Effects of Fertilizer Placement on Trace Gas Emissions from Nursery Container Production

S. Christopher Marble
Auburn University, Department of Horticulture, 101 Funchess Hall, Auburn, AL 36849

Stephen A. Prior, G. Brett Runion, and H. Allen Torbert
USDA-ARS National Soil Dynamics Laboratory, 411 S. Donahue Drive, Auburn, AL 36832

Charles H. Gilliam, Glenn B. Fain, and Jeff L. Sibley
Auburn University, Department of Horticulture, 101 Funchess Hall, Auburn, AL 36849

Patricia R. Knight
Mississippi State Coastal Research and Extension Center, 1815 Popp’s Ferry Road, Biloxi, MS 39532

Additional index words. carbon dioxide, climate change, greenhouse gases, horticulture, methane, nitrous oxide

Abstract. Increased trace gas emissions of carbon dioxide (CO2), methane (CH4), and nitrous oxide (N2O) are widely believed to be a primary cause of global warming. Agriculture is a large contributor to these emissions; however, its role in climate change is unique in that it can act as a source of trace gas emissions or it can act as a major sink. Furthermore, agriculture can significantly reduce emissions through changes in production management practices. Much of the research on agriculture’s role in mitigation of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions has been conducted in row crops and pastures as well as forestry and animal production systems with little focus on contributions from specialty crop industries such as horticulture. Our objective was to determine efflux patterns of CO2, CH4, and N2O associated with three different fertilization methods (dibble, incorporated, and topdressed) commonly used in nursery container production. Weekly measurements indicated that CO2 fluxes were slightly lower when fertilizer was dilled compared with the other two methods. Nitrous oxide fluxes were consistently highest when fertilizer was incorporated. Methane flux was generally low with few differences among treatments. Results from this study begin to provide data that can be used to implement mitigation strategies in container plant production, which will help growers adapt to possible emission regulations and benefit from future GHG mitigation or offset programs.

Over the past several decades global warming has received increased attention from the scientific community including possible impacts of increased temperature on the global environment. Anthropogenically enhanced climate change is still highly debatable; however, emissions of the three most important long-lived GHGs (CO2, CH4, and N2O) are known to have substantially increased in the past 25 years (Dlugokencky et al., 2005; Keeling and Whorf, 2005; Prinn et al., 2000). Experts in almost every industry are searching for ways to reduce GHG emissions and lessen their respective carbon (C) footprint.

One area of particular interest in GHG mitigation research is agricultural production. Agriculture occupies 37% of the earth’s land surface producing ≈20% of total GHG emissions (Cole et al., 1997; Smith et al., 2008). High levels of CO2 are emitted from agricultural production primarily through land use changes (deforestation), fossil fuel use, biomass burning, and soil disturbance accounting for 33% of total C emissions between 1850 and 1998, exceeding all other anthropogenic activities besides energy production (Houghton, 2003; IPCC, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007; Watson et al., 2000). Agricultural production is the largest contributor of anthropogenic CH4 and N2O emissions accounting for 52% and 84%, respectively, of annual anthropogenic global emissions (Smith et al., 2008). The major sources of CH4 production from agriculture include enteric fermentation in ruminant animals, flooded rice fields, biomass burning, and manure management and storage (Cole et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 1993; USDA, 2008). Nitrous oxide emissions are a direct result of increased use of synthetic fertilizers and production of legumes, resulting in 80% of the total N2O emissions in the United States (Mosier et al., 2003).

Agriculture production is unique compared with other industries in that it can act as a GHG source but can also act as a sink for GHG through changes in production management. Increased C storage through conservation or “no-till” has been shown to maintain or increase soil C levels and reduce fossil fuel use (Paustian et al., 1997; Reicosky et al., 1999; Smith et al., 1998). Methane emissions have been shown to be greatly reduced by adding feed supplementation to the diets of ruminant animals and by proper manure handling (Cole et al., 1997; Leng, 1991; Lin et al., 1994; Safley et al., 1992). Nitrous oxide emissions can be reduced by improving nitrogen (N) use efficiency (Kroezoe et al., 1999; Kroezoe and Mosier, 2000). Proper N fertilization timing (Weier et al., 1993) and placement (Oenema et al., 2001; Youngdahl et al., 1986) have also been shown to successfully reduce total N loss.

Several best management practices have been developed for reducing emissions of CO2 (Paustian et al., 2000), CH4 (Mosier et al., 1998), and N2O (Snyder et al., 2007) from agricultural production. Other programs such as Greenhouse Gas Reduction through Agricultural Carbon Enhancement network (GRACEnet) have also been initiated by the USDA-ARS to focus on reducing GHG emissions by altering current agricultural production practices. Past research has focused predominantly on agronomic, forestry, and animal production systems with little attention given to specialty industries such as horticulture. The green industry (nursery, greenhouse, and sod production) is one of the fastest growing sectors in agriculture (Hall et al., 2005); however, almost no research has focused on the impacts of this industry on GHG emissions.

Providing best management options for reducing GHG would not only reduce the environmental impact of the industry, but could benefit growers financially. There are now government and industry programs that provide tax incentives and payments to encourage farmers to reduce emissions and provide C offsets by altering current production practices (Chicago Climate Exchange, 2009; Environmental Protection Agency, 2009; National Farmers Union, 2009; Schmidt, 2009). There is also speculation that agricultural GHG emissions could be “capped” or taxed in the future (Adams, 2009; Blanford and Josling, 2009; Moore and Bruggen, 2011).
There is a need to develop mitigation strategies for nursery production practices to help growers adapt to possible future legislation and benefit from C trading or offset programs.

One method of GHG mitigation that has been previously investigated is fertilizer placement in agricultural soils [Breitenbeck and Bremner, 1986; Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST), 2004; Engel et al., 2009; Hosen et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2006; Millar et al., 2010; Mosier et al., 1996; Prasertsak et al., 2002; Stefanson, 1976]. The placement of fertilizers into the soil and near the zone of active root uptake may reduce N loss from leaching and increase plant N use efficiency, which would reduce the amount of N that could be lost through N₂O emissions (CAST, 2004). Concentrated N placement of urea fertilizer in agricultural soils using a band or nest placement has been shown to increase N₂O production when compared with a broadcasted application, attributable in part to higher soil N accumulations (Engel et al., 2009). Breitenbeck and Bremner (1986) reported that after injection of anhydrous ammonia fertilizer, N₂O production increased with injection depth, whereas in contrast, Hosen et al. (2000) and Stefanson (1976) reported that emission rate of N₂O did not change with depth of fertilizer application.

Although less studied, fertilizer placement could also affect CO₂ and CH₄ emissions by impacting plant growth. In agricultural soils, CO₂ is primarily produced from oxidation of soil organic materials by heterotrophic microorganisms and the respiration of plant roots, whereas CH₄ is produced under anaerobic conditions by microbial decomposition of organic materials (Yamulki and Jarvis, 2002). Fertilizer placement has been shown to affect shoot and root growth of container-grown nursery crops (Altland et al., 2004), which could indirectly impact net GHG emissions because increased crop growth will sequester more C in growing biomass. In a study by Liu et al. (2006), deep N placement (10 to 15 cm) resulted in lower N₂O emissions compared with shallow N placement (0 to 5 cm), although CO₂ and CH₄ emissions were unaffected by N placement depth.

Due to a lack of a general conclusion regarding the affect of N placement on GHG emissions, Mosier et al. (1996) concluded that the diverse combinations of physical and biological factors, which control gas fluxes, are likely the cause of the conflicting results seen in previously published literature. Smith et al. (1997) also concluded that emission rates from different placements will likely vary from one system to another because of complex interactions of soil, crop, and environmental factors that must be taken into account. The same could be said for fertilizer type or formulation, which has also yielded conflicting results depending on the production system being evaluated (Snyder et al., 2009). Although fertilization placement has been shown to affect emission rates, individual production systems will likely have varying results and different mitigation strategies may need to be developed for different production systems. Previous work has focused on agronomic crops; however, it is important to also understand how fertilizer placement will affect emissions in specialty crop industries such as horticulture. Therefore, the objective of this study was to determine the effects of fertilizer placement on CO₂, CH₄, and N₂O emissions from container production of a woody nursery crop.

**Materials and Methods**

This experiment was initiated at the Paterson Greenhouse Complex, Auburn University, AL. On 17 May 2011, *Azalea x hybrida* ‘Gumpo White’ (white gumpo azaleas) that were 15 cm in height with a 10-cm canopy width were transplanted from 72 cell-pack liners (2.5 cm) into 3.8-L containers; enough transplants were obtained to ensure there were no differences in plant size among treatments at study initiation. Containers were filled with a pine bark:sand (6:1 v:v) media, which had been previously amended with 3.0 kg·m⁻³ of ground dolomitic limestone and 0.9 kg·m⁻³ of Micromax® micronutrient (The Scotts Company, LLC; Marysville, OH). Polyon® (Harrell’s LLC, Lakeland, FL) 17N–2.2P–4.2K (17-5-11) controlled-release fertilizer (10 to 12 month) was applied at a potting at a rate of 25 g per container using the three different methods described by Altland et al.
polyvinyl chloride (PVC) cylinders (25.4 cm i.d. × 38.4 cm tall) was sealed at the bottom. During gas measurements, the entire plant-pot system was placed inside the base cylinder and a vented flux chamber (25.4 cm diameter × 11.4 cm height) was placed on top of the base cylinder. Top flux chambers were constructed with PVC, covered with reflective tape, and contained a center sampling port. Gas samples were taken at 0-, 15-, 30-, and 45-min intervals after chamber closure. At each time interval, gas samples (10 mL) were collected with polypropylene syringes and injected into evacuated glass vials (6 mL) fitted with butyl rubber stoppers as described by Parkin and Kaspar (2006). Corresponding air temperature data were collected for each sampling period using Hobo Portable Temperature Data Loggers (Model H08-032-08 with Solar Shield; Onset Computer Corp., Bourne, MA). Although container media moisture levels were not measured during this study, gas samples were collected in the morning before any irrigation event (with the exception of uncontrollable weather events) allowing container moisture levels to equilibrate before sampling.

Gas samples were analyzed using a gas chromatograph (Shimadzu GC-2014, Columbia, MD) equipped with three detectors: thermal conductivity detector for CO2, electrical conductivity detector for N2O, and flame ionization detector for CH4. Gas concentrations were determined by comparison with standard curves developed using gas standards obtained from Air Liquide America Specialty Gases LLC (Plumsteadville, PA). Gas fluxes were calculated from the rate of change in concentration of trace gas (CO2, N2O, or CH4) in the chamber headspace during the time intervals, whereas chambers were closed (0, 15, 30, and 45 min) as described by Parkin and Venterea (2010). Calculations in this study were used to express data as milligrams CO2-C, micrograms CH4-C, and micrograms N2O-N trace gas per day. Estimates of cumulative efflux were calculated from gas efflux at each sampling date integrated over time using a basic numerical integration technique (i.e., trapezoidal rule; Yeh, 1991).

On study completion, all plants were measured and destructively harvested as described previously for determination of C accumulation in plant biomass. Trace gas data were analyzed on each individual sampling date (data not shown), across all dates, and cumulatively. All trace gas and growth data were analyzed using the Proc Mixed procedure in SAS (SAS® Institute Version 9.1, Cary, NC).

---

**Table 2. Cumulative trace gas (CO2, CH4, and N2O) efflux from container media during container-grown plant production using three different fertilization placements.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fertilizer Placement</th>
<th>CO2-C (mg)</th>
<th>CH4 (μg)</th>
<th>N2O-N (μg)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dibble</td>
<td>370.85 b</td>
<td>25.62 a</td>
<td>629.25 b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporated</td>
<td>384.67 b</td>
<td>15.94 a</td>
<td>2434.83 a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topdressed</td>
<td>501.19 a</td>
<td>84.28 a</td>
<td>789.74 b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-fertilized</td>
<td>266.49 c</td>
<td>36.52 a</td>
<td>14.45 c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Means were separated using Fisher’s least significant difference test in the Proc Mixed procedure (P = 0.05). CO2 = carbon dioxide; CH4 = methane; N2O = nitrous oxide.

---

**Fig. 2. CO2-C efflux (mg d–1) from container media with three different fertilizer placements for 6 months (17 May to 17 Nov. 2011). The inset shows average daily efflux (means followed by the same letter are not significantly different from each other, P ≤ 0.05).**
Means were separated using Fisher’s least significance difference test in the Proc Mixed procedure. In all cases, differences were considered significant at \( P \leq 0.05 \).

**Results**

Average daily trace gas emissions from containers with plants indicated that CO\(_2\)-C efflux was lower in the dibble treatment (160.16 mg CO\(_2\)-C) when compared with incorporated or topdressed treatments (193.59 and 192.58 mg CO\(_2\)-C, respectively); all fertilized treatments had higher values than the non-fertilized containers (Fig. 1). The incorporated treatment had higher CO\(_2\)-C efflux than any other treatment on 10 of the 29 sampling dates, whereas the topdressed treatment was highest on six dates (data not shown). Efflux from the dibble treatment was lower than incorporated or topdressed on nine dates and had similar values to the non-fertilized treatment on four dates (data not shown); this pattern was also observed for cumulative CO\(_2\)-C losses (Table 1). Average daily efflux from media-only containers showed dibble and incorporated treatments had lower CO\(_2\)-C efflux (86.73 and 87.84 mg CO\(_2\)-C, respectively) than the topdressed treatment (118.96 mg CO\(_2\)-C) (Fig. 2); this pattern was also seen for cumulative efflux (Table 2).

Average N\(_2\)O efflux (with plants) was highest in the incorporated treatment (489.02 \( \mu \)g N\(_2\)O-N) with no differences observed between dibble and topdressed treatments (156.82 and 148.96 \( \mu \)g N\(_2\)O-N, respectively; Fig. 3); all placement treatments had significantly higher N\(_2\)O-N efflux than the non-fertilized containers. Cumulative N\(_2\)O efflux also illustrated that more N\(_2\)O-N was lost from the incorporated treatment (Table 1). On 15 of the 29 dates, the incorporated treatment had a higher N\(_2\)O-N efflux than any other treatment (data not shown). Efflux from the media-only containers followed similar trends (Fig. 4; Table 2) except that a much higher efflux was observed when no plants were present.

Methane efflux patterns were inconsistent (both with and without plants) but remained relatively low in all treatments for most of the study with no differences observed in daily averages among treatments (Figs. 5 and 6). Cumulative CH\(_4\) efflux (with plants) showed the lowest value in the dibble treatment and the highest value in the non-fertilized treatment with other treatments showing no significant difference (Fig. 2). No differences were observed in cumulative CH\(_4\) efflux among media-only containers (Table 2). On many sampling dates, it is likely CH\(_4\) efflux values were close to or below the detection limits of the gas chromatograph.

Gumpo azalea root and shoot dry weights did not differ among fertilizer placements at
Fig. 5. CH₄ efflux (µg·d⁻¹) from container media with three different fertilizer placements for 6 months (17 May to 17 Nov. 2011). The inset shows average daily efflux (means followed by the same letter are not significantly different from each other, P ≤ 0.05).

Fig. 6. CH₄ efflux (µg·d⁻¹) for gumpo azaleas grown with three different fertilizer placements for 6 months (17 May to 17 Nov. 2011). The inset shows average daily efflux (means followed by the same letter are not significantly different from each other, P ≤ 0.05).

termination of the study; all were higher than the non-fertilized treatment (Table 3). Shoot C followed this same pattern. However, root C was lowest in the topdressed treatment and highest in the non-fertilized treatment. Shoot N was higher in all treatments compared with the non-fertilized treatment and was higher in the incorporated treatment than the other placements; root N followed this same pattern.

Discussion

Lower CO₂-C efflux in the media-only non-fertilized treatment must be the result of lower heterotrophic respiration, likely attributable to N limitation in the microbial populations. Lower efflux in the non-fertilized treatment (with plants) was likely the result of a combination of lower heterotrophic respiration and lower autotrophic respiration resulting from smaller plant size. Higher CO₂-C efflux for the topdressed treatment (media only) compared with the other treatments may be the result of stimulation of the microbial populations near the media surface where the topdressed fertilizer was placed. Lower efflux for the dibble treatment (with plants) compared with the other placements may be the result of patterns of root growth impacting autotrophic respiration. Altland et al. (2004) has shown that dibble placement of fertilizer can slightly reduce root growth of container-grown crops.

Table 3. Biomass, carbon, and nitrogen content of white gumpo azalea shoots and roots after container production using three different fertilization placements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fertilizer Placement</th>
<th>shoots Dry wt (g)</th>
<th>shoots Carbon (%)</th>
<th>shoots Nitrogen (%)</th>
<th>roots Dry wt (g)</th>
<th>roots Carbon (%)</th>
<th>roots Nitrogen (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dibble</td>
<td>21.5 a</td>
<td>45.4 b</td>
<td>1.6 b</td>
<td>10.1 a</td>
<td>46.4 ab</td>
<td>0.9 b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporated</td>
<td>27.1 a</td>
<td>45.3 b</td>
<td>1.7 a</td>
<td>11.6 a</td>
<td>47.2 ab</td>
<td>1.2 a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topdressed</td>
<td>24.6 a</td>
<td>45.4 b</td>
<td>1.6 b</td>
<td>11.0 a</td>
<td>46.0 b</td>
<td>1.1 b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-fertilized</td>
<td>0.9 b</td>
<td>46.7 a</td>
<td>0.3 c</td>
<td>1.2 b</td>
<td>47.5 a</td>
<td>0.3 c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Azalea shoots show the carbon and nitrogen content of all aboveground plant material (leaves, stems, branches). Azalea roots show the carbon and nitrogen content of belowground plant material (roots only). The same fertilizer rate [25 g of product (Polyon® 17-5-11) per 3 L container] was used for all placement treatments with the exception of non-fertilized pots, which received no Polyon® fertilizer. Media in all treatments was amended with dolomitic limestone [3.0 kg·m⁻³ (5.0 lbs/yd³)] and Micromax® [0.9 kg·m⁻³ (1.5 lbs/yd³)]. Means were separated using Fisher’s least significant difference test in the Proc Mixed procedure (P ≤ 0.05).
Furthermore, growth index taken approximately halfway through the study (data not shown) indicated plants receiving dibble treatment were slightly smaller. Other studies using nursery crops have reported variable growth responses to fertilizer placement. Meadows and Fuller (1983) showed that dibble application of a controlled-release fertilizer resulted in better growth of four azalea cultivars and two holly cultivars than when fertilizers were incorporated. Meadows and Fuller (1984) showed different results in a later study in which surface application or topdressing resulted in better growth of three azalea cultivars than dibble application.

Results from this study indicate that dibbling fertilizer may reduce total trace gas emissions (CO₂, CH₄, and N₂O collectively) from container production systems. When plants were included (like in a nursery production setting), dibbling reduced CO₂ emissions compared with incorporation and topdressed treatments, whereas plant growth was statistically similar at the conclusion of the study. Dibbling and topdressing also significantly reduced N₂O emissions (68% and 70%, respectively) compared with the incorporated treatment. Although dibbling also resulted in lower CH₄ emissions than topdressed treatments, the fact that CH₄ efflux was low in all treatments indicates that CH₄ is not a trace gas of concern from container production systems regardless of the fertilization method used. Further work is needed to determine the impact of different production variables on trace gas emissions from container plant production. However, results from this study begin to provide evidence of mitigation strategies, which can be implemented in container plant production to help growers benefit from C offset programs, adapt to future legislation, and improve the environmental impact from container plant production without negatively affecting crop growth.

**Literature Cited**


