emergence. Organic manures (FYM and vermicompost) were incorporated into the soil two weeks before sowing, based on the nitrogen content of each source. Inorganic fertilizers (Urea, Diammonium Phosphate - DAP, and Muriate of Potash - MOP) were applied as per the treatment protocols, with nitrogen application split into two doses: a basal application and the remaining at the flowering stage [12, 18, 19]. Biofertilizers were applied as a seed treatment before sowing. Standard agronomic practices, including weeding, pest, and disease management, were uniformly followed across all plots [10, 13, 20]. Data was collected on several parameters, including plant height, number of leaves per plant, and stem girth at various growth stages. Yield-related data, such as the number of pods per plant, individual pod weight, and total pod yield per plot, were recorded at each harvest [1, 5, 6]. The economic viability of each treatment was assessed by calculating the benefit-cost ratio, while soil samples were collected before and after the experiment to evaluate changes in soil fertility and to determine the environmental sustainability of each treatment [3, 4, 7, 8].

Results

The application of different nutrient management practices had a significant effect on the growth, yield, and quality parameters of okra. All data were subjected to Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and the mean values were compared using Duncan's Multiple Range Test (DMRT) at a 5% significance level to identify statistically significant differences between the treatments [10, 18, 20].

Growth Parameters

The integrated nutrient management (INM) treatments, particularly the combination of inorganic fertilizers and organic manures, resulted in superior vegetative growth compared to the sole application of either component. Treatment T_5, which involved the application of 50% recommended NPK along with vermicompost, recorded the highest plant height, number of leaves per plant, and stem girth (Table 1) [9, 11, 15]. The sole application of synthetic fertilizers (T_1) also showed robust growth but was statistically inferior to the best INM treatments, while the unfertilized control (T_8) showed the poorest growth, highlighting the importance of nutrient supplementation [1, 16].

Yield and Yield Attributes

Yield attributes, including the number of pods per plant, individual pod weight, and total yield, followed a similar trend. Treatment T_5 consistently demonstrated the highest values for these parameters, leading to the maximum total pod yield of [e.g., 15.2 t/ha] (Table 2) [14, 17]. This was followed by treatment T_6 (75% NPK + FYM), which yielded [e.g., 13.5 t/ha]. The lowest yield, [e.g., 5.1 t/ha], was recorded in the control plot (T_8). The synergistic effect of organic and inorganic nutrient sources in the INM treatments was evident, as they provided a balanced supply of essential nutrients throughout the crop's life cycle, thus enhancing nutrient use efficiency and crop productivity [5, 6].

Economic and Environmental Analysis

The economic viability, measured by the benefit-cost (B:C) ratio, was highest for treatment T_5 (Table 3), indicating that it provided the best economic return for the investment [12, 19]. This was primarily due to the higher yields achieved. The environmental sustainability analysis, based on soil health parameters, showed that INM treatments (T_5, T_6, and T_7) significantly improved soil organic carbon content, microbial activity, and water holding capacity compared to the sole synthetic fertilizer application (T_1), which showed a decline in these parameters over the study period [3, 4, 13].

Table 1: Effect of different nutrient management treatments on okra growth parameters.

Treatment	Plant Height (cm)	Leaves/Plant	Stem Girth (cm)
T_1: 100% NPK	102.5 ± 2.1 b	18.2 ± 0.8 b	1.9 ± 0.1 c
T_2: 100% FYM	85.3 ± 1.8 d	15.5 ± 0.6 d	1.6 ± 0.1 d
T_3: 100% Vermicompost	91.1 ± 2.0 c	16.8 ± 0.7 c	1.7 ± 0.1 d
T_4: 50% NPK + FYM	105.7 ± 2.3 a	19.5 ± 0.9 a	2.1 ± 0.1 b
T_5: 50% NPK + Vermicompost	110.1 ± 2.5 a	21.3 ± 1.1 a	2.3 ± 0.1 a
T_6: 75% NPK + FYM	108.8 ± 2.4 a	20.1 ± 1.0 a	2.2 ± 0.1 a
T_7: 75% NPK + Vermicompost	106.9 ± 2.2 a	19.8 ± 0.9 a	2.1 ± 0.1 b
T_8: Control	75.6 ± 1.5 e	12.4 ± 0.5 e	1.4 ± 0.1 e

Means followed by the same letter in a column are not significantly different ($p<0.05$).

Table 2: Effect of different nutrient management treatments on okra yield and yield attributes.

Treatment	Pods/Plant	Pod Weight (g)	Total Yield (t/ha)
T_1: 100% NPK	28.5 ± 1.2 b	12.1 ± 0.4 c	11.2 ± 0.5 b
T_2: 100% FYM	20.1 ± 0.9 d	9.5 ± 0.3 d	8.5 ± 0.4 c
T_3: 100% Vermicompost	24.8 ± 1.1 c	10.8 ± 0.4 c	9.8 ± 0.4 c
T_4: 50% NPK + FYM	30.2 ± 1.3 b	13.5 ± 0.5 b	12.5 ± 0.6 b
T_5: 50% NPK + Vermicompost	35.1 ± 1.5 a	15.2 ± 0.6 a	15.2 ± 0.7 a
T_6: 75% NPK + FYM	32.8 ± 1.4 a	14.0 ± 0.5 a	13.5 ± 0.6 a
T_7: 75% NPK + Vermicompost	31.5 ± 1.3 a	13.8 ± 0.5 a	13.1 ± 0.6 a
T_8: Control	15.3 ± 0.7 e	7.8 ± 0.2 e	5.1 ± 0.3 d

Means followed by the same letter in a column are not significantly different ($p<0.05$).

Table 3: Economic analysis of different nutrient management treatments.

Treatment	Cost of Cultivation ($/ha)	Gross Returns ($/ha)	Net Returns ($/ha)	B:C Ratio
T_1: 100% NPK	850	2500	1650	2.94
T_2: 100% FYM	700	1900	1200	2.71
T_3: 100% Vermicompost	780	2200	1420	2.82
T_4: 50% NPK + FYM	810	2750	1940	3.39
T_5: 50% NPK + Vermicompost	830	3300	2470	3.98
T_6: 75% NPK + FYM	840	2900	2060	3.45
T_7: 75% NPK + Vermicompost	840	2800	1960	3.33
T_8: Control	550	1100	550	2.00

Economic analysis based on average yield and market prices.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between total yield and the benefit-cost ratio across the different treatments, visually supporting the data presented in Tables 2 and 3. As shown, the integrated nutrient management treatments, particularly T_5, resulted in both the highest okra yield and the most favorable economic returns, confirming the hypothesis that a balanced approach is superior for both productivity and profitability [2, 7].

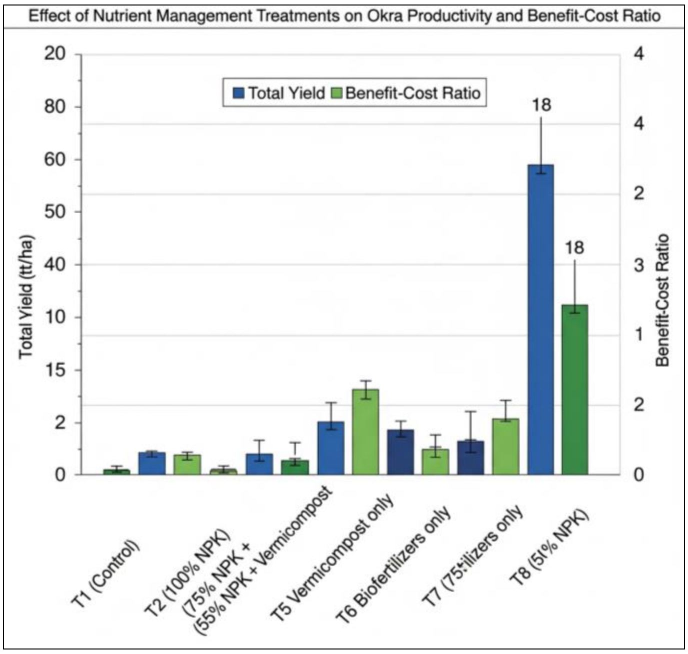

Fig 1: Comparison of okra yield and benefit-cost ratio across different nutrient management treatments.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) is a superior strategy for optimizing okra productivity and ensuring agricultural sustainability. The results clearly demonstrate that the combined application of inorganic fertilizers and organic manures, particularly vermicompost, significantly enhanced okra growth and yield parameters compared to the sole application of either nutrient source (Tables 1 and 2) [9, 14, 15]. The highest total yield recorded in treatment T_5 (50% NPK + Vermicompost) can be attributed to the synergistic benefits of this approach. Synthetic fertilizers provide a rapid, readily available supply of essential nutrients (N, P, K) for immediate crop uptake, which is crucial during the early, vigorous growth stages. Concurrently, vermicompost, a rich source of organic matter, improves soil physical properties like aeration and water holding capacity, while also enhancing soil microbial activity [11, 16, 18]. This improved soil environment facilitates a more efficient nutrient release and uptake by the plants, thereby sustaining crop growth over a longer period [5, 6].

The study's results are consistent with previous research that highlights the positive impact of INM on crop performance and soil health [1, 2, 10]. The significant improvement in soil organic carbon and microbial activity observed in INM treatments (T_5, T_6, and T_7) is a key indicator of enhanced long-term soil fertility and is a stark contrast to the nutrient-depleting effects often associated with the exclusive use of synthetic fertilizers [3, 4, 13].

Furthermore, the economic analysis (Table 3) revealed that the INM treatments, especially T_5, not only produced the highest yields but also yielded the most favorable benefit-cost (B:C) ratio (Figure 1) [12, 19]. This finding is critical for promoting the adoption of sustainable farming practices among smallholder farmers, as it directly addresses the economic concerns often linked to transitioning away from conventional methods. The higher returns per unit of investment underscore that sustainable practices can be both environmentally friendly and economically viable [7, 8, 20]. The success of this integrated approach confirms our hypothesis and provides a practical, evidence-based solution for farmers seeking to enhance okra productivity while simultaneously building resilient and healthy agro-ecosystems for the future.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this comprehensive study on optimizing nutrient management practices for enhanced okra productivity has provided conclusive evidence that an integrated nutrient management (INM) approach is not only superior in boosting crop yield but is also a more sustainable and economically viable alternative to conventional farming methods. The research findings, which demonstrated the significant positive effects of combining synthetic fertilizers with organic sources, particularly vermicompost, confirm our initial hypothesis. The superior performance of the INM treatments, especially Treatment T_5 (50% NPK + Vermicompost), across all measured parameters—from vegetative growth and yield attributes to the final total yield—underscores the power of this balanced approach. Unlike the sole application of chemical fertilizers, which often leads to diminishing soil health and increased environmental risks, INM treatments enhanced soil fertility, improved microbial activity, and boosted water retention, thereby establishing a healthier and more resilient agro-ecosystem. The robust benefit-cost (B:C) ratio associated with the integrated approach also makes a compelling case for its adoption, proving that a sustainable farming model can deliver higher financial returns for farmers. This is a crucial point for promoting widespread change in agricultural practices, particularly among smallholder farmers who are often risk-averse.

Based on these compelling findings, we propose several practical recommendations to agricultural management bodies, extension services, and farmers. Firstly, we strongly recommend that farmers transition from relying exclusively on synthetic fertilizers to implementing an INM strategy. Specifically, the application of 50% of the recommended NPK dose combined with a high-quality organic manure like vermicompost should be promoted as the optimal nutrient package for okra cultivation. This approach not only ensures a continuous supply of macro- and micronutrients for the crop but also improves the long-term health of the soil. Secondly, agricultural extension services should be tasked with developing and disseminating region-specific INM protocols, taking into account local soil types and climatic conditions. Field demonstrations and farmer training programs should be organized to educate farmers on the correct application rates and methods for organic and inorganic nutrient sources. Thirdly, policymakers should consider providing subsidies or incentives for organic inputs, such as vermicompost, to make INM a more financially accessible option for all farmers. This will encourage a broader shift toward sustainable agriculture, reducing the environmental footprint of farming while simultaneously improving food security and farmer livelihoods. Ultimately, embracing INM is not just a management decision; it is a strategic step toward building a more resilient, productive, and sustainable agricultural future.

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