TISSUE-SPECIFIC RESPONSES TO WATER DEFICIT IN THE NEW ZEALAND XEROPHYTIC TUSSOCK SPECIES

Festuca novae-zelandiae

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Plant Biology at Massey University Palmerston North New Zealand

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2005
Abstract

Festuca novae-zelandiae (Hack.) Cockayne is an endemic New Zealand perennial tussock forming grass of the family Poaceae. Morphologically F. novae-zelandiae exhibits a number of leaf adaptations associated with dehydration postponement as reflected in the climatic distribution of this species and its occurrence as a physiognomic dominant grass in semi arid short-tussock grasslands. Biochemical studies into the drought tolerance of this species have indicated the occurrence of tissue specific responses with respect to abscisic acid (ABA) and proline accumulation and protein turnover suggestive of a preferential protection of the tiller base and associated meristematic zones at the expense of lamina tissues. Further tissue specific biochemical responses to water-deficit stress in F. novae-zelandiae have been investigated. Changes in water-soluble carbohydrates (WSC) were monitored over a 49-day dry-down period (decline in soil water content from 30% to 4%) in consecutive leaf segments comprising the leaf base (meristem region), elongation zone, the enclosed and exposed lamina, as well as basal sheath segments from the two next oldest leaves. In fully hydrated leaf tissues polymers of fructose (fructans) were the main WSC present and were mainly low molecular weight fructans of the inulin and neokestose series with the average degree of polymerization (DP) of fructan pools from 6 to 9. The highest fructan concentrations were present towards the leaf base. Fructan concentrations decreased over the course of the dry-down, although remained significantly higher in the meristem region of the tiller base with respect to any other tissue, until tissue water content fell below 45%. By day 49 of the dry-down period, the average DP of the fructan pool in tissues was from 3 to 5. Sucrose content increased in each tissue during the course of the dry-down, and was highest at the leaf base, where a concentration of 200 µmol g⁻¹ dry weight was measured after 49 days of dry-down.

The negative correlation between fructan and sucrose content, which indicates an inter conversion dependent on tissue water content, suggests that, in this speciess, fructans serve as a carbohydrate storage pool, while sucrose stabilises the meristem during extreme water deficit.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my supervisors Dr. Michael McManus and Dr Heather Outred for their guidance throughout my studies at Massey.

Special thanks to Dr Arnd Heyer and Ellen Zuther for their warm reception in Golm and assistance in this project.

Thanks to the staff at the Massey University Plant Growth Unit, and the staff at the Climate Control facility at HortResearch for watching over the plants.

Thanks to The Miss E.L. Hellaby Indigenous Grasslands Research Trust for their financial support and interest in this project.

Thanks to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for their financial support towards travel and expenses while in Germany

Thanks to Balance and the other characters from the Lab

To Mum and Dad
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