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Role of Biochar in Enhancing Soil Fertility and Crop Yield

[1]Anil Kumar, [2] Shikha Ojha

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Soil Science, Sardarkrushinagar Dantiwada Agricultural University Gujarat

[2]Research Scholar, Department of Agronomy, Navsari Agricultural University, Navsari

Abstract

Biochar is a carbon-dominant material obtained via pyrolysis of organic biomass, in restricted-oxygen environments, that has been discerned as a potential soil amendment with several agronomic and environmental advantages. Against the background of the growth of soil degradation, deterioration of crop productivity, and critical necessity in sustainable agriculture, the use of biochar appears to be one of the possible ways to improve the fertility of the land and make crops more useful. Biochar has special physicochemical characteristics, such as a large surface area, porosity, cation exchange capacity (CEC), and they benefit the soil organization, water storage, and nutrient retention capacity. Using it on the soil may cause nutrients (nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) availability to increase, help nutrient leaching, and improve pH controls especially in the acidic soils. In addition, biochar favors the growth of beneficial soil Microorganisms thus increasing the biological activity of the soil including the cycling of nutrients. The beneficial effects of biochar on crop productivity in different agro-ecological regions and farming policies have been proved in several studies. It has been demonstrated that biochar increase plant productivity in cereals, legumes, and horticultural crops, especially when applied in combination with organic manures and inorganic fertilizers. However, the response yield depends on a number of factors, such as biochar feedstock, the temperature of production, the level of application and soil. In addition to agronomic benefits, biochar has been reported to help in climate change mitigation by locking up some of the carbon

in stable forms over a longer period. It also offers a viable channel to recycle agricultural and forestry wastes, thereby limiting environmental pollution and increased sustainability at the farm level. Notwithstanding these advantages, there exists some challenge on the standardization of quality of biochar, cost-effectiveness and adoption at the field level, especially among smallholder farmers. This paper discusses the processes that make biochar improve soil fertility and crop output and it examines how all this can be done practically, it identifies gaps and the manner in which biochar integration in agriculture will still need further research.

Introduction

The soil fertility is an issue of significant importance of sustainable agriculture, because it directly affects crop yield, food safety, and environmental wellbeing. But due to rise in the process of land degradation and intensive use of chemical fertilizers and unsustainable cultivation methods, the agricultural production in several regions of the globe has declined due to poor and deteriorating quality of soil. There is much a pressing agency of environmentally sound, economically viable and sustainable soil management. Biochar has come under this spotlight as a possible soil amendment that can enrich and revive the fertility of soils and increase crop yields besides benefits like sequestering of carbon and minimizing wastes. Biochar is a low-temperature carbon rich char created by thermal breakdown of organic material (crop residues, wood chips and animal manure) under a low-oxygen condition a process called pyrolysis. Its specific characteristics such as great porosity, surface area along with cation exchange capacity (CEC) make it very proficient in enhancing the condition of the soil, holding of nutrients, water-holding capacity, and growth of microbes. All these attributes have the common impact of increasing the soil fertility especially in barren or poor soils.

During the last few years, more research has been devoted to the agronomic advantages of biochar in various soil types and cropping arrangements. Research has indicated that application of biochar has led to increase in the availability of essential nutrients, soil acidity reduction, and enhancement of plant growth and product yield. Also, biochar, when combined with organic manures or synthetic fertilisers, can give an enhanced nutrient use efficiency and a sustainable soil health. In addition, biochar is known to have environmental co-benefits where it reduces the amount of green house gases emitted by the soils as well as it helps in the recycling of wastes of organic matter. In spite of the potential, issues like variability in biochar quality, cost of production and absence of region specific guidelines to its application still serve as a some set-backs towards its large scale application.

What is Biochar?

Biochar A carbonaceous material, rich in porosity, processed by pyrolyzing organic biomass under restricted or null Oxygen conditions. Biochar is not to be confused with ash or charcoal, which is directly applied to the soil as a source of fuel, but biochar is purposely produced to either increase the fertility of the soil or increase soil health and also sequester more carbon. The very idea of biochar is not recent; the piquant variety of soil management the excessively carbonated remains added to the ground to change the soil to make it more productive has been central to the land management methods of native people used in the Amazon Basin their land since millennia known as Terra Preta (dark earth).

Feedstock materials for biochar production vary widely and range all the way to agricultural residues (e.g., crop stalks, husks and straw), forestry wastes (e.g., wood chips and bark), livestock manure, and even municipal organic waste. Feedstock selection, pyrolysis temperature and time tend to greatly affect the chemical and physical properties of the obtained biochar.

Biochar normally has the following important properties:

• Good porous structure with large surface area that improve soil aeration and microbial habitat.

• Cation Exchange Capacity (CEC), which enables it to store and avail to plants the indispensable nutrients through roots.

• Stable concentration of carbon is present and thus it is very resistant to decomposition and can be used in the long-term in carbon sequestration.

• Optimum alkaline PH: this can be used to neutralize soil that is acidic.

• Bulk density is low hence easy to handle and transport.

The chemical properties of biochar normally contain a high percentage of carbon, low percentages of nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, and magnesium-these elements depend on feedstock. It is more of a soil conditioner than a direct supply of nutrients, enhancing the soil capacity to hold water and nutrients and the better growth of roots and the actions of microbes. It is critical to draw a difference between biochar and other kinds of soil amendments such as compost or manure. Compost is a great source of nutrients and organic matter, but biochar has a stronger effect on physical structure and chemical stability. Biochar can also increase crop nutrient supply durability and efficacy coupled with the use of organic amendments. Biochar being a multi-purpose material can be utilized to enhance soil fertility as well as potential applications in waste management, mitigation of climate change and sustainable agriculture. It is essential to get to know its features so as to maximize its application on various types of soil and systems of farming.

Deliberations on Biochar Action in the Soil

Biochar alters the health and fertility of soil by a multiplicity of physical, chemical and biological processes. The mechanisms help in improving the soil structure, the availability of nutrients, improved microbial life and greater production of crops. The strength of biochar is relative to its characters, application rate and the prevailing conditions of the soil into which biochar is applied.

1. Soil Physical Properties Enhancement

It is very porous and the bulk density is quintessentially low, making biochar useful in improving soil aeration, water holding capacity as well as improving infiltration capacity. This is especially useful in sandy soils where there is tendency of water and nutrient leaching. Biochar has the potential in clayey soils to alleviate compaction and enhance aggregate stability and enable more effective plant roots to penetrate.

2. Chemical Properties optimization

Among the greatest advantages of biochar is that it has the capacity to add soil cation exchange capacity (CEC), which makes soils hold on to crucial nutrients, including potassium (K), calcium (Ca), magnesium (Mg), and ammonium (NH_4^+). The biochar also contributes in pH adjustment of the soil particularly in acid soils, as it lowers its pH by serving as a liming agent since its alkaline. This pH condition enhances solubility and availability of nutrients to plants.

3. Feed retention and slow release

The surface of biochar possesses many functional groups that lead to the adsorption of nutrients and their slow release that leads to the minimization of nutrient leaching and the enhancing of the efficiency of nutrient utilization. It is also able to adsorb toxins and heavy metals and harmful organic substances, therefore, limiting their availability as food to the plants and the microorganisms.

4. Activation of Microbials

Specifically, the porous structure of the biochar furnishes the microhabitats to useful soil microorganisms such as nitrogen-fixing bacteria, mycorrhizal fungi, and decomposers. Having the ability to serve as a microbial carrier, biochar can contribute to microbial diversity and activity which is a key to the soil nutrient cycling and organic matter decomposition.

5. Reaction to Organic matter and Fertilizers

The biochar can also increase the efficiency of the co-application of biochar with compost, chemical fertilizers to prevent the loss of nutrients and increase microbial synergy. This interaction has been good in the development of long-term soil fertility and better crop performance.

Biochar and Enhancement of Soil Fertility

The importance of biochar in soil fertility is that biochar improves soil fertility by increasing the exponentially of the soil and makes the required elements to be more available to the plants and the soil condition favorable to the life of the plants. Biochar differs with the traditional fertilizer in that it enhances long term fertility of soil due to its tenacious structural and chemical nature as opposed to temporary nutrient boost of traditional fertilizers.

1. Retention and availabilities of nutrients

High cation exchange capacity (CEC) is one of the major properties that make biochar fertilize the soil. The porous structure and functional groups on the biochar surfaces enable it to take in and hold nutrients and particularly positively charged nutrients, such as potassium (K 2+), calcium (Ca 2+), magnesium (Mg 2+) and ammonium (NH 4 2+). This minimizes leaching of nutrients and makes nutrients last longer supplying plants uninterrupted. Biochar has the potential to also affect phosphorus (P) availability by pH and binding to aluminum and iron in acid soils thereby making phosphorus unavailable forms available.

2. Soil Amendments and pH Control

Biochar usually contains liming effects in acidic soils, increasing pH to more tenable levels so that most crops can be planted. The first is that neutral pH increases the solubility of nutrients as well as the activities of microbes and enhancing roots growth. This especially helps in the tropical and the sub nourished areas where acid soil is common.

3. Microbial stimulation and Organic Matter

Composting or use of manure combined with biochar gain frequency in increase of soil organic carbon. It forms a steady form of carbon that is not easily broken down by microbes, thus adding up organic matter over a long term. Also, the biochar improves the microbial habitat, favoring favorable soil microbes in nutrient cycling, nitrogen fixing, and biodecomposition.

4. Soil-Water relations: Better ones.

Fertility is a vital element with soil water-holding capacity as a constituent. In sandy soils, biochar increases the moisture holding capacity that allows the soil to retain good ground conditions during the dry spell that favors the absorption of nutrients and growth.

5. Fertilizers Interaction Synergy

Biochar helps in increasing nutrients use efficiency, when it is applied together with organic or inorganic fertilizer. Biochar may be used as a carrier and minimize losses of fertilizers to leaching or volatilization and extend the availability of nutrients during the crop growth period.

Crop Yield and Biochar

It has been demonstrated that biochar may greatly enhance crop yield in diverse agro-ecological regions and cropping pattern. Its capacity to increase fertility and moisture content of the soil as well as efficient utilization of nutrients positively influences growth of the plant, yield, and production resilience. The extent to which yield may be increased is however subject to a variety of conditions such as soil type, the nature of the biochar, crop species, climate conditions and method of application.

1. Increased Availability and Uptake Of Nutrients

Biochar will enhance nutrient-retention behaviour of soils thereby providing more steady availability of vital nutrients like nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P), potassium (K), calcium (Ca) and magnesium (Mg). This translates to the increased nutrient assimilation by crops resulting in healthier vegetative growth, flowering and fruiting. Biochar can also mitigate nitrogen losses in nitrogen-deficient soils by causing a higher nitrogen use efficiency due to diminished nitrogen losses in nitrogen-deficient soils through either leaching or volatilization.

2. Better Soil Texture and Root system development.

The biochar surface is porous that helps in aerating and soil clump formation, contributing to deeper and healthier roots. With better root growth, the plants have better access of water and nutrients especially when it is critical, which enhances overall performance/yield of the plants.

3. Drought resistant and Water Retention

Biochar has been shown to buffer water in water-limited regions and improve water holding capacity in soil and limit water stress experienced by crops. This is particularly crucial in dry and sub dry lands where a small increase in soil moisture translates into the quantifiable increase in yield.

4. Crop Related Yield Responses

Getting increased yields of various crops has also been seen over some cereals (e.g., rice, wheat, maize), leguminous crops (e.g., soybean, chickpea), vegetables (e.g., tomato, brinjal, okra) and fruits. As such, a 20 30 increase in yield has been recorded by applying biochar to rice fields coupled with the use of organic or inorganic fertilizers. The same effect has been found with maize and wheat when in nutrient-starved conditions.

5. Fertilizer and Organic Amendment Synergetic Effect

Biochar when used with compost, manure or chemical fertilizers improves the nutrient efficiency and stimulates microbial activity, and in general, biochar results in an increased yield compared to any input alone.

Biochar Benefits Environmental and Economically

Biochar provides a rare opportunity of a win-win solution that offers a winning combination of environmental sustainability on one hand and economic benefits on the other hand hence its attraction as an attractive soil amendment to enhance a climate resilient cost effective agriculture. Its use combats various issues surrounding the management of wastes, greenhouse emissions, soil erosion and profitability of the farms.

1. Mitigation of Climate Change

Probably the most important environmental impact of biochar is carbon sequestration. When compared to organic matter that decays and liberates CO_2, biochar has stable carbon which lasts in the soil between hundreds to thousands of years. The process avoids greenhouse gases such as CO_2, CH_4 (methane) and N_2O (nitrous oxide) emission unleashed when biomass waste rots or catches fire by turning it into biochar instead. Consequently, biochar helps mitigate the carbon emissions of agricultural systems, as well as align with the objectives of climate control globally.

2. Waste Recylce and pollution Minimization

Agricultural residues, forestry and municipal wastes that would otherwise be used to cause environmental pollution would offer a sustainable approach to the production of biochar. Turning organic wastes like crop stalks, husks, wood chips, or animal manure into biochar assists in disposing of the organic waste to produce a high-value by-product. Additionally, the use of biochar has been observed to trap heavy metals and toxins and this diminishes contamination of the soils and water in polluted areas.

3. Erosion and Soil Remediation

Soil erosion can be defined as the process through which soil and rocks are moved and transferred. Soil and rocks can be moved by force of wind and water. Erosion can be regulated or slowed down by preventing the water and wind motion. This could be done by means of plants and vegetation as they stabilize the soil in order to prevent erosion. Erosion can also be controlled by means of soil remediation.

Biochar enhances soil structure and growth of vegetation thus it is used in controlling erosion and the degraded lands. It has adsorption capacity; which enables it to adsorb the contaminants and therefore, it is used in rehabilitating the polluted soils or overused soils.

4. Pros to farmers economically

The cost of initial production or buying might be high but inform the long term economic benefits of increased soil fertility, decreased reliance on synthetic fertilizers, higher yields of crops and better soil health. Where biochar is made locally out of the locally available biomass, it could become a cheap and non-depleting soil input. Its advantages are of special interest to smallholder farmers who are aimed at lowering the expense of inputs and using the marginal land to attain growth.

5. Work and Business Opportunity

Manufacture and use of biochar can create jobs within the countryside with small-scale enterprise, skills-training and developed products. It puts forward the way to decentralized community-based sustainable energy and sustainable food systems.

Conclusion

Biochar has proved to be an excellent multi and sustainable soil amendment that may have a great potential to enhance soil fertility and crop production as well as form a great contribution to the environment conservation. Due to its distinct physical and chemical characteristics (high porosity and surface area, stable carbon structure), it is useful in the enhancement of soil water retention, nutrient availability, microbial activity, as well as soil health. Biochar can have a critical role in reviving degraded soils since several constraints can be tackled on a single farm. This could particularly apply in areas where lands are low in fertility, acidic, or are experiencing moisture levels below optimum levels. Various research in various agro-climatic regions has shown that it is possible to achieve more crop productivity through the use of biochar especially when combined with organic or inorganic fertilisers. Positive interaction of biochar and other soil amendments not only increases the nutrient use efficiency, but also promotes long-term alternations of soil organic carbon, soil structure, and soil biology. Biochar has significant environmental benefits besides its usefulness in agriculture. This teaches it how to sequester the carbon into stable forms and is thus a potent weapon in reversing the cause of climatic change. Additionally, it is offering an environmentally friendly way to deal with agricultural and forestry wastes, cut down the release of greenhouse gases, and clean up polluted soils. Economically, biochar has the potential of cutting the cost of fertilizing the land and stabilizing the yields in the long run making it economically profitable to farmers especially those who work in areas where resources are scarce or even weather susceptible. Along with the list of benefits, there are the problems of inconsistency in biochar quality, ignorance of the farmers, production expenses in the early times, and a lack of guiding principles in the application process that need to be rectified. Future work ought to concentrate on location-specific formulas, protracted discipline trials, and manufacturing technologies that could up-scale biochar to be more efficient and available to distinct farming systems.

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