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**Effects of cutting, nitrogen, closing date and water
on herbage and seed production in Ruzi grass
(*Brachiaria ruziziensis* Germain and Everard)**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) in
Plant Science (Seed Technology)
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ABSTRACT

The successful production of Ruzi grass (*Brachiaria ruziziensis*) for both herbage and seed production requires a knowledge of vegetative and reproductive development and their reaction to management. Several management aspects were investigated in the present study, i.e. defoliation, closing date, nitrogen fertilizer application and water stress effects during reproductive development. In addition, an attempt was made to describe more fully phenotypic variation in a Ruzi grass population, an aspect which may provide information useful for a future plant breeding programme in this species.

Phenotypic variation in Ruzi grass was investigated under plastic house conditions where minimum and maximum temperatures were set at 20 C and 30 C respectively. The seed used was from a commercial seedlot obtained from Thailand. Single plant measurements were made during the vegetative stage (herbage production and tiller development, growth form, plant height, canopy width, leaf width, leaf hairiness, ligule colour, and stem colour) and during the reproductive stage (date of first flower initiation, tiller numbers at harvest, and development of inflorescences).

Erect and semi-erect plants had significantly higher herbage production than prostrate plants but failed to show significant differences in tiller numbers. Seed yield was unaffected by plant growth form. Other parameters such as ligule colour, stem colour, leaf width and hairiness also showed considerable variation from plant to plant. However there was little evidence they were linked to any particular plant growth form.

Management practices for herbage and seed production, particularly in terms of defoliation, time of closing and nitrogen fertilizer application were studied in miniature swards in a plastic house at 20 C and 30 C (night and day temperature). These swards were established in wooden bins each with 49 seedlings at a 15 cm square spacing.

In a complete randomised block design, the treatments comprised a combination of cutting frequencies viz. at 20, 35, 50 and 65 cm height and cutting intensities viz. 4 and 12 cm

stubble height, with 3 replications. This experiment was designed to determine the most appropriate defoliation management practice for Ruzi grass "pasture", and to provide a reasoned justification for the defoliation strategy adopted in subsequent studies.

Differences in cutting intensity between 4 cm (hard) and 12 cm (lax) had no significant effect on total plant dry matter, but under lax cutting plants produced significantly greater leaf dry matter and a higher leaf:stem ratio. Despite this, herbage quality was not significantly different mainly due to the longer cutting interval under hard cutting conditions resulting in plants producing bigger leaves and a significantly higher LAI compared with lax cutting. Although plants in the longer cutting frequency treatment had a significantly higher LAI than with more frequent cutting, the greater proportion of stem had a major effect in lowering herbage quality.

The overall assessment of the data from the defoliation treatments concluded that the most appropriate defoliation management for a Ruzi sward was 12-35 cm i.e. cutting when the canopy reached a height of 35 cm down to 12 cm. This was the defoliation strategy subsequently employed in studies on the management of Ruzi swards for herbage and seed production.

The effects of nitrogen and "closing date" (cessation of cutting) on herbage and seed production of Ruzi grass, were examined under three nitrogen levels viz. 50, 150 and 250 kg N/ha and three closing dates viz. early (24th March 1997), medium (7th April 1997) and late (21st April 1997) with 3 replications in a complete randomised block design. The experiment was conducted in "miniature swards" as previously described.

Herbage dry matter production prior to closing increased progressively with increasing levels of nitrogen supply. This nitrogen effect continued to produce significantly higher herbage production (250 kg N/ha) even after seed harvest, but there were no significant differences between 50 and 150 kg N/ha. Different closing dates did not cause similar effects to nitrogen application, simply because plant growth rate declined with the approach of the reproductive stage. This was particularly evident in medium and late closing treatments.

However, as expected, the earlier the closing date the higher the amount of herbage dry matter yield obtained after seed harvest. This was mainly contributed by both new vegetative and old reproductive tillers.

Nitrogen application up to 150 kg/ha increased seed yield mainly by increasing total and harvested ripe inflorescence density, total floret numbers, and seed numbers. However nitrogen had no effect on percentage seed set or seed weight. Early and medium closing dates produced significantly greater seed yields than the late closing date mainly through an effect on total and harvested ripe inflorescence density, seed numbers, seed weight. Closing date had no effect on percentage seed set, but early closing resulted in greater inflorescence size (floret numbers/inflorescence). The interaction of nitrogen level and closing date suggested that higher nitrogen supply (150 kg N/ha) and early closing increased the percentage of pure germinating seed, suggesting that this is the most appropriate management for enhancing seed quality and yield.

The final experiment in this study was established to determine the effects of different levels of water stress applied at different stages of reproductive development on seed yield, yield components and seed quality in Ruzi grass. Individual plants were grown in 10 litre pots filled with potting mixture. Three levels of water stress were imposed (control (nil), mild and severe) at three different reproductive development stages (floral initiation, ear emergence and full flowering).

The response of plants to different levels of water application were clearly shown in terms of physiological and morphological changes particularly when these applications were continued throughout the entire reproductive development stage. Although the higher the amount of water applied the greater the dry matter produced, in terms of reproductive development, there was relatively little difference between non stressed and mild stressed plants. Under severe stress, however, although plants developed inflorescences, they were unable to exert to full ear emergence. Generally, the stage of plant development and level of water stress applied had a bearing on plant dry matter, seed yield and seed yield components.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.	vii
LIST OF TABLES	xiv
LIST OF FIGURES	xviii
LIST OF PLATES	xx
LIST OF APPENDICES	xx
 Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES	 1
 Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	 4
2.1 INTRODUCTION	4
2.2 GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE SPECIES	5
2.3 RUZI GRASS SEED PRODUCTION IN THAILAND	8
2.4 EFFECT OF DEFOLIATION MANAGEMENT	9
2.4.1 Influence of cutting frequency and intensity on herbage production	 10
2.4.2 The effects of defoliation on sward dynamics	11
2.4.3 The effects of defoliation on physiological responses of plants . . .	12
2.4.3.1 residual leaf area, light interception and photosynthesis. .	12
2.4.3.2 meristematic tissue.	13
2.4.4 Processes leading to recovery from defoliation	13
2.4.5 The effects of defoliation on pasture seed production	14
2.4.5.1 reproductive apices.	15
2.4.5.2 tillering and tiller development	16
2.4.5.3 closing date.	17
2.4.5.4 assimilate supply	18
2.5 EFFECT OF NITROGEN FERTILIZER APPLICATION	18
2.5.1 On herbage production.	18

2.5.1.1 dry matter yield.	18
2.5.1.2 crude protein in herbage	19
2.5.1.3 time of nitrogen application	19
2.5.2 On seed production.	19
2.5.2.1 seed yield and yield components.	19
2.5.2.2 species and cultivar	21
2.5.2.3 seed quality.	22
2.5.2.4 crop maturity	22
2.6 EFFECT OF WATER STRESS ON SEED PRODUCTION	22
2.6.1 Physiological and morphological response	22
2.6.2 Reproductive stages and their sensitivity to water stress	25
2.6.3 Irrigation practice and benefits for seed crops	27
Chapter 3. PHENOTYPIC VARIATION IN RUZI GRASS.	28
3.1 INTRODUCTION	28
3.2 MATERIALS AND METHODS	30
3.2.1 Environmental Conditions And Establishment Of The Trial Plots	30
3.2.2 Measurements	31
3.2.2.1 Vegetative stage	31
(a) herbage production and tiller development.	31
(b) growth form	31
(c) plant height and canopy width	33
(d) leaf width.	33
(e) leaf hairiness	33
(f) ligule colour.	33
(g) stem colour	34
3.2.2.2 Reproductive stage.	34
(a) date of first flower initiation	34
(b) tiller numbers at harvest	34
(c) reproductive development of inflorescences	34
3.2.3 Statistical Analysis.	35

3.3 RESULTS	36
3.3.1 Vegetative Stage	36
3.3.1.1 Herbage production and tiller development	36
3.3.1.2 Growth form	40
3.3.1.3 Plant height and canopy width	41
3.3.1.4 Leaf width, Leaf hair, Ligule colour and Stem colour	41
3.3.1.5 Relationship between plant parameters and some phenotypic variation recorded during the vegetative growth	43
3.3.2 Reproductive Stage	45
3.3.2.1 Date of first flower initiation.	45
3.3.2.2 Tiller numbers at harvest.	49
3.3.2.3 Inflorescence development.	49
3.3.2.4 Inflorescence development and growth form	56
3.3.2.5 Relationship between plant parameters and some phenotypic variation recorded during the vegetative and reproductive growth	56
3.4 DISCUSSION	59
3.5 CONCLUSION	62

Chapter 4. THE EFFECTS OF DEFOLIATION ON HERBAGE AND SEED PRODUCTION IN RUZI GRASS.

4.1 INTRODUCTION	63
4.2 MATERIALS AND METHODS	65
4.2.1 Site and Study Period	65
4.2.2 Design and Treatments.	65
4.2.3 Measurements	68
4.2.3.1 Herbage production	68
4.2.3.2 Seed production	69
4.2.4 Statistical Analysis.	69
4.3 RESULTS	71

4.3.1 Number of Cut, Cutting Interval and Total Herbage Production . .	71
4.3.2 Growth and Growth Components	73
4.3.2.1 Growth rate of sward (total plant)	73
4.3.2.2 Growth rate of leaf	74
4.3.2.3 Growth rate of stem	74
4.3.2.4 Leaf:Stem ratio	75
4.3.2.5 Leaf area index	76
4.3.3 Tiller Development	76
4.3.4 Crude Protein.	80
4.3.5 Seed Production	80
4.4 DISCUSSION	83
4.5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION	88

Chapter 5. EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT NITROGEN APPLICATION LEVELS AND CLOSING DATES DURING A DECREASING PHOTOPERIOD ON SEED PRODUCTION OF RUZI GRASS 91

5.1 INTRODUCTION	91
5.2 MATERIALS AND METHODS	94
5.2.1 Plant Preparation and Study Period	94
5.2.2 Design and Treatments.	94
5.2.3 Measurements	95
5.2.3.1 Herbage production	95
5.2.3.2 Seed production	96
5.2.3.3 Seed quality	97
5.2.3.4 Tiller development	98
5.2.3.5 Crop index and Harvest index	98
5.2.4 Statistical Analysis.	98
5.3 RESULTS	99
5.3.1 Herbage Production	99
5.3.1.1 Until closing	99
5.3.1.2 After seed harvesting.	100

5.3.2 Seed Yield and Yield Components104

5.3.2.1 Actual seed yield104

5.3.2.2 Seed yield components.104

(a) inflorescence development104

(b) Thousand seed dry weight (TSDW)108

(c) floret numbers from harvested ripe inflorescences. . .110

(d) seed number110

(e) percentage seed set111

(f) seed quality113

5.3.3 Tiller Development114

5.3.4 Crop index and Harvest index117

5.4 DISCUSSION119

5.5 CONCLUSION127

Chapter 6. EFFECTS OF WATER STRESS ON SEED PRODUCTION IN RUZI GRASS.129

6.1 INTRODUCTION129

6.2 MATERIALS AND METHODS131

6.2.1 Plants and Experimental Site131

6.2.2 Design and Treatments.131

6.2.3 Measurements135

6.2.3.1 Leaf extension rate (LER)135

6.2.3.2 Relative leaf water content (RWC)137

6.2.3.3 Reproductive development.137

6.2.3.4 Seed harvesting and data collection137

6.2.3.5 Percentage of Pure Germinating Seed (%PGS) and PGS yield 139

6.2.3.6 Plant dry weight and dry weight partitioning139

6.2.3.7 Tiller development140

6.2.3.8 Harvest index.140

6.3 RESULTS141

6.3.1 LER and RWC	141
6.3.2 Reproductive Development	141
6.3.3 Seed Yield and Yield Components	144
6.3.3.1 Seed production at harvest	144
(a) calculated seed yield	144
(b) harvested ripe inflorescence numbers	145
(c) total inflorescence numbers produced per plant	146
(d) the percentage of harvested ripe inflorescences and partitioning of total inflorescence numbers	147
(e) harvested seed numbers	150
(f) Thousand seed dry weight (TSDW)	151
(g) floret numbers at seed harvest	152
(h) percentage seed set	152
(i) deformed inflorescence numbers	153
6.3.3.2 Percentage of Pure Germinating Seed (%PGS) and PGS yield	153
6.3.4 Plant Dry weight and Dry Weight Partitioning	156
6.3.4.1 Total plant dry weight	156
6.3.4.2 Leaf dry weight.	159
6.3.4.3 Stem dry weight	159
6.3.4.4 Leaf area	160
6.3.4.5 Leaf : Stem ratio	161
6.3.5 Tiller Development	162
6.3.6 Harvest Index	164
6.4 DISCUSSION	165
6.5 CONCLUSION	172
Chapter 7. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.	174
7.1 INTRODUCTION	174
7.2 PHENOTYPIC OF PLANT POPULATION	174
7.2.1 Comparison of plant population	174

- 7.2.2 Plant performance under spaced plant and miniature swards conditions175
 - 7.2.3 Plant selection and recommendations176
- 7.3 THE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR HERBAGE AND SEED PRODUCTION176
 - 7.3.1 Effect of defoliation176
 - 7.3.2 Effect of closing pasture178
 - 7.3.3 Nitrogen fertilizer178
- 7.4 THE EFFECTS OF WATER STRESS ON SUBSEQUENT REPRODUCTIVE DEVELOPMENT AND SEED YIELD.179
 - 7.4.1 The sensitivity of vegetative growth to plant water stress179
 - 7.4.2 The sensitivity of seed yield and yield components to plant water stress180
- 7.5 CONCLUSIONS.181
- APPENDICES183**
- REFERENCES184**

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 3.

Table 3.1	Herbage production (plant DW, leaf DW, stem DW), leaf:stem ratio, leaf area and tiller numbers over 4 cuts during vegetative growth	37
Table 3.2	The range, mean and coefficients of variation (%CV) of the 72 Ruzi plants after 4 cuts.	37
Table 3.3	Number and percentage of plants with different growth form in the population	40
Table 3.4	Herbage production parameters in different each growth form group . . .	40
Table 3.5	Mean plant height and canopy width (cm) in different plant growth form group	41
Table 3.6	Leaf width, leaf hair, ligule colour and stem colour characteristics	41
Table 3.7	Leaf width and hairiness of plants in each plant growth form group . . .	42
Table 3.8	Ligule colour and stem colour in each plant growth form group	43
Table 3.9	Simple correlation coefficients (r^2) between plant parameters and some phenotypic variation recorded during the vegetative growth	44
Table 3.10	Number of plants and percentage showing first flower initiation	45
Table 3.11	Reproductive (old, new and total) and vegetative tillers and percentage at harvest	49
Table 3.12	Mean inflorescence numbers and components.	50
Table 3.13	The range, mean and coefficients of variation (%CV) of 48 Ruzi plants	50
Table 3.14	Inflorescence development in each plant growth form group	57
Table 3.15	Simple correlation coefficients (r^2) between plant parameters and some phenotypic variation recorded during the vegetative and reproductive growth	58

CHAPTER 4.

Table 4.1	The management programme in this study	66
Table 4.2	Number of cuts, cutting interval and total herbage production in different defoliation treatments	71
Table 4.3	Mean growth rate of sward (kgDM/ha/day)	73
Table 4.4	Mean growth rate of leaf DM (kg/ha/day)	74
Table 4.5	Mean growth rate of stem DM (kg/ha/day)	75
Table 4.6	Mean DM leaf:stem ratio	75
Table 4.7	Mean leaf area index	76
Table 4.8	Early, medium and late tiller development in each treatment during herbage production	79
Table 4.9	Mean crude protein percentage	80
Table 4.10	Mean calculated seed yield (kg/ha)	81
Table 4.11	Ranking of different parameters (1 = highest; 8 = lowest) in each cutting treatment	90

CHAPTER 5.

Table 5.1	The number of cuts and cutting interval for the different closing treatments	96
Table 5.2	Range of harvest dates in different nitrogen and closing date treatments .	97
Table 5.3	Total dry matter herbage production from first cut to closing date in different nitrogen and closing date treatments (kg/ha).	99
Table 5.4	Mean herbage dry matter production from closing date to final harvest in different nitrogen and closing date treatments (kg/ha)	100
Table 5.5	Relationship between nitrogen application and closing date on tiller dry matter (kg/ha) originating from old and new vegetative and reproductive tillers	101
Table 5.6	Mean leaf:stem ratio after seed harvest in different nitrogen and closing date treatments	103

Table 5.7	Mean leaf area index after seed harvest in different nitrogen and closing date treatments	103
Table 5.8	Mean total seed yield obtained from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (kg/ha)	104
Table 5.9	Total inflorescence numbers from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (m ²)	105
Table 5.10	Mean harvested inflorescence numbers from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (m ²)	105
Table 5.11	Mean unharvested inflorescence numbers from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (m ²)	107
Table 5.12	Comparison of mean inflorescence numbers produced by old and new tillers in different nitrogen and closing date treatments	108
Table 5.13	Mean TSDW at harvest from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (g)	108
Table 5.14	Mean total floret numbers at harvest from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (no./m ²)	110
Table 5.15	Mean total numbers of seeds harvested from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (no./m ²)	111
Table 5.16	Mean percentage seed set from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (%)	111
Table 5.17	Mean percentage pure germinating seed from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (%)	113
Table 5.18	Mean yield of pure germinating seed from different nitrogen and closing date treatments (kg/ha).	114
Table 5.19	Tiller numbers from different nitrogen and closing date treatments at the time of the first cut, at the early closing date and at the final cut . . .	116
Table 5.20	Tiller partitioning between old and new vegetative and reproductive tillers at the final cut	117
Table 5.21	Crop index in different nitrogen and closing date treatments (%) . . .	118
Table 5.22	Harvest index in different nitrogen and closing date treatments (%) . .	118

CHAPTER 6.

Table 6.1	Water stress treatments used in this study	134
Table 6.2	The number of days from the commencement of water stress (FI) to the completion of seed harvest (HI) or final cut, and for the transition periods FI-EE, EE-FF, and FF-SH	143
Table 6.3	Effect of water stress on seed yield (g/plant)	144
Table 6.4	Effect of water stress on harvested ripe inflorescences per plant and percentage of total inflorescences harvested	146
Table 6.5	Effect of water stress on total inflorescence numbers produced per plant .	147
Table 6.6	Effect of water stress on total inflorescence numbers partitioned into inflorescences borne on old basal tillers (OBT), old aerial tillers (OAT), new basal tillers (NBT) and new aerial tillers (NAT)	149
Table 6.7	Effect of water stress on harvested seed numbers	151
Table 6.8	Effect of water stress on TSDW (g)	151
Table 6.9	Effect of water stress on harvested floret numbers	152
Table 6.10	Effect of water stress on seed set per plant (%)	153
Table 6.11	Effect of water stress on the number of deformed inflorescences per plant	155
Table 6.12	Effect of water stress on pure germinating seed (%PGS) and PGS yield (g/plant)	156
Table 6.13	Effect of water stress on total plant dry weight (g/plant)	157
Table 6.14	Effect of water stress on leaf dry weight (g/plant)	159
Table 6.15	Effect of water stress on stem dry weight (g/plant)	160
Table 6.16	Effect of water stress on leaf area (cm ² /plant)	161
Table 6.17	Effect of water stress on leaf:stem ratio	161
Table 6.18	Effect of water stress on tiller numbers per plant	162
Table 6.19	Effect of water stress on harvest index (HI)	164

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 3.

Figure 3.1	A comparison of individual total plant dry weights, including leaf and stem dry weight after four successive cuts	38
Figure 3.2	A comparison of individual plants development after four successive cuts in terms of (a) Total Leaf Area, (b) Mean Leaf:Stem ratio and (c) Mean Tillers	39
Figure 3.3	Date of first flower initiation in the Ruzi plant population	46
Figure 3.4	The pattern of inflorescence development per plant per day based on first flower initiation	47
Figure 3.5	A comparison of inflorescence development per plant per day from different plant growth forms and means of each growth form.	48
Figure 3.6	A comparison of tiller numbers at harvest and mean tiller numbers produced over the vegetative stage.	51
Figure 3.7	A comparison of mean inflorescence numbers per plant from different reproductive tillers	52
Figure 3.8	A comparison of mean floret numbers per inflorescence per plant from different reproductive tillers	53
Figure 3.9	The comparison of mean raceme numbers per inflorescence per plant from different reproductive tillers	54
Figure 3.10	A comparison of mean floret numbers per plant from different reproductive tillers	55

CHAPTER 4.

Figure 4.1	Plant layout per bin.	67
Figure 4.2	The layout of treatment defoliation study	67
Figure 4.3	Effect of cutting intensity (a) and frequency (b) on numbers of cuts and cutting interval (days). Vertical bars show standard error of the mean . .	72

Figure 4.4	Tiller development at each of the cutting intensities and frequencies used in the defoliation study. Vertical bars show standard error of the mean .	77
Figure 4.5	A comparison of tiller number development at the date of closing and final tiller number at seed harvest. Vertical bars show standard error of the mean	78
Figure 4.6	Relationship between seed yield and tiller number at seed harvest. $Y = -104.767 + 0.66615 * x, r^2 = 70.64$	82

CHAPTER 5.

Figure 5.1	Effect of nitrogen fertilizer and closing date on total dry matter (DM) production from the first cut to closing (DM until closing) and after seed harvest (DM after seed harvest). Vertical lines indicate the standard error (SEM) of the mean (total dry matter).	102
Figure 5.2	The relationship between seed yield and ripe inflorescence number at seed harvest. $Y = 79.9523 + 0.8501 * x, r^2 = 87.16$	106
Figure 5.3	Effect of nitrogen fertilizer and closing date on percentage of harvested and immature inflorescences.	109
Figure 5.4	Effect of nitrogen fertilizer and closing date on floret number per inflorescence (harvested ripe inflorescence) Vertical lines indicate the standard error of the mean.	112
Figure 5.5	Effect of nitrogen fertilizer and closing date on nitrogen efficiency (kg pure germinating seed per kg nitrogen applied). Vertical lines indicate the standard error of the mean.	115

CHAPTER 6.

Figure 6.1	The effect of water stress on (a) Leaf Extension Rate and (b) Leaf Relative Water Content. Vertical bars show standard error of the mean .	142
Figure 6.2	Effect of water stress on tiller development viz. old main tillers (OMT), new main tillers (NMT) and vegetative tillers (VT). Vertical bars show standard error of the mean	163

LIST OF PLATES

CHAPTER 3.

Plate 3.1 Plant growth form categories (a) erect, (b) semi-erect, and (c) prostrate . 32

CHAPTER 4.

Plate 4.1 Miniature 'swards' showing effect of removal of guard rows before
cutting (a); plants after cutting to 12 cm (b) or 4 cm (c). Plate (d)
shows the method of plant support to prevent lodging 70

CHAPTER 6.

Plate 6.1 General view of plants used in the water deficit study (a); initiated leaf
used for leaf extension measurement (b); and the plant support system
used to prevent lodging (c). 136

Plate 6.2 Examples of deformed (non) fully exserted inflorescences in severe
water stress treatment (a, b, c); rewatering recovery of inflorescences
(d, e) 154

Plate 6.3 Examples of differences in dry matter production according to the level
of water supply. Full water throughout (WWW); mild stress (D₁D₁D₁)
and severe stress (D₂D₂D₂). 158

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 4.1 Method of calculating herbage production, leaf:stem ratio and leaf
area index 183

Appendix 5.1 Mean tiller dry matter production (kg/ha) of new reproductive
tillers in different nitrogen and closing date 183a

Appendix 5.2 Mean inflorescence numbers (numbers/m²) produced by new tillers
in different nitrogen and closing date 183a

Appendix 5.3 Mean tiller numbers at final cutting (tiller numbers/m²) in different
nitrogen and closing date 183b

Appendix 5.4 Mean new reproductive tiller numbers (tiller numbers/m²) in
different nitrogen and closing date 183b