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STUDIES OF THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE YIELD AND QUALITY OF SINGLE TRUSS TOMATOES.

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A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy in Horticultural Science at Massey University

ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to evaluate the potential of the single truss system of tomato production to produce high yields of quality fruit under New Zealand conditions. The NFT hydroponic system was used to grow the plants so that nutrient solution conductivity could be maintained close to predetermined levels.

In the first experiment three cultivars were compared. At the time of fruit set of the first truss four conductivity treatments (2, 4, 6 and 8 mS cm⁻¹) were applied. Yield and fruit quality data was obtained from each of six crops over an 18 month period. Yield (fruit size) decreased with increasing conductivity for all three cultivars. Season also had a significant effect on yield, with an April harvested crop having the highest yield. Both fruit brix and titratable acidity were increased at the higher conductivity levels. There were also cultivar and seasonal differences in fruit quality, with the cherry cultivar 'Cherita' consistently producing the highest brix and titratable acidity levels. Brix levels were found to be low in the December harvested crop, while acidity was highest in the December, April and July harvested crops. Season, solution conductivity and cultivar influenced plant leaf area and leaf area index. Solution conductivity also effected foliar mineral levels, as did cultivar.

Three successive multi truss crops were grown in a pumice media system to provide fruit quality data for sensory evaluation and comparison with single truss and commercial compositional fruit quality. The same three cultivars as were compared in the single truss crop experiment were grown at three conductivity levels (2, 4 and 6 mS cm⁻¹) applied at the time of fruit set of the first truss. Fruit samples were taken from the 5th and 6th trusses for quality evaluation. Season and solution conductivity had an effect on fruit dry matter percentage and brix. Fruit shelf life was affected by season, conductivity and cultivar, with a longer shelf life obtained from fruit grown at the higher conductivity levels. The December harvested crop had the lowest overall shelf life. Fruit firmness was only affected by solution conductivity, with the fruit from the higher

conductivity treatments being firmest. Sensory evaluation of Rondello fruit on three separate occasions showed that the higher conductivity treatment scored highest for most attributes, and that these sensory scores correlated well with brix and titratable acidity levels.

A second single truss crop experiment focused on manipulation of the source/sink relationship (fruit and leaf number combinations) of three successional crops and the effect of spring and winter CO₂ enrichment on two of the three crops. The summer crop also evaluated the effect of crop shading and source/sink relationship on fruit yield, as high fruit temperatures were suspected to have reduced yield in the previous summer single truss crops. Yield and fruit quality data was collected from all three crops, along with fruit and environmental temperature recordings from the summer crop. It was found that season and fruit number effected yield, with the 8 fruit per plant treatment resulting in the greatest yield. Leaf number (either 2 or 3) and season affected fruit dry matter percentage, brix and leaf area, while fruit number influenced brix levels. CO₂ enrichment (1000 ppm) had no effect on either spring or winter fruit yield, but did advance crop maturity allowing an extra crop per year to be produced. Thus yearly yield was increased by CO₂ enrichment. CO₂ enrichment improved fruit quality in the spring crop, but had no effect on the winter crop. Shading of the summer crop resulted in an increase of 10% in total fruit yield and 19% in marketable fruit yield, due to the presence of smaller fruit and heat induced ripening disorders in the unshaded crop. Both leaf number and shading treatments affected titratable acidity, with unshaded fruit having greater percent citric acid levels. Shelf life and fruit firmness was greater in the shaded crop. Air, canopy and fruit temperatures were reduced under shade, with exposed fruit often reaching extreme temperatures (above 40°C).

Having established that leaf and fruit temperatures were reaching extreme levels during the summer in a single truss cropping situation, the effect of these temperatures on photosynthesis and fruit respiration was examined. The effect of leaf age on photosynthesis was also examined as single truss plants do not continue to produce young foliage to maintain photosynthesis levels. After harvest, net photosynthesis and the light compensation point, which had been increasing began to fall rapidly at all light

levels. It was found that after an initial drop as leaves matured, leaf age did not effect net photosynthesis. Plants exposed to 800 PAR showed maximum net photosynthesis at temperatures between 25 - 27°C. Net photosynthesis ceased at 43°C.

Fruit truss respiration rates were determined at 4 temperatures (25, 30, 35 and 40°C), on 3 occasions (18, 26, 36 and 40 days after fruit set). 5 different tissue sample combinations were assessed comprising, the whole truss with sealed and unsealed cut surfaces, fruit only with sealed and unsealed calyx scar and calyx, peduncles and plant stem only. It was found that temperature, truss portion assessed and stage of fruit maturity all affect fruit respiration rate, with the fruit only (calyx scar unsealed) resulting in the greatest CO₂ efflux. It was concluded that while the fruit epidermis is relatively impermeable to gas escape, the main route for CO₂ is through the calyx scar. Mature green fruit had the greatest response of increased CO₂ production with increasing temperature, while temperatures above 25°C disrupted the climacteric pattern of CO₂ evolution. It was concluded that in single truss plants, when temperatures were above 30°C, net photosynthesis is reduced, while fruit respiration begins to increase rapidly, both responses having a detrimental effect on yield.

The single truss system was shown to produce yields and fruit quality equal to those of good multi truss commercial tomato producers in New Zealand. This was achieved by CO_2 enrichment for crop advancement and summer crop shading, while moderate levels of solution conductivity produced good quality fruit. However, there is the possibility of further improving these yields by utilisation of other technologies such as a movable bench system and manipulation of plant density, timing of conductivity application, and different cultivars. The potential of this system for high quality, high yielding tomato fruit production warrants commercial evaluation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their support, input and encouragement during the research and preparation of this thesis:

my supervisors Dr Keith Fisher and Dr Mike Nichols for their guidance and patience, their sharing of knowledge and never ending supply of ideas.

Professor Errol Hewitt, Dr Nigel Banks, Chris Rawlingson and Suzie Newman for their advice, interest and assistance with the postharvest component of this research.

Dr David Woolley for his input into the design of the photosynthesis and respiration experimentation and subsequent discussion.

the staff of the Plant Growth Unit, particularly Bryan Sturgess, Ray Johnstone and Charlie Forbes who provided valuable assistance with the NFT systems, growth cabinets, respiration chambers, greenhouse environment and who always managed to fix those things that broke down.

my panel of trained tomato tasters and all those staff and students who participated in numerous panel selections, whose enthusiasm and interest was greatly valued.

the Packhouse association of NZ (PANZ) who provided industry information and commercial fruit samples for quality assessment.

the Vice Chancellors study grant fund, C Alma Baker trust and the Helen Alkers trust whose financial support was greatly appreciated.

the staff and students of the Plant Science department for their interest, support and friendship during the last 4 years.

my parents, Pam and Keith Morgan for their encouragement, financial support, and insistence that I get a higher education.

my husband Simon for his technical assistance, emotional support, hours of proof reading and for not ever letting me give up.

CON	TENTS								PAGE
ABST	RACT			•••••	••••	•••••	•••••		ii
ACKN	NOWLEDGEM	ENTS	•••••				•••••		v
CONI	TENTS		•••••		•••••				vi
LIST	OFTABLES			• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •	• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •				xx
LIST	OF FIGURES		•••••	•••••		•••••			xxv
LIST	OF PLATES								xxvix
INTRO	ODUCTION	•••••	•••••				•••••	•••••	xxvxx
1	REVIEW OF	LITERATUR	E				•••		1
1.1	Tomato produ	action							1
	1.1.1	Introduction							1
	1.1.2	New Zealand	greenho	ouse to	mato in	dustry			1
1.2	Physiology of	the tomato cre	ор			•••			2
	1.2.1	Growth form					, ,		2
	1.2.2	Nutrient uptal	ce			•••	•••	•••	3
	1.2.3	Distribution o	f nutrie	nts		·			5
	1.2.4	Flowering							5
	1.2.5	Pollination			•••				8
1.3	Photosynthesi	s						•••	9
	1.3.1	Introduction	•••	•••					9
	1.3.2	Effect of radia	ation lev	vels			•••	•••	9
	1.3.3	Light compen	sation p	oint an	d satura	ation le	vels		10
	1.3.4	Effect of leaf	age on	crop ph	notosyn	thesis	•••		13
	1.3.5	Effect and ava	ailability	y of CC)2			•••	14
	1.3.6	CO ₂ fixation a	and cart	ohydra	te trans	location	ı	•••	16
1.4	Temperature		•••	•••	•••		•••	•••	17
	1.4.1	Effects of tem	peratur	e on tor	mato cr	op phot	osynthe	esis	17
	1.4.2	The effect of	solution	tempe	rature o	n toma	to plant	:	
		growth and de	velopm	ent					18

	1.4.3	Summ	nary						•••	21
1.5	The source si	nk relat	tionship	of the	tomato	plant				21
	1.5.1			•••						21
	1.5.2			leaves a	and root	ts	•••			22
	1.5.3	Comp	etition v	within a	sink		•••			25
	1.5.4	-		oetween						26
	1.5.5	•				the ton	nato pla	nt		27
	1.5.6	Summ				•••				28
1.6	Fruit growth	and dev	elopme	ent						29
	1.6.1	Fruit g	growth	and dev	elopme	nt - phy	sical ch	nanges		29
	1.6.2	Physic	ological	change	S					29
	1.6.3	Bioche	emical a	and com	positio	nal char	nges			30
	1.6.4	Chang	es that	occur d	uring ri	pening	and sen	escence		34
	1.6.4.1	l	Introdu	uction	•••					34
	1.6.4.2	2	Physic	al chan	ges					35
	1.6.4.3	3	Physic	ological	change	s				35
	1.6.4.4	1	Bioche	emical a	and com	positio	nal char	nges		35
1.7	Respiration									36
1.7	1.7.1	 Introdi	 action	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	36
	1.7.2			 nerature	on resi	 piration	rates in	 Lomato	o fruit	37
	1.7.3			on after				· tomat	, iiuit	38
	1.7.4		_			respira	tion		•••	39
	1.7.5					of toma		respirat	tion	40
1.8	Fruit quality									42
	1.8.1	Introdu	uction							42
	1.8.2	Compa	arison o	of differ	ent tom	ato vari	eties			44
	1.8.3	Compa	arison o	f differ	ent prod	duction	systems	S		45
	1.8.4	Nutriti	on and	fruit qu	ality					46

V	1	1	1	

							V 111
	1.8.5	Salinity level					 47
	1.8.6	Conductivity level					 49
	1.8.7	Partial defoliation	•••	•••	•••		 52
	1.8.8	Fruit and truss positi	ion				 53
	1.8.9	Light and temperatur	re effec	ts on fr	uit qual	ity	 54
	1.8.10	Seasonal trends in fr	uit com	positio	n		 55
1.9	Sugars, acids,	volatiles and sensory	evalua	tion			 57
	1.9.1	Fruit composition an	d flavo	ur			 57
	1.9.2	Sensory evaluation of	of hortic	cultural	product	:S	 57
	1.9.3	The sense of taste ar	nd flavo	our chen	nistry		 58
	1.9.4	The sensory evaluati	on of to	omato fi	ruit		 59
	1.9.5	Volatiles and flavour					 61
1.10	Postharvest		•••				 62
	1.10.1	Changes in fruit com	positio	n during	g ripeni	ng	 62
	1.10.2	Postharvest effects of	on fruit	quality			 63
	1.10.3	Firmness, ripening a	and she	lf life o	f tomate	o fruit	 64
	1.10.4	Fruit water loss dur	ing stor	age			 66
1.11	Single truss s	ystem of tomato produ	uction				 67
	1.11.1	Introduction					 67
	1.11.2	The physiology of s	ingle tr	uss tom	ato cro	ps	 68
	1.11.3	Nutrition of single t	russ cro	ps		•••	 69
	1.11.4	Temperature					 70
	1.11.5	Supplementary light	ing	•••			 71
	1.11.6	CO ₂ enrichment of	single t	russ cro	ps		 73
	1.11.7	Yields obtained from	n single	e truss c	rops		 73
	1.11.8	Modelling of single	truss c	rops	•••		 75

2	THE EF	FECT	S OF I	PLANT	ING DA	ATE, S	OLUTI	ON CC	NDUC'	TIVITY	<i>7</i>
	AND C	ULTIV	AR O	N THE	FRUIT	QUAI	LITY O	F MUL	TI TRU	JSS	
	TOMAT	O CR	OPS								77
2.1	Introduc	tion	•••								77
2.2	Material	s and	method	ls							78
	2.2.1		Cultura	al	•••					•••;	78
	2.2.2		Treatm	ents	•••						79
	2.2.3		Experi	mental	design			•••		•••	80
	2.2.4		Data c	ollectio	n			•••			80
	2	2.2.4.1		Fruit o	lry matt	er perce	entage			•••	80
	2	2.4.2		Brix						•••	80
	2	.2.4.3		Titrata	ble acid	lity				•••	80
	2	.2.4.4		Shelf	life						81
	2	.2.4.5		Fruit f	imness						81
	2	.2.4.6		Sensor	y evalu	ation					82
	2	2.4.7		Plant 1	neasure	ments					84
	2	.2.4.8		Data a	nalysis						84
2.3	Results										85
	2.3.1		Effect	of plan	ting dat	e, solut	ion con	ductivi	ty and o	cultivar	
			on frui	t perce	ntage di	y matte	er, brix	and titr	atable		
			acidity	У					•••		85
	2	.3.1.1		Effect	of plan	ting dat	e, solut	ion con	ductivi	ty	
				and cu	ltivar o	n fruit j	percenta	age dry	matter		85
	2	.3.1.2		Effect	of plan	ting dat	e, solut	ion con	ductivi	ty	
				and cu	ltivar o	n fruit	brix				87
	2	.3.1.3		Effect	of culti	var on	fruit titi	ratable	acidity		88
	2.3.2		Effect	of plan	ting dat	e, solut	ion con	ductivi	ty and o	cultivar	on
			fruit sh	elf life	and fir	mness	•••				89
	2	.3.2.1		Effect	of plan	ting dat	te, solut	ion cor	ductivi	ty	
				and cu	ltivar o	n fruit :	shelf lif	e and f	imness	;	89

		2.3.2.2	Effe	ct of sol	ution c	onducti	vity on	fruit fin	mness	91
	2.3.3	Eff	ect of pla	anting d	ate and	solutio	n cond	uctivity	on sens	ory
		eva	luation			•••				92
		2.3.3.1	Intro	duction		•••				92
		2.3.3.2	Effec	ct of pla	nting d	ate and	solutio	n condi	activity	
			on se	ensory e	valuati	on	•••		•••	92
		2.3.3.3	Соп	elation b	oetweer	analyt	ical con	npositio	nal	
			anal	ysis and	l senso	ry evalı	ation s	cores	•••	94
	2.3.4	Eff	ect of so	lution co	onducti	vity on	leaf mi	neral le	vels	95
2.4	Discu	ssion							•••	97
	2.4.1	Eff	ect of pla	enting da	ate, sol	ution co	onducti	vity and	cultiva	г
		on	fruit qual	lity						97
		2.4.1.1	Effec	t of pla	nting d	ate on	compos	itional o	quality	97
		2.4.1.2	Effec	et of solu	ution c	onducti	vity on	compos	sitional	
			fruit	quality			•••		•••	97
		2.4.1.3	Effec	t of cul	tivar or	comp	ositiona	l fruit q	uality	98
	2.4.2	Effe	ect of pla	inting da	ate, sol	ution co	onductiv	vity and	cultiva	on
		frui	t shelf li	fe and fi	irmness	·		•••		98
		2.4.2.1	Effec	t of sol	ution co	onducti	vity on	fruit sh	elf	
				nd firm		••••		•••	•••	98
		2.4.2.2	Effec	t of plan	nting d	ate and	cultiva	r on she	elf life	99
	2.4.3	Effe	ect of pla	inting da	ate and	solutio	n condi	activity	on fruit	
		sen	sory eval	uation	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	99
	2.4.4	Effe	ect of sol	ution co	onducti	vity on	foliar n	nineral	levels	101
3		EFFECT OF								
		IVAR ON T		LD AN	D QUA	ALITY	OF SIN	IGLE T	RUSS	
	TOMA	ATO CROPS	S	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	103
2 1	Introd									102
- 1	IDITO									1117

3.2	Mater	ials and	method	is							104
	3.2.1		Cultur	al							104
	3.2.2		Treatm	nents	•••	•••		•••			106
	3.2.3		Data c	ollection	n	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	109
		3.2.3.1		Yield	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	109
		3.2.3.2		Brix			•••				109
		3.2.3.3		Titratal	ole acid	lity					110
		3.2.3.4		Plant n	neasure	ments			•••	•••	110
		3.2.3.5		Data an	nalysis	•••					110
3.3	Result	s									111
5.5	3.3.1	.0	Effect	of seaso	on solu	ition co	nductiv	ity and	cultiva	 r on vie	
	3.3.1			r and si				ity und		on ye	111
		3.3.1.1		Introdu							111
		3.3.1.2				tion con					
		3.3.1.2		fruit siz							113
		3.3.1.3		Effect	of seas	on and	cultivar	on yie	ld, num	ber	
				and fru	it size						115
				3.3.1.3.	.1	Introdu	ction				115
				3.3.1.3.	.2	Effect	of seaso	on and	cultivar		
						on frui	t yield				115
				3.3.1.3.	.3	Effect	of seaso	on and	cultivar		
						on frui	t numbe	er		•••	116
				3.3.1.3.	.4	Effect	of seaso	on and	cultivar		
						on frui	t size	•••			116
	3.3.2		The ef	fect of s	season,	solution	n condu	ctivity	and cul	tivar o	n fruit
			quality								117
		3.3.2.1		Brix le	vels						117
				3.3.2.1.	.1	Effect	of seaso	on and	cultivar	•	
						on frui	t brix le	evels			117
					.2	Effect	of solut	tion cor	nductivi	ty	
						and cui	ltivar o	n fruit l	brix lev	els	119

										xii
	3.3.2	.2	Titra	table aci	dity					119
			3.3.2	.2.1	Effec	t of sea	son and	conduc	ctivity	
					on fru	uit titrat	able aci	idity lev	els	119
			3.3.2	.2.2	Effect	t of sea	son and	cultiva	ron	
					fruit t	itratable	e acidity	y levels		120
	3.3.3	Effec	t of sea	son, sol	ution c	onducti	vity and	d cultiva	r on	
		leaf g	rowth							121
	3.3.3.	.1	Leaf	area and	l leaf a	rea inde	x			121
			3.3.3.	.1.1	Effect	t of solu	ation co	nductiv	ity	
					on lea	af area	and leaf	area in	dex	121
			3.3.3.	.1.2	Effect	t of seas	son and	cultiva	r on	
					leaf a	rea and	leaf are	ea index		123
	3.3.4	Effect	t of sea	son, sol	ution c	onducti	vity and	l cultiva	r on	
		leaf n	nineral	levels	•••					124
3.4	Discussion						•••			127
	3.4.1	Yield	, size a	nd numl	per of f	ruit	i	•••		127
	3.4.1.	1	Effec	t of seas	son and	cultiva	r on yie	eld,		
			size a	ind num	ber of	fruit		•••		127
			3.4.1.	1.1	Effect	of seas	son and	cultiva	ron	
					fruit y	ield	•••	•••	•••	127
			3.4.1.	1.2	Effect	of seas	son and	cultiva	r on	
					fruit s	size				129
			3.4.1.	1.3	Effect	of seas	son and	cultiva	ron	
					fruit r	number	•••	•••	•••	129
	3.4.1.	2	Effec	t of solu	tion co	nductiv	ity on y	/ield,		
			size a	nd num	ber of t	fruit	•••	•••	•••	130
			3.4.1.	2.1	Effect	of solu	ition co	nductiv	ity on	
					fruit y	ield ·		•••	•••	130
			3.4.1.	2.2	Effect	of solu	ition co	nductiv	ity on	
					fruit c	176				131

			3.4.1.2	2.3	Effect	of solu	tion co	nductivi	ity on	
					fruit n	umber	•••			131
	3.4.2	Effect	of seas	on, solu	ition co	nductiv	ity and	cultiva	r	
		on fru	it quali	ty						132
	3.4.2.	.1	Effect	of seas	on on f	ruit bri	x and a	cidity		132
	3.4.2.	.2	Effect	of solu	tion con	nductivi	ity on f	ruit		
			brix a	nd acidi	ty					133
	3.4.2.	.3	Effect	of culti	var on	fruit br	ix and a	acidity		134
	3.4.2.	.4	Solution	on cond	uctivity	and th	e yield/	quality		
			relatio	nship						134
	3.4.3	Effect	of solu	tion con	nductivi	ity and	season	on plan	t leaf	
		area a	nd leaf	area inc	dex					135
	3.4.3.	.1	Effect	of cond	ductivity	y on lea	af area a	and leaf	area	
			index	•••						135
	3.4.3.	.2	Effect	of seas	on on l	eaf area	and le	af area	index	136
	3.4.4	Foliar	minera	l levels	•••					136
	3.4.4.	.1	Effect	of solu	tion co	nductivi	ty on f	oliar mi	neral	
			levels							136
	3.4.4.	.2	Effect	of culti	var on	foliar n	nineral	levels		138
4	THE EFFEC	T OF S	PRING	AND V	VINTE	R CO ₂	ENRIC	HMENT	Γ,	
	SUMMER S	HADIN	G AND	SOUR	CE/SIN	IK TRE	EATME	NTS O	N	
	THE YIELD	AND (QUALIT	ry of	SINGL	E TRUS	SS TON	OTAN		
	CROPS	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	139
4.1	Introduction	•••	•••	•••		•••	•••			139
4.2	Materials and	d metho	ds		•••		•••			140
	4.2.1	Cultu	ral		•••			•••		140
	4.2.2	Treati	ments	•••	•••		•••			142
	4.2.2.	.1	Numb	er of cr	ops	•••	•••	•••	•••	142

											xi
		4.2.2.2	2	Sourc	e sink s	trengt	hs				142
		4.2.2.3	3	Carbo	on dioxi	de enr	ichment				142
		4.2.2.4	ļ	Crop	shading	;					143
		4.2.2.5	5	Green	nhouse c	compar	tments				143
	4.2.3		Exper	imenta	l design						143
	4.2.4		Data o	ollecti	on	•••	•••				143
		4.2.4.1		Yield	and fru	it qua	lity		•••		143
		4.2.4.2	2	Plant	measure	ements	·		•••		144
		4.2.4.3	3	Temp	erature	measu	rements				144
	4.2.5		Data a	nalysis	S						145
4.3	Result	S				•••			•••		146
	4.3.1		Introd	uction							146
	4.3.2		Effect	of sea	son and	source	e/sink tr	eatmer	nt on the	e	
			perfor	mance	of the s	pring,	summer	and v	vinter c	rops	146
		4.3.2.1		Effect	t of seas	son an	d source	/sink t	reatmen	t	
				on yie	eld and	fruit s	ize				146
		4.3.2.2		Effect	t of seas	son and	d source	/sink t	reatmen	t	
				on fro	iit quali	ty					148
		4.3.2.3		Effect	t of seas	son an	d source	/sink t	reatmen	t	
				on lea	af area (cm²) a	nd leaf	area in	dex		149
	4.3.3		Effect	of sea	son, CO	enric	hment a	ınd soı	ırce/sinl	k treatm	nent
			on the	perfor	mance o	of the	spring a	nd wir	iter crop	os	150
		4.3.3.1		Introd	luction	•••	•••				150
		4.3.3.2		Effect	t of seas	son and	d CO ₂ e	nrichm	ent on		
				fruit y	ield		•••			•••	150
		4.3.3.3		Effect	of seas	son, C	O ₂ enric	hment	and sou	ırce	
				sink t	reatmen	t on fr	uit qual	ity	•••	•••	151
		4.3.3.4		Effect	t of seas	son, C	O ₂ enric	hment	and sou	irce	
				sink t	reatmen	t on p	lant leaf	area a	and leaf		
				area i	ndex		•••				155
		4.3.3.5		Effect	of CO ₂	on cr	op timir	ng		•••	157

	4.3.4		Effect	of shading	and source	ce/sink t	reatme	nt on th	e perfo	rmance
			of the	summer gr	own crop	•••		•••	***	157
		4.3.4.1		Introduction	on		***	•••	•••	157
		4.3.4.2	2	Effect of s	shading an	nd sourc	e/sink t	treatmen	nt on	
				the perform	mance of	the sum	mer gro	own cro	p	157
		4.3.4.3	3	Summer g	reenhouse	and fro	uit temp	perature	S	160
4.6	Discu	ssion			•••	•••	•••			163
	4.6.1		Yield	and fruit si	ze for all	three cr	ops	•••	•••	163
		4.6.1.1		Effect of s	season and	l source	/sink tr	eatment	on	
				yield and	fruit size	•••	•••	•••	•••	163
		4.6.1.2		Effect of s	season and	l CO ₂ e	nrichme	ent on y	ield	
				and fruit s	ize		•••	***	•••	164
	4.6.2		Fruit c	quality for a	ıll three cı	rops	•••	•••		165
		4.6.2.1		Effect of s	season and	l source	/sink tr	eatment	on	
				fruit dry n	natter perc	entage	and bri	x levels		165
	4.6.3		Leaf a	rea and lear	f area inde	ex for a	ll three	crops	•••	166
		4.6.3.1		Effect of s	season and	l leaf nu	ımber c	on leaf		
				area and le	eaf area in	ndex	•••	•••		166
	4.6.4		Effect	of season,	source/sin	k treatn	nent an	d CO ₂ e	nrichme	ent
			on frui	it quality	•••		•••	•••	•••	166
		4.6.4.1		Effect of s	season, soi	urce/sin	k treatn	nent and	i	
				CO ₂ enrich	hment on	fruit per	rcentage	e dry m	atter	
				and brix le	evels	•••	•••	•••	•••	166
		4.6.4.2	,	Effect of s	season, soi	urce/sin	k treatn	nent and	d	
				CO ₂ enrich	hment on	fruit titr	atable a	acidity 1	levels	167
		4.6.4.3		Effect of s	season, soi	urce/sin	k treatn	nent and	d	
				CO ₂ enrich	hment on	plant le	af area	(cm ²) a	nd leaf	
				area index	•••	•••	•••	•••	***	167
		4.6.4.4		Effect of C	CO ₂ enrich	nment o	n crop	timing	•••	168
	4.6.5		Effect	of summer	shading o	on the F	ebruary	crop	•••	168
		4.6.5.1		Effect of s	summer sh	nading c	n fruit	yield an	nd size	168

		4.6.5.2	Effec	t of sur	nmer s	hading a	nd sou	rce/sink	:	
			treatn	nent on	fruit ti	tratable	acidity	levels	•••	170
		4.6.5.3	Effec	t of sur	nmer sl	hading o	n fruit	shelf li	fe	170
		4.6.5.4	Effec	t of sun	nmer sl	hading a	nd leaf	f numbe	ron	
			leaf a	rea and	l leaf a	rea index	(•••	171
		4.6.5.5	Sumn	ner gree	enhouse	e air and	fruit t	emperat	ures	171
		4.6.5.6	Sumn	nary	•••		•••			172
5	THE	EFFECT OF E	NVIRO	ONMEN	NTAL (CONDIT	TIONS	ON		
	PHOT	COSYNTHESIS	s and	RESPI	RATIO	ON OF S	INGL	E		
	TRUS	SS TOMATO I	PLANT	S	•••					173
5.1	Introd	luction	•••	•••	***	•••	•••	•••	•••	173
5.2	Mater	ials and metho	ds		•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	174
	5.2.1	Cultural	•••		•••		•••		•••	174
		5.2.1.1	Photo	synthes	sis expe	riments	•••	•••	•••	175
		5.2.1.2	Fruit	respirat	ion exp	periment	S		•••	175
	5.2.2	Treatments	•••	•••			•••	•••	•••	176
		5.2.2.1	Photo	synthes	sis expe	riments	•••	•••	•••	176
			5.2.2.	1.1	Effec	t of leaf	age an	nd light		
					inten	sity on n	et leaf	photos	ynthesis	176
			5.2.2.	1.2	Effec	t of tem	peratur	e on ne	t	
					leaf p	hotosyn	thesis	••••		176
		5.2.2.2	Effec	t of tem	peratu	re on fru	it resp	iration		177
	5.2.3	Data collection	on					***		178
		5.2.3.1	Leaf 1	photosy	nthesis	experin	nents			
			5.2.3.	1.1	Leaf	net phot	osynth	esis dete	erminati	ion178
			5.2.3.	1.2	Effec	t of leaf	age an	nd light	intensit	ty
					on le	af net pl	otosyr	nthesis		178
			5.2.3.	1.3	Effec	t of temp	peratur	e on pho	tosynth	esis.178

										xvii
			5.2.3.	1.4	Fruit	respirati	on exp	eriment	S	178
5.3	Resul	ts								182
	5.3.1	Photosynthes	is expe	riments						182
		5.3.1.1	The e	ffect of	leaf ag	e and li	ght inte	ensity o	n	
			net pl	notosynt	hesis					182
		5.3.1.2	Effect	of leaf	temper	ature of	n net pl	hotosyn	thesis	183
	5.3.2	Fruit truss re	spiratio	n experi	iments					184
		5.3.2.1	Introd	luction						184
		5.3.2.2	Fruit	truss res	spiration	n during	fruit d	levelop	ment	184
		5.3.2.3	Effect	of frui	t maturi	ity and	tempera	ature or	ı	
			respir	ation ra	te					187
		5.3.2.4	Effect	of tem	perature	on lea	f net pl	hotosyn	thesis	
			and fr	uit truss	s respira	ation				188
5.4	Discussion			•••						190
	5.4.1	Photosynthesi	is expe	riments						190
		5.4.1.1	Effect	of leaf	age an	d light i	intensit	y on		
			net ph	otosynt	hesis					190
		5.4.1.2	Effect	of leaf	temper	ature or	net pl	notosyn	thesis	194
	5.4.2	Respiration e	xperime	ents					•••	195
		5.4.2.1	Effect	of tem	perature	on fru	it truss			
			respir	ation rat	tes		•••		•••	195
		5.4.2.2	Effect	of trus	s portio	n on re	spiratio	n rate		196
		5.4.2.3	Effect	of fruit	maturi	ty and	tempera	ature on	l	
			matur	e tomate	o fruit r	espirati	on			198
		5.4.2.4	Effect	of tem	perature	on pho	otosynt	hesis,		
			respir	ation an	d final	fruit ciz	P			100

										xviii
6	POTE	NTIAL OF TH	E SINC	GLE TR	USS S	YSTEM	1			201
6.1	Introd	uction								201
	6.2.1	Description of	the sys	stem						201
	6.2.2	Cropping area								202
6.3	Yield								••••	202
	6.3.1	Number of cro	ps per	year						202
	6.3.2	Yield potential	l							204
6.4	Fruit e	juality								206
0.1	6.4.1	Fruit quality o		 le with	the sin	ole trus	s system	 m		206
	6.4.2	The yield/qual								206
6.5	Issues	not considered	in the	present	study					208
	6.5.1	Introduction	•••		•••		•••			208
	6.5.2	Timing of incr	easing	conduc	tivity	•••				208
	6.5.3	Plant density	•••			•••				208
	6.5.4	Cultivars and f	lower	number	S					209
	6.5.5	Environmental	manip	ulation						209
	6.5.6	Plant size and	spacing	g						210
	6.5.7	Crop modelling	g							211
	6.5.8	Summary	•••	'		•••		•••		212
6.6	Conclu	isions								212
7.0	DEEE	DENICES								214

								xix
APPENDICE	S			•••				238
Appen	dix 1 - Seed	germin	ation n	nedia				238
Appendix 2 - Growing-on media for transplanted seedlings								239
Appendix 3 - Standard hydroponic stock solution								240
Appen	dix 4 - Com	nercial	ly prodi	uced pa	ckhouse	e fruit q	uality	242

LIST OF TABLES

			PAGE
Table 1.1	Composition of ripe tomato fruit (% dry matter)		31
Table 1.2	Changes in composition during ripening		32
Table 1.3	Some analysis of juices expressed from ripe tomatoes		43
Table 1.4	The relationship between dry matter and shelf life for tw	o toma	ito
	cultivars		44
Table 1.5	Soluble solids, acidity, conductivity and firmness of tomat	o fruit f	rom UK
	commercial growers 1981		45
Table 1.6	The composition of tomatoes cv. Sonato grown in peat	bags co	mpared
	with that of fruit grown in nutrient-film culture		46
Table 1.7	Relation between the conductivity of recirculating nutrie	nt solut	ion and
	fruit composition		50
Table 1.8	Round tomato cultivar Mercator, taste panel evaluation o	f fruit g	rown at
	a range of salinity levels	•••	50
Table 1.9	The effect of different numbers of leaves on the content	of suga	ers and
	total solids in the expressed fruit juices		52
Table 1.10	Effect of truss number on fruit composition for the culti-	var Dur	anto
	grown in NFT and soil		54
Table 2.1	Multi truss tomato crop - significant dates	•••	79

Table 2.2	The effects of p	olanting date	, solutio	n cond	uctivity	and cu	ltivar o	n fruit		
	dry matter perce	entage, brix	and titra	itable a	cidity			85		
Table 2.3	The effect of pl	anting date,	conduc	tivity a	nd culti	var on	fruit she	elf life		
	and firmness							90		
Table 3.1	Single truss ton	nato crops -	importar	nt dates				109		
Table 3.2	Effect of season	, solution co	nductivi	ty and o	cultivar	on yield	d, numb	er and		
	size of fruit							113		
Table 3.3	The effects of se	ason and sol	ution co	nductiv	ity on fr	uit Brix	and titi	atable		
	acidity			•••	•••	•••		118		
Table 3.4	Effect of conductivity on fruit percent citric acid for each planting									
	date			•••		•••	•••	120		
Table 3.5	Effect of season	and cultiva	r on frui	t titrata	ble acid	lity		121		
Table 3.6	Effect of season	and solution	n conduc	ctivity o	on the le	eaf area	and lea	of area		
	index							122		
Table 3.7	Effect of solution	on conductiv	ity on le	af area	and lea	f area i	ndex	122		
Table 3.8	Effect of season	on leaf area	a index f	for all c	ultivars			123		
Table 3.9	Effect of solution	n conductiv	ity on y	ield and	l fruit q	uality (a	average	of all		
	crops)							135		
Table 4 1	Source sink seri	es - importa	nt dates					140		

Table 4.2	The effect of	season	and so	urce/sin	k treatn	nent on	yield,	fruit siz	e,
	percentage di	ry matte	er, brix,	percen	t citric a	acid and	d leaf a	rea	147
Table 4.3	Effect of sea	son and	l fruit n	umber o	on yield	(g/plar	nt) and	fruit siz	e
	(g/plant)								148
Table 4.4	Effect of leaf	f and fr	uit num	ber on	fruit pe	rcentag	e dry n	natter a	nd brix
	levels								149
Table 4.5	Effect of seas	son and	leaf nu	mber o	n leaf a	rea (cm	n^2) and n^2	leaf area	a
	index		•••						150
Table 4.6	Effect of CO	₂ enrich	ment or	n spring	and wi	inter yie	eld and	fruit siz	ze.151
Table 4.7	Effect of seas	on, CO	enrichi	ment an	d source	e/sink tr	eatmen	t on spri	ing and
	winter crops	•••	•••						152
Table 4.8	Effect of seas	son, fru	it numb	er and	CO, eni	richmen	t on fru	it perce	entage
	dry matter								153
Table 4.9	Effect of seas	on, CO	, enrich	ment ar	nd sourc	e/sink t	reatme	nt on fr	iit brix
	levels and titu	ratable	acidity o	expresso	ed as pe	ercent c	itric aci	d	154
Table 4.10	Effect of seas	on, sou	rce/sink	treatme	ent and	CO ₂ en	richmer	it on pla	ınt leaf
	area (cm²) an	d leaf a	rea inde	ex	•••	•••	•••	•••	156
Table 4.11	Effect of CO	on cro	p timin	g (days)				157
Table 4.12	Effect of sour	rce/sink	treatme	ent on c	crops sh	ading o	n the s	ummer	
	Crop								158

Table 4.13	Effect of cro	p shadin	g on to	tal and	marketa	able cro	p yield	s and fi	ruit
	size								158
Table 4.14	Effect of sha	ding, lea	of and fr	ruit nun	nber on	percen	t citric	acid	159
Table 4.15	Effect of sha	ding on	fruit sh	elf life	(days)				159
Table 4.16	Effect of sha	ding and	l leaf ni	ımber o	on leaf a	агеа (сп	n²) and	leaf are	ea
	index								160
Table 5.1	Plant develop	omental s	stages						176
Table 5.2	Photosynthes	is x tem	perature	treatm	ents - 1	0 week	s after	sowing	177
Table 5.3	Respiration t	reatment	S						177
Table 5.4	Fruit respirat	ion deter	minatio	ons					181
Table 5.5	Effect of tem	•		•					
	colour (for th	e final a	issessm	ent) on	fruit tru	iss resp	iration	rates	184
Table 6.1	Crop timing	- number	r of day	s from	plantin	g to cro	p remo	val	203
Table 6.2	Highest yield	s obtain	ed at a	density	of 13.5	plants	m² (cul	ltivar	
	Rondello)		100	***	***	***	•••	***	205
Table 6.3	Expected year	rly yield	ls utilisi	ing diff	erent pe	ercentag	ge grow	ing are	as.205
Table 6.4	Comparison	of single	truss a	nd com	mercial	l fruit s	ample o	luality	206

					xxiv
Table 6.5	Effect of conductivity on yield, brix and po	ercent	citric a	acid leve	els in
	single truss crops			•••	207
Table A1.1	Bark additives - Seed Germination Media				238
Table A2.1	Bark additives - Growing on Media	•••			239
Table A3.1	NFT stock solution				240
Table A4.1	Commercially produced packhouse fruit qu	ality r	anges		246

LIST OF FIGURES

		PAGE
Figure 2.1	Taste panel score sheet	83
Figure 2.2	Effect of planting date on fruit dry matter percentage	86
Figure 2.3	Effect of solution conductivity on fruit dry matter percentage	86
Figure 2.4	Effect of cultivar on fruit dry matter percentage	87
Figure 2.5	Effect of planting date and conductivity on fruit brix levels	87
Figure 2.6	Effect of planting date and cultivar on fruit brix	88
Figure 2.7	Effect of cultivar on fruit titratable acidity levels (% citric acid)	89
Figure 2.8	Effect of planting date and conductivity on fruit shelf life	90
Figure 2.9	Effect of planting date and cultivar on shelf life	91
Figure 2.10	Effect of solution conductivity on Rondello fruit firmness (March	
	only)	91
Figure 2.11	Effect of solution conductivity on fruit sensory evaluation scores	
	October (a), December (b) and March (c) harvested crops	93
Figure 2.12	Correlation between the effects of solution conductivity on brix le	vels and
	sweetness sensory evaluation scores	94
Figure 2.13	Correlation between the effect of solution conductivity on fruit t	itratable
	acidity levels (% citric acid) and acidity sensory evaluation score	re95

F: 0.14	Effect of colution and destinity on folion N (a) W	(h)d	Co (o)	xxvi
Figure 2.14	Effect of solution conductivity on foliar N (a), K levels	(b) and		96
Figure 3.1	Example of an NFT bench			106
Figure 3.2	Effect of season, conductivity and cultivar on yie	ld (g/pla	ant)	112
Figure 3.3	Effect of solution conductivity on yield (mean of	3 cultiv	ars and	16
	plantings)			114
Figure 3.4	Effect of solution conductivity on fruit size (mean	n of 3 c	ultivars	and 6
	plantings)	•••	•••	114
Figure 3.5	Effect of season on yield for the cultivars Rondel	lo, Oph	ir and	
	Cherita			115
Figure 3.6	Effect of season on fruit number for the cultivars	Rondel	lo, Oph	ir and
	Cherita	•••		116
Figure 3.7	Effect of season on fruit size for three cultivars			117
Figure 3.8	Effect of season on brix levels for the cultivars R	ondello.	, Ophir	and
	Cherita			118
Figure 3.9	Effect of solution conductivity on fruit brix levels	S		119
Figure 3.10	Effect of season on leaf area for all cultivars			123

Effect of solution conductivity on foliar N levels (5 planting dates

...124

averaged with the July crop presented separately) ...

Figure 3.11

Figure 3.12	Effect of solution conductivity on foliar P levels (5 plants	ing date	S
	averaged with the July crop presented separately)	•••	125
Figure 3.13	Effect of solution conductivity on foliar K levels (5 plant	ing date	ès
	averaged with the July crop presented separately)		125
Figure 3.14	Effect of solution conductivity on foliar Ca levels (5 plan	Ū	
	averaged with the July crop presented separately)		126
Figure 3.15	Cultivar differences in foliar N, P, K, Ca and Mg levels		126
Figure 4.1	Example of a bench layout		144
Figure 4.2	Air temperature of unshaded and shaded crops		160
Figure 4.3	Canopy temperature of unshaded and shaded crops		161
Figure 4.4	Fruit skin and air temperature of unshaded and shaded cre	ops	161
Figure 4.5	Temperature of exposed surface, fruit centre and shaded s	surface (of an
	exposed fruit on a day with high solar radiation		162
Figure 4.6	Temperature on exposed surface, fruit centre and shaded	surface	of an
	exposed fruit on a day with low solar radiation		162
Figure 5.1	Respiration chamber		179
Figure 5.2	Diagram of truss, stalk and portion of plant stem which was	s severe	d from
	each plant and placed in the fruit respiration chamber		180

	xxvii	ii								
Figure 5.3	Example of a bench - plant selection system for respiration									
	measurement)								
Figure 5.4	Effect of leaf age and radiation level on net photosynthesis182	2								
Figure 5.5	Effect of leaf age on the light compensation point for single truss tomate	0								
	plants	3								
Figure 5.6	The effect of leaf temperature on net photosynthesis at 800 µmol.m ⁻² .s ⁻	·1								
	Quanta, 10 weeks after sowing	3								
Figure 5.7	Effect of stage of fruit development, truss portion and temperature on									
	respiration rates. (a) = 18 days, (b) = 26 days and (c) = 36 days after fruit	spiration rates. (a) = 18 days, (b) = 26 days and (c) = 36 days after fruit								
	set	Ó								
Figure 5.8	Effect of truss portion on respiration rate	,								
Figure 5.9	Effect of maturity and temperature on fruit only respiration rate187	,								
Figure 5.10	Effect of temperature on the climacteric pattern of respiration188	}								
Figure 5.11	Effect of temperature on net photosynthesis and whole truss									
	respiration)								
Figure 6.1	12 month crop timing for single truss plantings204	-								
Figure A4.1										
	percentage (a), brix (b) and percent citric acid (c)244	ŀ								
F:										
Figure A4.2	Combined packhouse frequency distribution for fruit shelf life (a)	_								
	and firmness (b))								

LIST OF PLATES

		PAGE
Plate 3.1	Seedlings 1 day after planting into the NFT gullies	105
Plate 3.2	Single truss crop at the 50% fruit set stage	105
Plate 3.3	Single truss crop showing bench system and nutrient lines	108
Plate 3.4	Plants at the time of conductivity treatment application	108
Plate 4.1	Seedlings 1 day after planting into the NFT system (CO ₂ enrich crop)	
Plate 4.2	Source sink treatment fruit nearing maturity (CO ₂ enriched	
	crop)	141