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**INVESTIGATION OF RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH WHICH  
BIODYNAMIC GROWING PRACTICES AFFECT  
PLANT GROWTH AND NUTRIENT COMPOSITION**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master  
of Science (in Soil Science) at Massey University, New Zealand**

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## ABSTRACT

More research attention has been paid to development of indicators of soil quality in relation to environmental sustainability than to food quality. Challenges in measuring and showing relationships between soil quality, food quality and human health are discussed. Comparative and long-term studies have shown that organic and biodynamic farming methods and use of composts and manures favourably affect soil quality, enhancing organic matter content and soil organism activity. However, measured effects on food quality have been lacking or inconsistent. Antioxidants, nitrates, trace elements, protein quality and ratios between element concentrations can be measured in assessing food quality. Many of these factors vary considerably with growing conditions and soil management techniques. Effects of factors such as water, light, soil type, variety and nutrient supply on lettuce growth, lettuce nutrient requirements, and recent research into effects of light on plant signalling and nitrogen metabolism are reviewed and discussed.

Recent research into factors influencing food quality has focussed on integration of growth and differentiation forces into “vital quality” food. The biodynamic field-spray preparations 500 and 501 are used to balance effects of growth or “shade” forces from humus and fertilisers with the differentiating or “light’ forces on plants. Literature indicates that the preparation 501 (silica-spray) appears to increase plant nutrient assimilation and production of more complex organic acids. Similar effects have been found for silica compounds applied to soil or nutrient solution.

The main objective of the experimental work conducted for this thesis was to investigate whether relationships exist between soil management techniques and application of biodynamic sprays and plant product quality.

Transplanted lettuces (cv. Canasta) were grown in a factorial designed field trial on Te Puke Series sandy loam with six treatments: control, soluble fertilisers (DAPCAN) and compost, each with, or without, biodynamic field-sprays 500 (twice) and 501 (3 times). High variability between plants within treatments and small differences between treatment means for most parameters measured prevented many statistically significant differences or relationships being found.

Compost amendments appeared to enhance water and nutrient uptake during a dry season. However compost application at a rate to provide equivalent nitrogen to the soluble fertilisers resulted in high leaf concentrations of nitrates and potassium and low DM% and concentrations of sugars, antioxidants, calcium and magnesium. Plants in treatments given compost had highest yields; highest N, P and K concentrations at 28 days from transplanting (DAT); and highest K at 48 DAT. Plants in treatments given soluble fertilisers had highest Ca, Mg, Fe, Zn, and Cu concentrations and greater Ca: P and K: Ca + Mg ratios at 48 DAT.

Application of biodynamic field-sprays appeared to have different effects on the plants in plots, depending upon whether they received compost or not. Plants in treatments given field-sprays but no compost had generally small head weight, greater dry matter % and root: shoot ratios at 28 DAT, and highest crude protein and Ferric reducing ability of plasma (FRAP) antioxidant concentration at 48 DAT. Plants in the biodynamic treatment, given compost and field-sprays, had highest P uptake between 28 and 48 DAT and highest fresh-weight at 48 DAT.

Measurements of nitrate and sugar contents of leaf cell sap and amino acid concentrations in leaves yielded few, or no, significant differences between treatment means. Microbial activity measured by soil respiration *ex situ* at 28 DAT was highest in composted plots and lowest in sprayed plots. Measurement of AM fungi colonisation of roots gave inconclusive results. In a sensory evaluation, no significant differences in taste, bitterness, sweetness and preference ranking were found between lettuces from the different treatments.

A greenhouse pot trial was undertaken to study the effects of the biodynamic silica spray in more detail. Lettuce transplants (cv. Cos Little Gem) were grown in the same soil and biodynamic compost as were used in the first trial and preparation 500 applied. Half the plants were sprayed 3 times with preparation 501. Measurements before and after the last spray time yielded insignificant differences in light absorption at most wavelengths, net photosynthesis and nitrate, sugar and amino acid concentration in leaves. Silica sprayed plants had higher rates of transpiration and stomatal conductance and higher estimated light absorption of blue and near infrared wavelengths 2½ hours after spraying.

Mainly inconclusive effects of treatments were due partly to the large natural plant to plant (within replication) variation. It was concluded that organic and biodynamic management of lettuces may result in some favourable quality attributes compared to soluble fertilisers but not necessarily all. Results are likely to be specific to particular climatic and soil conditions.

It is recommended that further trials be carried out to evaluate influences of biodynamic practices on vegetable food quality in controlled, well-replicated conditions, to improve likelihood of showing statistical differences between treatments. Such trials are needed in a variety of soil, climatic and management conditions, to better understand how different conditions and their interactions affect food quality parameters. Relationships between biodynamic preparation application, soil biota populations and activity, plant metabolism and food product quality, particularly nitrogen assimilation into complex molecules such as essential amino acids, should be explored.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	ii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	v
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	vi
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	ix
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	xii
<b>LIST OF PLATES</b>	xvi
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b>	
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	
2.1 Relationships between soil health and quality, food quality and human health	3
2.1.1 Indicators of soil health and quality	3
2.1.2 Food quality, nutrition and human health	5
2.2 Organic farming systems, soil quality and food quality	
2.2.1 What is an organic farming system?	10
2.2.2 How do organic farming systems affect soil and soil organism properties ?	11
2.2.3 How do organic farming systems affect food quality?	14
2.3 The biodynamic preparations and silica	
2.3.1 The biodynamic preparations	20
2.3.2 Effects of the biodynamic preparations on quantity and quality of crops	21
2.3.3 Light and dark effects: preparations 500 and 501 and the calcium and silica processes	24
2.3.4 Effects of Silica and preparation 501 on plant metabolism and nutrient content	28
2.3.5 Silica and light	31
2.4 Factors affecting lettuce physiology and food quality	
2.4.1 Climatic factors	34
2.4.2 Soil type	37
2.4.3 Lettuce type and variety	38
2.4.4 Nutrient supply	39
2.4.5 Nutrient metabolism	46
2.4.6 Interactions between nutrient uptake, humus and soil biota	54
2.5 Indicator tests for soil and compost characterisation and plant nutrient composition	
2.5.1 Soil characterisation	61
2.5.2 Compost characterisation	69
2.5.3 Tests of plant nutrient composition	71
2.6 Conclusions from literature review, and research questions	
2.6.1 Literature review conclusions	73
2.6.2 Some issues to consider when researching organic systems	74
2.6.3 Research questions	75

<b>3</b>	<b>FIELD TRIAL METHOD</b>	
3.1	Compost preparation	76
3.2	Compost stability, toxicity and life activity tests	77
3.3	Soil and compost laboratory analysis	79
3.4	Trial design and treatments	81
3.5	Field-site plot preparation	83
3.6	Lettuce seedling preparation and planting	84
3.7	Spraying of biodynamic field-sprays	85
3.8	Weather records and irrigation	86
3.9	Calendar of Events	87
3.10	Visual Observations	88
3.11	Plant growth measurements	88
3.12	Plant preparation for final analyses	89
3.13	Sap Nitrate and Brix measurements	90
3.14	Capillary dynamolysis	92
3.15	Soil sampling	92
3.16	Leaf nutrient content analysis	92
3.17	AM fungi colonisation assessment	93
3.18	Sensory evaluation	94
3.19	Self disintegration test	95
3.20	Statistical analysis	95
<b>4</b>	<b>FIELD TRIAL RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</b>	
4.1	Soil and compost analyses	
4.1.1	Soil analysis	96
4.1.2	Compost analysis	107
4.2	Observations of plant growth	118
4.3	Weather and irrigation records	126
4.4	Growth measurements and analysis and dry matter content	
4.4.1	Plant Growth as shown by wet weight and size of shoots and roots	129
4.4.2	Dry matter content of plants	135
4.4.3	Can pre-planting mustard yield be used as a co-variate to control variation in lettuce yield caused by plot and block differences?	137
4.5	Elemental analysis of leaves	
4.5.1	Nitrogen content of lettuce leaves	139
4.5.2	Crude protein content of leaves	141
4.5.3	Leaf nitrate content	145
4.5.4	Phosphorus content of leaves	151
4.5.5	Calcium, magnesium and potassium content of leaves	157
4.5.6	Trace element content of lettuce leaves	163
4.6	Amino acids, antioxidants and sugar content of leaves	
4.6.1	Amino acids	169
4.6.2	Antioxidant content of leaves	172
4.6.3	Leaf Brix readings	175

<b>4.7</b>	<b>Soil microbial activity and arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi inhabitation of roots</b>	
4.7.1	Soil microbial activity	177
4.7.2	Arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi colonisation of roots	180
<b>4.8</b>	<b>Capillary dynamolysis, taste and self decomposition tests</b>	
4.8.1	Capillary dynamolysis	187
4.8.2	Lettuce sensory evaluation	190
4.8.3	Lettuce self-decomposition test	194
<b>4.9</b>	<b>Preliminary conclusions from field trial</b>	
4.9.1	Preliminary conclusions	196
4.9.2	Supplementary glasshouse trial	198
<b>5</b>	<b>GLASSHOUSE TRIAL</b>	
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Glasshouse Trial Method</b>	
5.1.1	Trial design and lettuce cultivation	199
5.1.2	Measurements	201
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Glasshouse Trial Results</b>	
5.2.1	Observations on plant growth	205
5.2.2	Plant water loss by lettuces	205
5.2.3	Leaf spectral reflectance and light absorption	207
5.2.4	Photosynthesis and stomatal resistance	213
5.2.5	Nitrate content of leaves	216
5.2.6	Soluble solids content of leaves	217
5.2.7	Amino acids	218
5.2.8	Capillary dynamolysis	219
<b>6</b>	<b>FINAL DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	
6.1	Discussion	221
6.2	Recommendations	227
	<b>REFERENCES</b>	229
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Appendix I	Nitrate (Merck-strip) and brix levels in lettuce leaf sap (Tables 4.5.2, 4.6.4)	251
Appendix II	Questionnaire for Sensory Evaluation	253

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1.1	Geometric mean ratio of change in mineral content and dry matter of 20 vegetables and 20 fruits over a 50 year period (Meyer, 1995)	8
Table 2.3.1	Influence of soluble fertiliser (NPK) and biodynamic management on the free amino acid and nitrate concentration in carrots (Koepf, 1993)	22
Table 2.3.2	Pure protein as % of crude protein in potatoes grown by biodynamic method or with mineral fertilisers (Granstedt and Kjellenberg, 1996)	22
Table 2.3.3	Effects of light and shade conditions on quality of food products (From Koepf, 1993)	25
Table 2.3.4	Effects of a silicon compound made from polycondensate boiler waste applied at the rate of 4g/l substrate on amino acid composition of 2 <i>Arum</i> plant varieties	29
Table 2.3.5	Effect on concentrations of some amino acids of weekly spraying homeopathic D7 solution of preparation 501 on to Savoy cabbages (Remer, 1995)	31
Table 2.4.1	Trial lettuce mineral content compared to standard food composition tables and other research	40
Table 2.4.2	Recommended nutrient sufficiency concentrations in lettuce leaves	46
Table 2.5.1	Brix standards for lettuce	71
Table 3.1	Compost composition	76
Table 3.2	Dates of compost and soil tests	77
Table 3.3	Trial treatment design and treatments codes	82
Table 3.4	Trial preparation and treatment dates	87
Table 3.5	Calendar of Trial measurement dates	88
Table 4.1.1	Initial analysis of Te Puke sandy loam topsoil at the trial-site and recommended levels for lettuces	97
Table 4.1.2	Soil analysis results compared with MAF Quicktest results from a kiwifruit orchard survey of similar soil types.	97
Table 4.1.3	Total nitrogen in Te Puke sandy loam topsoil, at the trial-site measured by Kjeldahl digestion and Autoanalyser and by LECO combustion	98
Table 4.1.4	Carbon (C) and nitrogen (N) content and C: N ratio of Te Puke sandy loam topsoil from each trial block as measured by LECO combustion.	100
Table 4.1.5	Mineralisable nitrogen in the Te Puke sandy loam topsoil at trial-site	101
Table 4.1.6	Total Phosphorus content of Te Puke sandy loam topsoil at trial- site	102

Table 4.1.7	Cation concentrations and base saturation of the Te Puke sandy loam topsoil at the trial-site.	105
Table 4.1.8	Mustard yields (g) from a 69 x 76 cm area in centre of each trial plot	107
Table 4.1.9	Respiration and moisture content of organic and biodynamic composts before applying to trial plots.	108
Table 4.1.10	Compost laboratory analysis of compost sampled on 19.8.02	110
Table 4.1.11	Total nitrogen and phosphorus in composts sampled on 23.9.02	110
Table 4.1.12.	Mineralisable nitrogen in composts used for trial	112
Table 4.2.1	Plant observations on 30.10.02 , 5 days after transplanting	118
Table 4.2.2	Plant observations on 2.11.02 , 8 days after transplanting	120
Table 4.2.3	Plant observations on 9.11.02 , 15 days after transplanting	121
Table 4.2.4	Plant observations on 15.11.02 , 21 days after transplanting	122
Table 4.2.5	Plant observations on 30.11.02 , 36 days after transplanting	124
Table 4.2.6	Plant observations on 11.12.02 , 47 days after transplanting	124
Table 4.3.2.	Estimated volumetric depth of water in trial soil prior to irrigation events and irrigation volumes applied	126
Table 4.4.1	Fresh plant weights and root weight: shoot weight ratios 28 and 47 DAT	130
Table 4.4.2	Lettuce canopy cover at 37 and 45 DAT and lettuce longest root length At 47 DAT	133
Table 4.4.3	Dry Matter (DM) % of heads and roots at 28 and 47 DAT	135
Table 4.5.1	Nitrogen and protein content of lettuce leaves at 28 and 47 DAT	141
Table 4.5.2	Mean nitrate levels in lettuce leaf sap at different times after application of silica spray to some treatments (in Appendix I)	251
Table 4.5.3	Mean nitrate levels in leaf sap 39 DAT at 7pm and in dried leaf material at 28 and 47 DAT and nitrate N: total N ratios	146
Table 4.5.4	Phosphorus content of dried lettuce leaves at 28 and 47 DAT and P uptake 28-47 DAT	152
Table 4.5.5	Potassium, magnesium and calcium content of leaves (meq/g dried leaves) at 28 and 47 DAT	157
Table 4.5.6	Percentage potassium, magnesium and calcium in dried leaves at 28 and 47 DAT	158
Table 4.5.7	Ratios of calcium: phosphorus, calcium: magnesium and potassium to calcium + magnesium	160

Table 4.5.8.	Iron, zinc and copper concentrations in dried leaves at 47 DAT	164
Table 4.6.1	Amino acid content of fresh lettuce leaves – mg/100mg compared to average quantities for 2 varieties in the USDA nutrient database	169
Table 4.6.2	Calculation of Protein quality scores from amino acid mg/g protein for trial lettuce essential amino acids treatment means, recommended values and an average lettuce.	171
Table 4.6.3	Mean Ferric Reducing Ability of Plasma (FRAP) of lettuce leaves at 47 DAT.	172
Table 4.6.4	Mean levels of soluble solids (Brix level) in lettuce leaves for each treatment. (in Appendix II)	252
Table 4.6.5	Lettuce leaf sap Brix levels at 7pm 41 DAT	175
Table 4.7.1	Carbon dioxide respiration in soil samples at 28 DAT	177
Table 4.7.2	Mycorrhizal colonisation of lettuce roots.	182
Table 4.8.1	Mean scores for lettuce leaf appearance, aroma, and flavour of lettuce samples assessed by 10 panelists using 5-point category scales.	190
Table 4.8.2	Mean scores for lettuce leaf bitterness and sweetness assessed by 10 panelists using 3-point intensity scales.	192
Table 4.8.3	Mean weight loss (g/day) and deterioration score of lettuce leaves from each treatment over 17 days from harvest.	195
Table 5.1.1	Calendar of Trial Measurement Dates	201
Table 5.1.2	Programme of measurements, Glasshouse Trial	203
Table 5.2.1	Estimated mean water losses by lettuce plants in each treatment from one hour before spraying	206
Table 5.2.2	Percentage absorption relative to white card of 443nm (blue) and 670 nm (red) wavelengths by sprayed and unsprayed lettuces before and after spraying	208
Table 5.2.3	Red: far-red ratio of light absorption and percentage absorbance relative to white card of 860 nm (infrared) wavelength by lettuces before and after spraying	211
Table 5.2.4	Mean treatment readings for photosynthesis and stomatal resistance in leaves of 4 lettuce plants per treatment before and after spraying	214
Table 5.2.5	Mean NO <sub>3</sub> -N mg/l in lettuce leaf sap from leaves of 4 lettuce plants per treatment as measured by Merck strip and by KCl extraction and autoanalyser at each measurement time before and after spraying	216
Table 5.2.6	Mean refractometer reading for lettuce leaf sap 27 hours after spraying in °Brix (equivalent to % sucrose content) of leaves	217

## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.3.1	The calcium and silica processes described by Steiner (1993) as they affect a growing plant. Adapted from Atkinson (2002)	26
Fig. 2.4.1	Regulation of nitrate reductase activity adapted from diagram by Lillo and Appenroth (2001)	50
Fig. 4.3.1	Maximum and minimum temperature and rainfall recorded for each day of the trial period close to trial plots, and water provided by irrigation.	127
Fig. 4.3.2	Soil water deficit calculated for before and during the trial period using actual rainfall and irrigation data and data recorded by the Meteorological Service using a pasture production model (Moir et al. (2000).	128
Fig. 4.4.1	Whole plant wet weight at 3 harvest times – mean of 8 plants/treatment at 19 and 28 DAT and 12 plants/treatment at 47 DAT	129
Figs. 4.4.2,3	Mean fresh weights of shoots and roots of lettuce plants in each treatment at 19, 28 and 47 days from transplanting	131
Fig. 4.4.4	Ratio of root wet weight (g) to shoot wet weight (g).	132
Fig. 4.4.5	Canopy cover of lettuce heads, means of 4 plants per treatment at 17, 37 and 45 days from transplanting	132
Fig. 4.4.6	Effect of management treatment on longest root length measured at each harvest time, 19, 28 DAT. (mean of 8 plants per treatment) and 47 DAT (mean of 12 plants per treatment).	134
Fig. 4.4.7.	Root numbers counted in a 15 cm <sup>2</sup> grid placed 2 cm from the outer edge of plant leaves of one plant per plot at 43 days from transplanting	135
Fig. 4.4.8	Head dry matter (DM) % of plants from each treatment	136
Fig. 4.4.9	Relationship of lettuce head dry weight (g) with head wet weight (g) at 47 days from transplanting	137
Fig. 4.4.10	Relationship between lettuce whole plant fresh weight (mean of 2 plants per plot) at 28 DAT and mustard yield from an area 69x76cm in the centre of each plot 21 days before lettuces were transplanted into those plots.	138
Fig. 4.5.1	Percentage N in leaf dry matter for lettuces harvested at 28 and 47 days after transplanting (DAT).	139
Fig. 4.5.2	Nitrogen uptake per lettuce head (mg N per day per plant head) for the growth period between 28 – 47 days after transplanting	140
Fig. 4.5.3	Estimated crude protein content of fresh lettuce leaves (mg/100g head) at 28 and 47 DAT	141
Fig. 4.5.4	Relationship between estimated total N content of lettuce head and root wet weight at 47 DAT	142
Fig. 4.5.5	Relationship between estimated total N content of lettuce head at 47 DAT and leaf canopy area at 45 DAT as estimated from photos taken from above	143

Fig. 4.5.6	Relationship between nitrogen uptake/plant from 28 to 47 DAT and soil respiration at 28 DAT	144
Fig. 4.5.7	Variation in diurnal fluctuation of mean leaf sap nitrate contents by spray and non-spray treatments	147
Fig. 4.5.8	Relationship between nitrate-N measured by Merck strip in leaf cell sap at 45 DAT and acetic acid extracted nitrate- N at 47 DAT	148
Fig. 4.5.9	Ratio of nitrate-N % to total N % in dried leaf material at 28 DAT and 47 DAT	149
Fig. 4.5.10	Relationship between Total N % and Nitrate N % in dried leaf material at 47 DAT	150
Fig. 4.5.11	% P in leaf dry matter for lettuces harvested at 28 and 47 days after transplanting (DAT)	151
Fig. 4.5.12	Phosphorus uptake by lettuce head (mgN per day per plant head) for the growth period between 28 – 47 days after transplanting (DAT)	153
Fig. 4.5.13	Relationship between estimated total P content of lettuce head and root wet weight at 47 DAT for all plots	154
Fig. 4.5.14	Relationship between phosphorus uptake from 28 to 47 DAT and soil respiration at 28 DAT	155
Fig. 4.5.15	Relationship between total P in leaf DM and AM fungi % colonisation at 47 DAT	156
Fig. 4.5.15.	Major cation content of lettuce leaves in milli-equivalents per gram leaf dry matter at 28 and 47 days from transplanting	157
Fig. 4.5.16	Relationship between estimated total potassium and nitrogen concentrations in leaves at 47 DAT	162
Fig. 4.5. 17	Correlation between estimated total magnesium and nitrogen concentrations in leaves at 47 DAT	162
Fig. 4.5.18	Iron content in 100g of fresh leaves based on concentration in leaf dry matter of 4 plants per treatment at 47 DAT	163
Fig. 4.5.19	Zinc content in 100g of fresh leaves based on concentration in leaf dry matter of 4 plants per treatment at 47 DAT	163
Fig. 4.5.20	Copper content in 100g of fresh leaves based on concentration in leaf dry matter of 4 plants per treatment at 47 DAT	164
Fig.4.5.21	Relationship between total estimated copper and nitrogen content of lettuce heads at 47 DAT	167
Fig.4.5.22	Relationship between total estimated zinc and phosphorus content of lettuce heads at 47 DAT	167
Fig.4.5.23	Relationship between total estimated copper and calcium content of lettuce heads at 47 DAT	168
Fig. 4.6.1	Mean Ferric Reducing Ability of Plasma (FRAP) in lettuce leaves at 47 DAT in each treatment	173

Fig. 4.6.2	Relationship between lettuce head dry matter content and FRAP/100mg leaves.	174
Fig. 4.6.3	Relationship between FRAP concentration and total N in lettuce leaves at 47 DAT.	175
Fig. 4.6.4	Diurnal variation of Brix level and possible effects of the silica spray	176
Fig. 4.7.1	Carbon dioxide respiration in soil samples taken from each plot 28 days after transplanting	177
Fig. 4.7.2	Relationship between soil respiration at 4 weeks and estimated phosphorus uptake by plant head 28- 48 days after transplanting	179
Fig. 4.7.3	Percentage of root observations in which AM hyphae with or without arbuscles or vesicles were present	180
Fig 4.7.4	Relationship between estimated lettuce leaf uptake of P and AM fungi colonisation of roots of lettuce plants	185
Fig. 4.7.2.3	Relationship between estimated lettuce leaf uptake of Ca and AM fungi colonisation of roots in plants	186
Fig. 4.8.5	Mean scores for lettuce appearance, aroma and flavour for sample leaves from each treatment assessed by 10 panelists using descriptive category scales	191
Fig. 4.8.6	Mean scores for lettuce sweetness and bitterness for sample leaves from each treatment assessed by 10 panelists using descriptive category scales	191
Fig. 4.8.7	Mean scores for ranking of lettuce sample leaves sensory quality for from each treatment assessed by 9 panelists	193
Fig. 4.8.8	Mean moisture loss per day of lettuce leaves kept in an unsealed plastic bag in a drawer for 17 days after harvesting	194
Fig. 4.8.9	Mean decomposition score of 3 samples per treatment of 3 lettuce leaves kept in an unsealed plastic bag in a drawer for 17 days after harvesting	195
Fig. 5.2.1	Weight loss (g) per hour per 100g fresh lettuce head, as an indicator of water loss by transpiration	206
Fig. 5.2.2	Estimated water losses from lettuce plants during 5 hours (from one hour before to 4 hours after spraying) on day 1 and during 2 hours (from midday to 2 pm) on day 2	206
Fig. 5.2.3	Percentage of light absorbed ( $100 * (\text{reflectance white} - \text{reflectance plant}) / \text{reflectance white}$ ) by lettuce plant leaf surface relative to absorbance by a white card at a range of wavelengths, as measured by a reflectometer above the plant before and one hour after spraying (mean of 4 reps)	207
Fig. 5.2.4	Percentage of light absorbed ( $100 * (\text{reflectance white} - \text{reflectance plant}) / \text{reflectance white}$ ) by lettuce plant leaf surface relative to absorbance by a white card at a range of wavelengths by plants 30 minutes and 150 minutes after spraying. (mean of 4 reps)	208
Fig. 5.2.5	Percentage absorption relative to white card of 443 nm wavelength (blue) by lettuces from each treatment (mean of 4 reps) at each measurement time before and after spraying.	209

Fig 5.2.6	Percentage absorption relative to white card of 670nm wavelength (red) by lettuces from each treatment (mean of 4 reps) at each measurement time before and after spraying.	210
Fig 5.2.7	Ratio of percentage absorption relative to white card of 670nm (red) and 720nm (far-red) wavelengths by lettuces from each treatment (mean of 4 reps) at each measurement time before and after spraying	212
Fig 5.2.8	Percentage absorption relative to white card of 860nm wavelength (infrared) by lettuces from each treatment (mean of 4 reps) at each measurement time before and after spraying	213
Fig. 5.2.9	Net carbon dioxide assimilation by plant leaves in each treatment before and after spraying (4 plants per treatment)	214
Fig. 5.2.10	Stomatal resistance in plant leaves of sprayed and unsprayed plants (4 plants per treatment) before and after spraying	215
Fig. 5.2.11	Mean NO <sub>3</sub> -N (mg/l) in lettuce leaf sap of 4 plants per treatment at each measurement time as measured by Merck strip and by KCl extraction and autoanalyser	216
Fig. 5.2.12	Amino acid content of lettuce leaves grown with and without silica field spray treatment	218

## LIST OF PLATES

Plate 3.1	Organic and biodynamic compost heaps, September 2003.	77
Plate 3.2	Mustard harvest	83
Plate 3.3	Planting lettuces	85
Plate 4.1.1	Soil profile near trial site	96
Plate 4.1.2	Results of compost phytotoxicity test	109
Plate 4.1.3	Chromatogram of biodynamic compost prepared from NaOH extract on 26.10.02, 21 weeks after completion of compost	114
Plate 4.1.4.	Chromatogram of organic compost (made from same materials as biodynamic compost, but without the biodynamic preparations) on 26.10.02	114
Plate 4.1.5	Chromatogram of biodynamic compost on 21.11.02	115
Plate 4.1.6	Chromatogram of organic compost on 21.11.02	115
Plate 4.1.7	Chromatogram made from mature biodynamic compost (Gerrard, 2001)	116
Plate 4.1.8	Chromatograms of composts made with BD compost starter which contains biodynamic preparations by Pfeiffer (1988)	117
Plate 4.2.1	Lettuces on 11.11.02, 17 days from transplanting.	119
Plate 4.2.2	Lettuces on 21.11.02, 27 days from transplanting.	121
Plate 4.2.3	Lettuces at final harvest.	123
Plate 4.2.4	Lettuces on 1.12.02, 37 days from transplanting.	124
Plate 4.2.5	Lettuces on 9.12.02, 45 DAT.	125
Plate 4.7.1	Arbuscles and vesicles in lettuce root from Control treatment	181
Plate 4.7.2	AM hyphae in lettuce root from Control treatment at x 200 magnification	181
Plate 4.7.3	Hyphae, arbuscles and vesicle in lettuce roots	181
Plate 4.8.1	Chromatograms made from lettuce sap at 35 days from transplanting (DAT)	187
Plate 4.8.2	Chromatograms made from lettuce sap at 35 DAT	188
Plate 4.8.3	Chromatograms of lettuces at 47 DAT	189
Plate 4.8.4.	Chromatograms made from young maize leaves by Pfeiffer (Galaxy Nutrients, 2001)	189
Plates 5.1.1, 5.1.2.	Lettuce plants and equipment prepared for reflectometer reading	203
Plate 5.2.1	Lettuce plants after transplanting	205
Plate 5.2.2	Lettuce plants at 35 DAT	205
Plate 5.2.3	Lettuce sap chromatograms of greenhouse lettuce 57 DAT	220