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**Effects of green manure crops on  
short-term nitrogen availability in  
organic sweet corn systems**

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A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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James Anthony Hanly

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*This thesis is dedicated to my wife Jolanda.*

*Your encouragement of me during my tertiary education,  
and your support, understanding and faithfulness  
have made all the difference.*

*Thank you!*



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## Abstract

In the Gisborne Region of New Zealand (NZ) many organic sweet corn growers use a range of winter green manure crops as a means of maintaining and improving soil fertility, particularly the availability of soil N. Some debate exists as to the most suitable green manure crops and their effectiveness at improving short-term N availability for subsequent sweet corn crops.

Two field trials were conducted in the Gisborne Region to assess the effectiveness of four winter green manure crops using a subsequent sweet corn crop to evaluate N availability. Two sites, Site-A at Tekaraka and Site-B at Tolaga Bay, with BIO-GROW NZ organic certification were used in this study. A Latin Square trial design was used at each site consisting of 25 plots made up of five replicates of each of the following five treatments: control (bare soil), blue lupin (*Lupinus angustifolus*), mustard (*Brassica sp.*), mustard/blue lupin mix and annual ryegrass (*Lolium multiflorum*).

Just prior to the soil incorporation of green manure treatments (early-mid September 1997), the lupin crop had the highest N concentration and N accumulation levels of 2.1% N and 156 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup>, respectively, at Site-A and 2.1% N and 173 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup>, respectively at Site-B. Soil incorporation of green manure treatments significantly influenced soil (0-150 mm) mineral N (nitrate and ammonium) levels measured at sweet corn emergence (30 November 1997) and at 5½ weeks post emergence. At sweet corn emergence the lupin, mustard/lupin mix, mustard, control and ryegrass treatments resulted in soil mineral N values of 68, 66, 57, 51 and 29 kg.N.ha<sup>-1</sup>, respectively, at Site-A and 118, 118, 91, 81 and 54 kg.N.ha<sup>-1</sup>, respectively, at Site B. At both sites, the lupin and mustard/lupin mix treatments resulted in soil mineral N levels significantly higher than the control treatment. In contrast, the ryegrass treatment resulted in soil mineral N levels significantly lower than the control treatment. These treatment effects were related to green manure crop N concentrations just prior to soil incorporation. On average over both sites, the lupin and mustard/lupin mix treatments, which had high DM yields (7900 kg and 6500 kg.DM.ha<sup>-1</sup> respectively), had the highest N concentrations (2.0% and 2.1% N respectively). The ryegrass treatment, which also accumulated a high average DM yield (6200 kg.DM.ha<sup>-1</sup>), contained the lowest average N concentration of only 1.1 % N.

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Sweet corn N accumulation at harvest was also significantly influenced by green manure treatments. At both sites, ryegrass significantly reduced sweet corn N accumulation compared with all other treatments, being 44% and 36% lower than control treatment value of 117 kg.N.ha<sup>-1</sup>. At Site-A, the lupin, mustard/lupin and mustard treatment effects on sweet corn N accumulation were not different from that of the control treatment at final harvest. However, at Site-B the lupin and mustard/lupin mix treatments did produce sweet corn N accumulation levels significantly higher than the control treatment; being 21% and 18% higher than the control value of 102 kg.N.ha<sup>-1</sup>, respectively.

Compared to the control treatment sweet corn yield (17.3 t ha<sup>-1</sup> averaged over both sites), none of the four green manure treatments improved sweet corn yield even though the lupin and mustard/lupin mix treatments both increased soil N availability and sweet corn N accumulation. Soil moisture limitations probably restricted yield potentials. However, the ryegrass treatment detrimentally affected sweet corn yields at both sites. When compared to the control treatment reductions of 64% and 48% at Site-A and Site-B, respectively, were measured.

Soil mineral N (0-150 mm) tested early in the sweet corn growing season gave a better relationship with sweet corn N accumulation and yield compared with the incubation tests used. Short-term soil incubation tests, conducted under aerobic and anaerobic conditions, were not useful as indicators of net N mineralisation as they did not relate well to actual soil N mineralisation or crop response.

Although both the lupin and the mustard/lupin mix treatments had similar effects on soil N availability and sweet corn N accumulation, of the two the lupin treatment achieved a higher level of estimated N fixation. On average the estimated N fixation in the lupin treatment (98 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup> averaged over both sites) was higher than N losses in harvested sweet corn ears (77 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup> averaged over both sites). This positive N balance would help compensate for other possible N losses from the soil-plant system (ie. ammonia volatilisation or nitrate leaching).

Overall, the lupin green manure treatment appears to be the best crop in terms of improving short-term N availability for the subsequent sweet corn crop and for maintaining an N balance in the soil–plant system. But ultimately, the benefit of lupin as a green manure crop will also depend on environmental conditions and management practices.

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# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgments .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Tables .....	viii
List of Figures.....	ix
<b>Chapter 1 ~ Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 BACKGROUND .....	1
1.2 OBJECTIVE.....	2
<b>Chapter 2 ~ Literature Review.....</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1 SUSTAINING ORGANIC CROP PRODUCTION ~ <i>AN INTRODUCTION</i> .....	3
2.2 MANAGING SOIL NITROGEN FERTILITY WITH GREEN MANURE CROPS .....	5
2.2.1 <i>What are green manures?</i> .....	5
2.2.2 <i>Legume characteristics</i> .....	6
2.2.3 <i>Soil properties and tillage management</i> .....	11
2.2.4 <i>Climate</i> .....	12
2.2.5 <i>Green manure N contribution to subsequent crop</i> .....	12
2.2.6 <i>Summary</i> .....	13
2.3 METHODS OF ASSESSING PLANT AVAILABLE SOIL NITROGEN.....	15
2.3.1 <i>Background</i> .....	15
2.3.2 <i>Methods of assessing the plant availability</i> .....	16
2.3.3 <i>Mineralisable N</i> .....	18
2.3.4 <i>Summary</i> .....	22
2.4 NITROGEN REQUIREMENTS OF SWEET CORN .....	23
2.4.1 <i>Background</i> .....	23
2.4.2 <i>Sweet corn N requirements</i> .....	24
2.4.3 <i>Fertiliser N response studies</i> .....	25
2.4.4 <i>Cultivar Differences in Fertiliser-N Responsiveness</i> .....	27



2.4.5	<i>Summary</i> .....	29
<b>Chapter 3 ~ Materials and Methods. ....</b>		<b>30</b>
3.1	INTRODUCTION.....	30
3.2	EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN AND TRIAL ESTABLISHMENT .....	30
3.2.1	<i>Treatments</i> .....	30
3.2.2	<i>Experimental layout</i> .....	30
3.2.3	<i>Site selection</i> .....	31
3.2.4	<i>Field Trial Establishment</i> .....	32
3.3	SOIL SAMPLING AND ANALYSES.....	35
3.3.1	<i>Soil sample collection</i> .....	35
3.3.2	<i>Soil sample preparation</i> .....	36
3.3.3	<i>Soil analyses</i> .....	36
3.4	HERBAGE SAMPLING AND ANALYSES.....	39
3.4.1	<i>Green manure herbage sampling</i> .....	39
3.4.2	<i>Sweet corn herbage sampling</i> .....	40
3.4.3	<i>Herbage Analyses</i> .....	41
<b>Chapter 4 ~ Results and Discussion .....</b>		<b>42</b>
4.1	CHARACTERISATION OF SOIL CHEMICAL PROPERTIES. ....	42
4.2	GREEN MANURE GROWTH AND NUTRIENT ACCUMULATION .....	42
4.2.1	<i>Green manure establishment</i> .....	42
4.2.2	<i>Green manure dry matter between plot variation</i> .....	43
4.2.3	<i>Green manure dry matter accumulation</i> .....	45
4.2.4	<i>Green manure nitrogen and phosphorus levels and C:N ratios</i> .....	48
4.3	EFFECT OF GREEN MANURES ON PLANT AVAILABLE SOIL NITROGEN.....	50
4.3.1	<i>Effect of growing green manures on soil mineral N in early spring</i> .....	50
4.3.2	<i>Effect of incorporating green manure crop residues on soil mineral N levels over time</i> .....	54
4.3.3	<i>Relationship between green manure N concentrations and soil total mineral N at sweet corn emergence</i> .....	59
4.3.4	<i>Effect of green manure treatments on soil N net mineralisation</i> .....	61
4.4	NET MINERALISABLE SOIL N AS A PREDICTOR OF SWEET CORN RESPONSE.....	64
4.5	SWEET CORN RESPONSE TO GREEN MANURE TREATMENTS .....	65

---

4.5.1	<i>Sweet corn N accumulation</i> .....	66
4.5.2	<i>Sweet corn P accumulation</i> .....	70
4.5.3	<i>Sweet corn dry matter accumulation</i> .....	70
4.5.4	<i>Sweet corn harvestable ear yield</i> .....	74
4.6	CROPPING SYSTEM ANNUAL N BALANCE.....	78
<b>Chapter 5 ~ Conclusion</b> .....		<b>81</b>
<b>References</b> .....		<b>83</b>
<b>Appendices</b> .....		<b>96</b>

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## List of Tables

<b>Table 2.1</b>	Above-ground N accumulation in high yielding sweet corn crops.....	24
<b>Table 3.1</b>	Green manure and control treatments.....	30
<b>Table 3.2</b>	Trial site description.....	32
<b>Table 3.3</b>	Summary of soil sampling detail.....	35
<b>Table 4.1</b>	Summary of soil test results (soil depth 0-15 cm).....	42
<b>Table 4.2</b>	Green manure nitrogen and phosphorus levels and C:N ratios.....	48
<b>Table 4.3</b>	Balance of soil (0-15 cm) total mineral N as influenced by green manure treatments after subtracting control treatment effect (30 November 1997).....	56
<b>Table 4.4</b>	‘Paid’ weight of Bio-Grow NZ certified sweet corn processed by Heinz-Wattie Ltd, Gisborne.....	76
<b>Table 4.5</b>	Estimates of N fixation using the ‘Difference’ method (LaRue and Patterson, 1981).....	78
<b>Table 4.6</b>	Annual N balance in green manure-sweet corn cropping systems at both trial sites.....	79

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 2.1</b>	The relationship between %N and C:N ratio of crop residues.....	8
<b>Figure 3.1</b>	Trial design layout.....	31
<b>Figure 3.2</b>	Locations of the two field trial sites (Site-A, Site-B) used in this study.....	33
<b>Figure 3.3</b>	A schematic diagram showing soil dates (# 1, 5-9) and herbage sampling dates (# 2-5, 7-10) in relation to crop DM accumulation.....	34
<b>Figure 4.1</b>	Green manure dry matter accumulation from sowing (25 March 1997) until just prior to soil incorporation (6 September 1997) at Site-A.....	46
<b>Figure 4.2</b>	Green manure dry matter accumulation from sowing (26 March 1997) until just prior to soil incorporation (17 September 1997) at Site-B.....	46
<b>Figure 4.3</b>	Effect of growing winter green manure crops on soil mineral N levels just prior to residue incorporation (6 September 1997) at Site-A.....	52
<b>Figure 4.4</b>	Effect of growing winter green manure crops on soil mineral N levels just prior to residue incorporation (17 September 1997) at Site-B.....	53
<b>Figure 4.5</b>	Effect of soil incorporation of green manure treatments on soil (0-150 mm) mineral nitrogen at Site-A.....	55
<b>Figure 4.6</b>	Effect of soil incorporation of green manure treatments on soil (0-150 mm) mineral nitrogen at Site-B.....	55

- 
- Figure 4.7** Relationship between green manure N concentrations just prior to soil incorporation (6 September 1997) and the subsequent soil (0-15 cm) total mineral N levels at sweet corn emergence (30 November 1997) at Site-A..... 60
- Figure 4.8** Relationship between green manure N concentrations just prior to soil incorporation (17 September 1997) and the subsequent soil (0-15 cm) total mineral N levels at sweet corn emergence (30 November 1997) at Site-B..... 60
- Figure 4.9** Effect of green manure treatments on ‘actual’ net mineralisable soil N and two indicators of net mineralisable N <sup>\*\*</sup>(aerobic and anaerobic soil incubation tests) at Site-A..... 62
- Figure 4.10** Effect of green manure treatments on actual net mineralisable soil N and two indicators of net mineralisable N <sup>\*\*</sup>(aerobic and anaerobic soil incubation tests) at Site-B..... 62
- Figure 4.11** Effect of green manure treatments on sweet corn N accumulation at Site-A..... 67
- Figure 4.12** Effect of green manure treatments on sweet corn N accumulation at Site-B..... 67
- Figure 4.13** Relationship between soil (0-150 mm) total mineral N measured at sweet corn emergence, and sweet corn N accumulation at harvest (Site-A)..... 69
- Figure 4.14** Relationship between soil (0-150 mm) total mineral N measured at sweet corn emergence, and sweet corn N accumulation at harvest (Site-B)..... 69

---

<b>Figure 4.15</b>	Effect of green manure treatments on sweet corn DM accumulation at Site-A.....	71
<b>Figure 4.16</b>	Effect of green manure treatments on sweet corn DM accumulation at Site-B.....	71
<b>Figure 4.17</b>	Effect of green manure treatments on sweet corn ‘harvestable’ ear yield at final harvest (19-20 February 1998) at Site-A and Site-B.....	74
<b>Figure 4.18</b>	Relationship between soil (0-150 mm) total mineral N measured at sweet corn emergence, and sweet corn ‘harvestable’ ear yield at harvest (Site-A).....	75
<b>Figure 4.19</b>	Relationship between soil (0-150 mm) total mineral N measured at sweet corn emergence, and sweet corn ‘harvestable’ ear yield at harvest (Site-B).....	75
<b>Figure 4.20</b>	Monthly rainfall, monthly estimated evapotranspiration and estimated soil water balance (800 mm soil rooting depth; silt loam soil) for Gisborne.....	77