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EFFECTS OF ROOT-INVADING FUNGI ON THE GROWTH OF RED CLOVER (Trifolium pratense L.)

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Plant Pathology at Massey University

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Methods to monitor invasion of red clover roots by soilborne fungi, and assess effects on clover growth and persistence, were developed and tested using soil from a plant breeder's red clover evaluation block at DSIR Grasslands Division, Palmerston North, which was known to contain several fungal species pathogenic to red clover. A quantitative method employing tissue maceration and plating was used to determine the internal microflora of red clover roots from the evaluation block. Effects of environmental factors, and of application of fungicide drenches to the soil, on root invasion under controlled environment and field conditions were also studied using the root maceration method. Fungi isolated from roots of red clover from the evaluation block were tested for their effects on establishment, growth, and persistence of red clover in the glasshouse and in field microplots. Light microscopy and transmission electron microscopy were used to study invasion of red clover roots by Trichocladium basicola, and the effects of the fungicides benomyl and prochloraz on this fungus in vitro and in vivo.

The root maceration method detected a similar range of fungi to that found by plating 1 - 2 mm long segments, but yielded more colonies and showed less variation. Using standardised amounts of tissue and blending times (2 g and 60 or 120 sec.) differences in fungal populations in roots subjected to different treatments were readily detected.

Verticillium dahliae, Trichocladium basicola, and Cylindrocladium scoparium were the major components of the root-invading mycoflora of red clover in the evaluation block, which consisted of 40 fungal species. Other major invaders were Fusarium solani, F. oxysporum, Cylindrocarpon destructans, and Gliocladium roseum, which are the fungi most commonly isolated from roots of red clover and other forage legumes worldwide.

Fungal invasion of red clover roots was affected by plant age, soil temperature and moisture. Generally, numbers of fungal colonies isolated progressively increased from the seedling stage onwards and more colonies were
isolated from roots of plants grown at 20 and 25°C than at 10 and 15°C, and from 60 and 80% WHC than at 40% WHC.

Prochloraz was the most suitable of 11 fungicides tested for use as a soil drench to study effects of root-invading fungi on red clover growth in the field. It showed a broad spectrum of antifungal activity, controlled the major root-invading fungi encountered in the experimental soil, was not toxic to *Rhizobium trifolii*, and was least retardant to red clover growth.

The numbers of fungal colonies recovered per gram of roots was 60-80% lower from plants from field plots receiving a single application of prochloraz drench at 3.46 g/m² than from plants from untreated plots. Yields from treated plots harvested 4 times over a period of 45 weeks were 28-95% higher than those from untreated plots.

The major root-invading fungi isolated from red clover plants grown in the plant breeder's evaluation block, *Cy. scoparium, T. basicola, E. solani*, and *E. oxy sporum*, reduced survival of red clover plants in field plots and microplots by 20-75%, and dry matter yield by 20-60%, over a periods of 62 and 76 weeks. *V. dahliae, C. destructans*, and *G. roseum*, also reduced plant growth in field plots but to a lesser extent. Seedling establishment, and nitrogen fixation and nodulation, were affected adversely by some fungal isolates.

*T. basicola* was found to penetrate roots of red clover directly and colonise tissue by means of "beaded hyphae" (intracellular hyphae which were constricted at their septa) then "straight hyphae" (unconstricted hyphae growing parallel to the root axis). The fungus is hemibiotrophic. Invaded host cells in the epidermis and cortex of the root are apparently unaffected at first then degenerate and die. Papillae are often found at sites of penetration through cell walls but these rarely obstruct fungal development. Pre-treatment of seedlings with benomyl or prochloraz reduced fungal penetration and growth within tissues. Changes in fungal ultrastructure resulting from benomyl treatment were an increased frequency of lomasome production and occasionally a disorganisation of cell contents. Changes resulting from prochloraz treatment included thickening and fragmentation of cell walls, and necrosis of hyphal cells.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xlii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF PLATES</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Red clover plant</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1 Taxonomy, origin and distribution</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2 Importance in world agriculture</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3 Effects of soil temperature on red clover</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.4 Effects of soil moisture on red clover growth</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Root diseases of forage legumes, and associated fungi</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 Fungi associated with root diseases</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 Seedling damping-off</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.3 Root rot</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.4 Wilt</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Effects of soil temperature and moisture, and other factors on root rot complex of forage legumes</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.1 Effects of temperature and moisture on mycelial growth of root-rotting fungi from forage legumes in culture</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.2 Effects of temperature and moisture on the development of root rot</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.3 Effects of other factors on root rot development</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.5 Methods used to obtain plants with different levels of root disease ........................................... 23

2.5.1 Glasshouse studies .................................................. 23
  2.5.1.1 Soil (growth substratum) infestation method .............. 23
  2.5.1.2 Root dip method ............................................. 24
  2.5.1.3 Root-injuring method ....................................... 25
  2.5.1.4 Slant-board method ......................................... 25
  2.5.1.5 Fungicide application method ............................... 26

2.5.2 Field plot methods .................................................. 26
  2.5.2.1 Fungicide application method ............................... 26
  2.5.2.2 Plant inoculation method .................................... 27

2.5.3 Microplot method .................................................. 28

2.6 Effects of root diseases on growth of forage legumes ................................................................. 29

2.6.1 Effects of diseases on establishment ............................................. 29
2.6.2 Effects of diseases on yield ........................................ 31
2.6.3 Effects of diseases on nitrogen fixation and nodulation ............ 33
2.6.4 Effects of diseases on persistence ................................... 33

2.7 Light and electron microscopy studies of root invasion by Trichocladium basicola and of effects of fungicides on fungal growth in vitro and invasion of host tissue ........................................ 34

2.7.1 Ultrastructure of T. basicola ...................................... 34
2.7.2 Root invasion by T. basicola ...................................... 35
2.7.3 Effects of benomyl on ultrastructure of fungi grown in culture and in hosts .................................... 37
2.7.4 Effects of ergosterol biosynthesis inhibiting fungicides on ultrastructure of fungi grown in culture and in hosts ............ 38

CHAPTER 3 GENERAL MATERIALS AND METHODS ................................................................. 40

3.1 Seed ................................................................. 40

3.2 Experimental sites .......................................................... 40
  3.2.1 Plant breeder’s evaluation block ................................ 40
  3.2.2 Pasture block ....................................................... 41

3.3 Soil processing for pot experiments ........................................ 42
3.4 Determination of soil water holding capacity ........................................ 42

CHAPTER 4 QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF ROOT INVASION BY SOILBORNE FUNGI UNDER CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT AND FIELD CONDITIONS ........................................ 44

4.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 44

4.2 Experiment one: assessment of a root maceration method for studying invasion of red clover roots by soilborne fungi ........................................ 45

4.2.1 Introduction ............................................................................. 45
4.2.2 Materials and methods ............................................................... 46
  4.2.2.1 Comparison of root segment and root maceration methods .................. 47
  4.2.2.2 Effects of the quantity of roots blended and blending time on the number of fungal colonies isolated ............................................. 48
  4.2.2.3 Effects of the quantity of roots blended and blending time on percentage of root tissue macerated ............................................ 49
  4.2.2.4 Calculation of maximum number of colonies ................................. 49
  4.2.2.5 Statistical analyses ............................................................... 49

4.2.3 Results .................................................................................. 50

4.2.3.1 Comparison of the root segment and root maceration methods ........................................ 50
  4.2.3.2 Effects of the quantity of roots blended and blending time on the number of colonies isolated ............................................. 50
  4.2.3.3 Effects of the quantity of roots blended and blending time on the percentage of root tissue macerated ............................................ 51
  4.2.3.4 Maximum number of colonies per gram fresh roots ....................... 51

4.2.4 Discussion .................................................................................. 56

4.3 Experiment two: quantitative appraisal of the effects of soil temperature and moisture on invasion of red clover roots by soilborne fungi ........................................ 58

4.3.1 Introduction ............................................................................. 58
4.3.2 Materials and methods ............................................................... 59
  4.3.2.1 Glasshouse trial ........................................................................ 59
  4.3.2.2 Field trial ................................................................................ 61
  4.3.2.3 Numbers of emerged seedlings .................................................. 61
  4.3.2.4 Shoot and root fresh weight ....................................................... 61
  4.3.2.5 Isolation of root-invading fungi ................................................. 61
4.3.2.6 Calculation of parameters of fungal invasion .......... 62
4.3.2.7 Field soil moisture and temperature .................. 63
4.3.2.8 Relationship between soil water content and matric potential ......................................................... 63
4.3.2.9 Statistical analysis ........................................ 63
4.3.3 Results .......................................................... 64
4.3.3.1 Glasshouse trial ............................................. 64
4.3.3.2 Field trial .................................................... 70
4.3.3.3 Field soil temperature and moisture .................... 73
4.3.3.4 Relationships between soil water content and matric potential ......................................................... 73
4.3.4 Discussion ....................................................... 73

CHAPTER 5  A STUDY OF EFFECTS OF DISEASES ON THE GROWTH OF RED CLOVER BY USE OF FUNGICIDES DRENCHES .......... 79

5.1 Introduction ....................................................... 79

5.2 Experiment three: effects of fungicides on growth of root-invading fungi, \textit{Rhizobium trifolii}, and red clover seedlings in the laboratory ... 80

5.2.1 Introduction .................................................. 80
5.2.3 Materials and methods ....................................... 81
5.2.3.1 Fungicides ................................................ 81
5.2.3.2 Fungi and rhizobia ........................................ 81
5.2.3.3 Effects on mycelial growth and spore germination .... 82
5.2.2.4 Effects on growth of rhizobia ............................ 83
5.2.2.5 Effects on germination and seedling growth of red clover ......................................................... 83
5.2.2.6 Statistical analysis ....................................... 84
5.2.3 Results ......................................................... 84
5.2.3.1 Effects on mycelial growth and spore germination .... 84
5.2.3.2 Effects on \textit{Rhizobium} growth ....................... 85
5.2.3.3 Effects on germination and seedling growth of red clover ......................................................... 87
5.2.4 Discussion ....................................................... 92

5.3 Experiment four: effects of prochloraz drenches on populations of soil micro-organisms, invasion of roots by fungi, and growth of red clover seedlings under glasshouse conditions ................. 94

5.3.1 Introduction .................................................. 94
5.3.2 Materials and methods ....................................... 94
5.3.2.1 Microbial population of the soil ........................................ 95
5.3.2.2 Seed germination and seedling growth of red clover ....... 96
5.3.2.3 Root-invading fungi ..................................................... 96
5.3.2.4 Statistical analysis .................................................... 97
5.3.3 Results ........................................................................ 97
5.3.3.1 Populations of bacteria and fungi in the soil ................. 97
5.3.3.2 Seedling emergence and growth of red clover .......... 100
5.3.3.3 Root-invading fungi .................................................... 102
5.3.4 Discussion .................................................................. 105

5.4 Experiment five: effects of fungicidal drenches on root-invading fungi and growth of red clover under field conditions. .. 108

5.4.1 Introduction ................................................................ 108
5.4.2 Materials and methods ................................................. 109
5.4.2.1 Assessment of plant growth ............................................. 109
5.4.2.2 Isolation of root-invading fungi ..................................... 110
5.4.2.3 Statistical analysis ....................................................... 110
5.4.3 Results ...................................................................... 111
5.4.3.1 Seedling emergence and plant growth .................... 111
5.4.3.2 Root-invading fungi .................................................... 114
5.4.4 Discussion .................................................................. 118

CHAPTER 6 A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF DISEASES ON THE GROWTH OF RED CLOVER BY USE OF INOCULATION METHODS 121

6.1 Introduction .................................................................. 121

6.2 Experiment six: effects of root-invading fungi on persistence and growth of red clover plants in field plots .................. 122

6.2.1 Introduction ................................................................ 122
6.2.2 Materials and methods ................................................. 122
6.2.2.1 Assessment of symptoms and isolation of fungi from the roots ........................................ 123
6.2.2.2 Measurement of survival and growth of plants ........ 124
6.2.2.3 Soil temperatures and rainfall .................................... 124
6.2.2.4 Statistical analysis ....................................................... 124
6.2.3 Results ...................................................................... 125
6.2.3.1 Root symptoms and fungal reisolation .................... 125
6.2.3.2 Plant survival .............................................................. 126
6.2.3.3 Plant growth .............................................................. 126
6.2.3.4 Soil temperatures and rainfall ................................. 130
6.2.4 Discussion ............................................. 130

6.3 Experiment seven: effects of root-invading fungi on the growth of red clover plants in the glasshouse and microplots ............................................. 132

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2 Materials and methods</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2.1 Glasshouse studies</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2.2 Field microplot studies</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2.3 Statistical analysis</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3 Results</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3.1 Glasshouse studies</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3.2 Field microplot studies</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.4 Discussion</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 7 Experiment eight: light and electron microscopy studies on invasion of red clover roots by *Trichocladium basicola*, and effects of benomyl and prochloraz ............................................. 156

7.1 Introduction                                                          156

7.2 Materials and methods                                                 157

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.2.1 Fungus</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.2 Fungicides</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.3 Seedlings and inoculation</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.4 Effects of the fungicides on the fine structure of the fungus grown in culture</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.5 Assessment of disease symptoms</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.6 Sampling for histological studies</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.7 Light microscopy</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.7.1 Conidial germination and penetration</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.7.2 Fungal development within the host</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.8 Transmission electron microscopy</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.9 Statistical analysis</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.3 Results                                                               161

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.3.1 Invasion of red clover roots by <em>T. basicola</em> and effects on host cells</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.1.1 Course of infection</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.1.2 Reaction of host cells to fungal invasion</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.2 Effects of fungicides on red clover seedlings and <em>T. basicola</em></td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.3.2.1 Effects of fungicides on root rot development and papilla formation .............................................. 178
7.3.2.2 Effects of fungicides on spore germination, hyphal penetration, and growth on the root surface .......... 178
7.3.2.3 Effects of fungicides on the fine structure of the fungus grown in culture and in the host .............. 181

7.4 Discussion .............................................................................................................................................. 183

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION ........................................................................................................ 193

8.1 MEASUREMENT OF EFFECTS OF ROOT-INVADING FUNGI ON RED CLOVER GROWTH ................. 193
8.2 INVASION OF RED CLOVER ROOTS BY FUNGI ..................................................................................... 195
8.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF ROOT-INVADING FUNGI IN PASTORAL AGRICULTURE ................................ 198

APPENDICES ................................................................................................................................................. 200

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................................................. 206
# LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-3-1  Fungi isolated from roots of forage legumes. ........................................... 9

Table 2-4-1  The optimum temperatures (°C) and minimum water potentials (-bars) for mycelial growth in culture of some selected fungi isolated from roots of forage legumes. ........................................... 18

Table 2-6-1  Pathogens adversely affecting seedling establishment of forage legumes in pot trials. ........................................... 30

Table 2-6-2  Pathogens reducing the weights of shoots (A) and roots (B) of forage legumes in pot trials. ........................................... 32

Table 3-2-1  Chemical analyses of soils of the two sites (From Blakemore, 1978) ........................................... 42

Table 4-2-1  Mean numbers of colonies isolated from one gram of fresh tap roots of 8-week-old red clover plants by a root segment or a root maceration method. ........................................... 52

Table 4-3-1  Mean numbers of emerged seedlings 7, 9, or 20 days after sowing 30 seeds treated with metalaxyl into each of 12 pots at different soil temperatures (°C) and moistures (% WHC). ........................................... 64

Table 4-3-2  Mean weights (mg) of shoots and roots per red clover plant grown in pots as affected by soil temperatures (A) and moistures (B) 4, 8, and 12 weeks after sowing. ........................................... 67

Table 4-3-3  Mean numbers of colonies \( \times 10^3 \) per gram fresh roots in total, and of the major fungal species isolated from whole roots of red clover plants grown in pots, as affected by soil temperatures (A) and moistures (B) 4, 8, and 12 week after sowing. ........................................... 68

Table 4-3-4  Mean numbers of colonies \( \times 10^3 \) per root in total, and of the major fungal species isolated from whole roots of red clover plants grown in pots, as affected by soil temperatures (A) and moistures (B) 4, 8, and 12 weeks after sowing. ........................................... 69

Table 4-3-5  Ratios of mean numbers of colonies \( \times 10^3 \) per gram tap root to lateral roots (A), and per tap root to lateral roots per pot plant (B) as affected by plant age (weeks), soil temperature (°C), and moisture (%WHC). ........................................... 71
Table 4-3-6 Mean numbers of colonies \((x 10^3)\) per gram fresh roots (A), and per root (B) in total, and of the major fungal species isolated from roots of red clover plants grown in field 4, 8, and 12 weeks after sowing. 72

Table 5-2-1 Mean percentage inhibition of mycelial growth 8 days after inoculation of seven fungal species on corn meal agar containing four concentrations of different fungicides. 89

Table 5-2-2 Mean root hair lengths \((\mu m)\) of 7-day-old red clover seedlings in petri dishes on filter papers soaked with different fungicides at four concentrations. 90

Table 5-3-1 Mean numbers of colony forming units of bacteria and fungi per gram dry Field and microwave-oven-treated soil (MW) 4 weeks after pots were drenched with different concentrations of prochloraz. 99

Table 5-3-2 Mean numbers of colony forming units \((x 10^3)\) of some fungal species per gram dry Field and microwave-oven-treated soil (MW) as affected by prochloraz concentrations (A) and temperatures (B). 100

Table 5-3-3 Mean emergence percentage of red clover seedlings 12 days after sowing 20 seeds into each pot containing Field or microwave-oven-treated soil (MW) as affected by prochloraz concentrations (A) and soil temperatures (B). 101

Table 5-3-4 Mean numbers of colonies per g fresh roots \((x 10^3)\) in total, and of some major fungal species isolated from roots of 4-week-old red clover plants growing in pots containing Field (A) or microwave-oven-treated (MW) soil (B). 104

Table 5-4-1 Mean percentages of roots exhibiting stele browning of 6-, 12-, 18-, and 45-week-old plants growing in a field plot drenched with benomyl or prochloraz (Proch.) immediately after sowing. 112

Table 5-4-2 Relative shoot and root weights (% of control) of 6-, 12-, 18-, and 45-week-old red clover plants growing in a field plot drenched with benomyl or prochloraz (Proch.) immediately after sowing. 114

Table 5-4-3 Mean numbers of colonies per gram fresh roots \((x 10^3)\) in total, and of the major fungal species isolated from 6-, 12-, 18-, and 45-week-old red clover plants growing in a field plot drenched with benomyl or prochloraz immediately after sowing. 115
Table 5-4-4 Mean numbers of colonies \((x10^3)\) per root in total, and of the major fungal species isolated from 6-, 12-, 18-, and 45 week-old-red clover plants growing in a field plot drenched with benomyl or prochloraz immediately after sowing. .................................................. 117

Table 6-2-1 Percent frequency of isolation of fungal colonies from 1-2 mm segments cut from the surface sterilised tap roots and petioles of red clover plants 7 weeks after transplanting into the field. ............................ 126

Table 6-2-2 Mean dry weights (A) and numbers (B) of shoots per red clover plant harvested from field plots on five occasions. ........................................ 127

Table 6-3-1 Scoring indices for external and internal root symptoms of plants grown in the field microplots 76 weeks after sowing. ................................. 139

Table 6-3-2 Mean ethylene production (A) and number of nodules (B) per red clover plant grown in the pots at 20°C and 60% WHC on three occasions after sowing. .................................................. 141

Table 6-3-3 Mean fresh weights of shoots (A) and roots (B) per red clover seedling grown in pots at 20°C and 60% WHC on three occasions after sowing. .... 144

Table 6-3-4 Mean length (A) and dry weight (B) of shoots per red clover plant grown in the microplots measured on six occasions after sowing. ......... 145

Table 6-3-5 Mean height and dry weight of shoots per red clover plant grown in the microplots containing soil without added corn kernel medium and in the guard rows 59 and 67 weeks after sowing. .................................................. 147

Table 6-3-6 Mean root rot, crown rot, and stele browning indices of red clover plants grown for 76 weeks in the microplots. ........................................ 150

Table 6-3-7 Mean height (A) and dry weight (B) of shoots per red clover plant on 6 occasions after transplanting 5-week-old plants into the microplots. ..... 151

Table 7-3-1 Mean percentage spore germination, hyphal penetration, and mean number of cells per invaded hypha of \(T.\) basicola on roots of red clover seedlings grown on water agar amended with benomyl or prochloraz. .... 180

Table 7-3-2 Mean numbers of conidiophores and chlamydospores per 1 mm length on the surface of roots of red clover seedlings grown on water agar amended with benomyl or prochloraz. ........................................ 182
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4-2-1 Mean numbers of fungal colonies in total, and of the major fungal species, per g fresh roots of 12-week- (A) and 1-year- (B) old red clover plants after adding various amounts of root and blending for 60 seconds. 53

Figure 4-2-2 Mean numbers of fungal colonies in total, and of the major fungal species, per g fresh roots of 12-week- (A) and 1-year- (B) old red clover plants after adding 2 g of root and blending for various times. 54

Figure 4-2-3 Mean percentage of fine root fragments in macerates of root steles of 1-year-old red clover plants using various amount of tissue (A) and different blending times (B). 55

Figure 4-2-4 Mean numbers of fungal colonies in total, and of the major fungal species, corrected for the proportion of coarse (unplated) fragments in the macerate using different blending times (A) and various amount of tissue (B). 55

Figure 4-3-1 Mean soil temperatures, soil water contents at 0-10 cm depth, and rainfall at 10 days intervals from 19 Nov. 1986 to 17 Feb. 1987. 74

Figure 4-3-2 Relationship between water content and matric potential for field and pot soil. 74

Figure 5-2-1 Mean lengths of primary shoot and root per seedlings of 7-day-old red clover growing on two layers of filter papers in petri plates at 25 or 15°C. 91

Figure 5-3-1 Mean lengths and weights of shoot and root per plant of 4-week-old red clover plants growing in pots containing field soil (A) or microwave-oven-treated soil (B). 103

Figure 5-4-1 Mean weights of shoots (A) and roots (B) per plants of 6-, 12-, 18-, and 45-week-old red clover plants growing in a field plot drenched with benomyl or prochloraz immediately after sowing. 113

Figure 6-2-1 Mean numbers of red clover plants per m² over a 62 week period after planting inoculated plants in field plots. 129
Figure 6-3-1 Mean numbers of seedlings per pot 2 and 8 weeks after sowing 10 seeds into each pot containing fumigated soil plus 0.1 or 1% corn kernel cultures of different fungi. .......................................................... 142

Figure 6-3-2 Mean numbers of seedlings per microplot 6 weeks after sowing 20 seeds into each microplot containing fumigated soil plus 0.1 or 1% of corn kernel cultures of different fungi. .......................................................... 142

Figure 6-3-3 Percentage cumulative yield per red clover plant in microplots containing fumigated soil plus 0.1 or 1% of corn kernel cultures of different fungi as compared with control. .......................................................... 148

Figure 6-3-4 Mean dry root weight per red clover plant in microplots containing fumigated soil plus 0.1 or 1% corn kernel cultures of different fungi, 76 weeks after sowing. .......................................................... 148

Figure 7-3-1 Mean percentages of root surface covered by lesions 5 and 8 days after inoculation with *T. basicola*. .......................................................... 179

Figure 7-3-2 Mean percentage infections where papillae were formed in cells of red clover roots 16 and 24 h after inoculation with *T. basicola*. .......................................................... 179
LIST OF PLATES

Plate 4-1  General view of the waterbaths showing the effects of different temperatures on red clover growth. ................................................. 60

Plate 5-1  a-b  Effects of captafol (a) and thiram (b) on Rhizobium growth after 3 days incubation at 25°C. .......................... 86

Plate 6-1  a-b  Leaf (a) and root (b) symptoms on red clover plants inoculated with Verticillium dahliae by the root dip method after 12 weeks growth in the field plots. ............................................. 128

Plate 6-2  a-b  Establishment of microplots ................................................................. 136

Plate 6-3  a-b  Red clover plants in microplots 54 weeks after sowing .................. 146

Plate 7-1  a-d  Germination and development of endoconidia on the root surface. 162

Plate 7-2  a-c  Development of intracellular beaded hyphae. .......................... 165

Plate 7-3  a-c  Penetration of adjacent cells. ................................................................. 167

Plate 7-4  a-c  Formation of intracellular straight hyphae, endoconidia and chlamydospores. .......................... 170

Plate 7-5  a-d  Response of host cells to the fungal invasion. .......................... 171

Plate 7-6  a-h  Degeneration of infected cells. ................................................................. 174

Plate 7-7  a-d  Fine structure of fungal cells treated with benomyl. .......................... 183

Plate 7-8  a-f  Fine structure of fungal cells treated with prochloraz. ......................... 184