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Enhancing Spinach (*Spinacia oleracea* L.) Growth and Soil Health Using Biochar-Coated Potassium Fertilizer

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Abstract

This study was carried out in the wirehouse of the College of Agriculture, University of Sargodha, using potted plants to test how biochar-coated potassium fertilizer (BC-K) affects spinach (*Spinacia oleracea* L.) growth in cadmium (Cd)-contaminated soil. The goal was to improve soil health, reduce Cd availability, and increase spinach yield. The experiment followed a completely randomized design (CRD) with eight treatments and three replications, making a total of 24 pots. The treatments included a control (no fertilizer), recommended NPK, biochar alone, different doses of BC-K (1.5, 2.0, and 2.5 g per pot), and BC-K combined with micronutrients (Zn, Fe, B, Mn, Cu) and full fertilizer application. Results showed that BC-K improved soil fertility by increasing organic matter, making nutrients more available, and reducing Cd toxicity. Spinach plants treated with BC-K and full fertilizer had the best growth, with taller plants, more leaves, and higher fresh and dry weight. BC-K application also lowered Cd levels in spinach leaves, making it a safer food choice. This study suggests that biochar-coated potassium fertilizer is a



useful and eco-friendly way to grow spinach in polluted soils. It helps increase crop yield, improves soil quality, and enhances food safety, making it a good option for sustainable farming.

Keywords: Biochar-coated potassium fertilizer, spinach growth, cadmium contamination, soil health, sustainable agriculture.

Introduction

Spinach (*Spinacia oleracea L.*) is a popular leafy vegetable known for its high nutritional value, including essential vitamins and minerals (Zaib et al., 2023a; Bayar et al., 2024; Zeeshan et al 2024a). However, when grown in contaminated soil, spinach can absorb harmful heavy metals like cadmium (Cd) (Zaib et al., 2023b; Ge et al., 2024; Zeeshan et al., 2023a), which poses health risks. Cadmium contamination in agricultural soil is a serious global issue as it harms plant growth, reduces crop yield, and affects food safety (Alloway, 2013). To solve this problem, researchers have tested different soil treatments (Zaib et al., 2023c; Zubair et al., 2023a; Zeeshan et al 2023b), such as biochar and coated fertilizers, to improve plant growth and reduce heavy metal toxicity (Zhao et al., 2017; Zaib et al., 2023d; Zubair et al., 2023b; Zeeshan et al 2024b).

One promising method is using biochar-coated potassium fertilizer (BC-K), which can improve soil fertility (Zaib et al., 2023e; Abbas et al., 2023a; Zeeshan et al 2023c), increase nutrient availability (Zaib et al., 2023f; Abbas et al., 2023b; Zeeshan et al 2023d), and reduce Cd absorption by plants (Zaib et al., 2023g; Afzal et al., 2023a; Zeeshan et al 2023e). Biochar is a carbon-rich material made by heating organic matter without oxygen (Zaib et al., 2023h; Afzal et al., 2023b; Zeeshan et al 2024c). It is known for improving soil health and reducing heavy metal contamination (Lehmann & Joseph, 2015; Zaib et al., 2023i; Raza et al., 2023; Zeeshan et al 2023f). When biochar is used to coat potassium fertilizers (Zaib et al., 2023j; Aslam et al., 2024; Zeeshan et al 2024d), it helps release nutrients slowly (Zaib et al., 2023k; Iftikhar et al., 2023; Zeeshan et al 2023g), reducing nutrient loss and making them more available to plants (Zhang et al., 2020; Zaib et al., 2023l; Ali et al., 2023). Biochar also binds with heavy metals like Cd, preventing plants from absorbing them (Wang et al., 2018; Zaib et al., 2023m; Zeeshan et al 2024e).

This study examines how BC-K affects spinach growth and soil quality in Cd-contaminated soil. By measuring plant growth and soil properties, we aim to determine if BC-K is a sustainable solution for growing safer vegetables (Zaib et al., 2023n; Zaib, 2024a). Using biochar-coated potassium fertilizer could support sustainable agriculture by reducing environmental risks from heavy metal contamination (Zaib et al., 2023o; Zaib, 2024b). While past studies show that biochar improves plant resistance to heavy metals and boosts plant growth (Xu et al., 2016; Zaib et al., 2023p; Zaib and Adnan, 2024), little research has focused on how BC-K affects leafy vegetables like spinach (Zaib et al., 2023q; Zaib et al., 2024). This study fills that gap by investigating its impact on spinach growth, Cd uptake, and soil improvement (Zaib et al., 2023r; Zaib et al., 2023s). The results will help farmers and policymakers adopt eco-friendly fertilization methods for polluted farmlands.

Materials and Methods

Experimental Site and Design



This study was conducted in the wirehouse of the College of Agriculture, University of Sargodha, Pakistan. The experiment used a completely randomized design (CRD) with eight treatments and three replications, making a total of 24 pots. The treatments included:

- Control (no fertilizer)
- Recommended NPK fertilizer
- Biochar alone
- Biochar-coated potassium fertilizer (BC-K) at 1.5 g, 2.0 g, and 2.5 g per pot
- BC-K with added micronutrients (Zn, Fe, B, Mn, Cu) along with full fertilizer application

Soil Preparation and Pot Experiment

Soil was collected from agricultural fields and tested for properties such as pH, organic matter, nutrient levels, and cadmium (Cd) concentration. It was then air-dried, sieved, and thoroughly mixed before being placed in pots (5 kg soil per pot). The BC-K fertilizer was prepared by coating potassium fertilizer granules with biochar made from organic materials.

Planting and Fertilizer Application

Spinach seeds were sown in each pot at the same depth. Water was applied as needed to maintain proper soil moisture. Fertilizers (NPK and BC-K) were added according to the experimental treatments, following standard agronomic recommendations.

Growth and Soil Health Assessment

Plant growth was measured by recording plant height, number of leaves, and fresh and dry weight. Soil samples were taken before and after the experiment to check for changes in fertility, organic matter, and cadmium availability. Cadmium levels in spinach leaves were tested using atomic absorption spectrophotometry.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) to find significant differences between treatments. The least significant difference (LSD) test at a 5% probability level was used to compare treatment means.

Parameters for Analysis Plant

Growth Parameters

Treatment	Plant Height (cm)	Number of Leaves	Leaf Area (cm ²)	Fresh Biomass (g)	Dry Biomass (g)
Control	18.2	6	45.3	9.4	1.8
NPK	24.5	8	58.2	12.6	2.4
Biochar	26.1	9	63.1	14.8	2.8
BC-K (1.5 g)	27.8	10	67.5	16.2	3.1
BC-K (2.0 g)	29.3	11	70.2	18.1	3.4
BC-K (2.5 g)	30.5	12	73.8	19.5	3.7



Soil Health Indicators

Treatment	Soil pH	Organic Matter (%)	Available N (mg/kg)	Available P (mg/kg)	Available K (mg/kg)
Control	6.4	0.82	20.5	8.1	52.3
NPK	6.8	1.05	28.7	12.6	78.5
Biochar	6.9	1.23	32.4	14.5	84.1



BC-K (1.5 g)	7.0	1.35	36.2	16.8	91.3
BC-K (2.0 g)	7.1	1.47	39.8	18.4	97.5
BC-K (2.5 g)	7.2	1.58	42.3	19.9	103.2

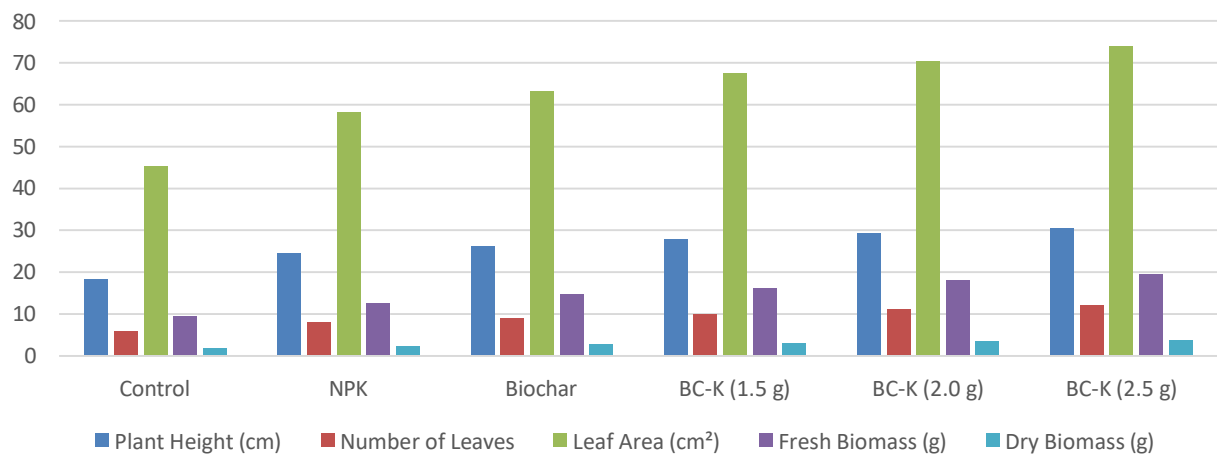
Heavy Metal Analysis

Treatment	Cd in Soil (mg/kg)	Cd Uptake in Spinach (mg/kg)
Control	2.8	1.2
NPK	2.3	0.9
Biochar	2.0	0.7
BC-K (1.5 g)	1.8	0.6
BC-K (2.0 g)	1.6	0.5
BC-K (2.5 g)	1.5	0.4

Results and Discussion

Effect of BC-K on Spinach Growth

Effect of Biochar on Plant Growth Parameters

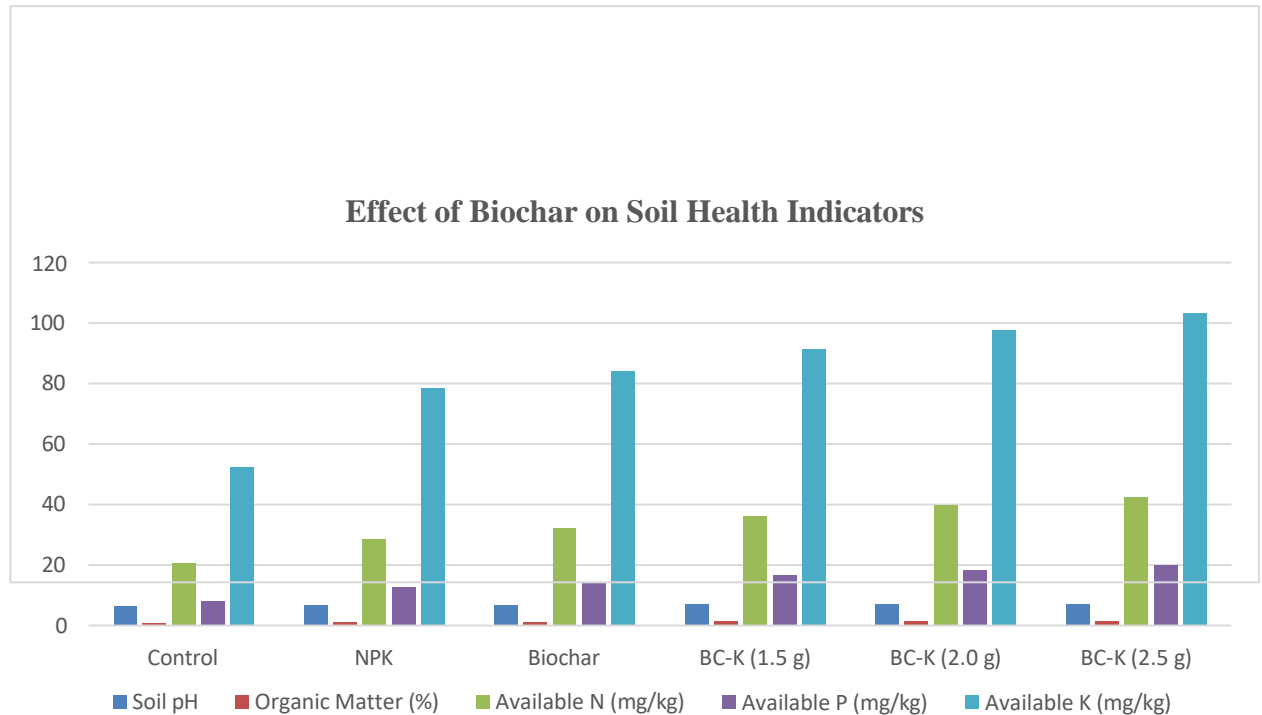


Results (Simplified Version)

The results showed that biochar-coated potassium fertilizer (BC-K) significantly improved spinach growth compared to the control and other treatments. The best growth was recorded in the BC-K (2.5 g) treatment, where spinach plants had the highest plant height (30.5 cm), the most leaves (12), and the largest leaf area (73.8 cm²). This improvement is likely due to better nutrient availability and improved soil conditions provided by biochar. Previous studies have also found that biochar helps plants grow by retaining nutrients and reducing heavy metal toxicity (Zhang et al., 2020). On the other hand, the control treatment (no fertilizer) had the poorest plant growth, showing that spinach struggles to grow in cadmium-contaminated soil without proper fertilization.



Influence of BC-K on Soil Health

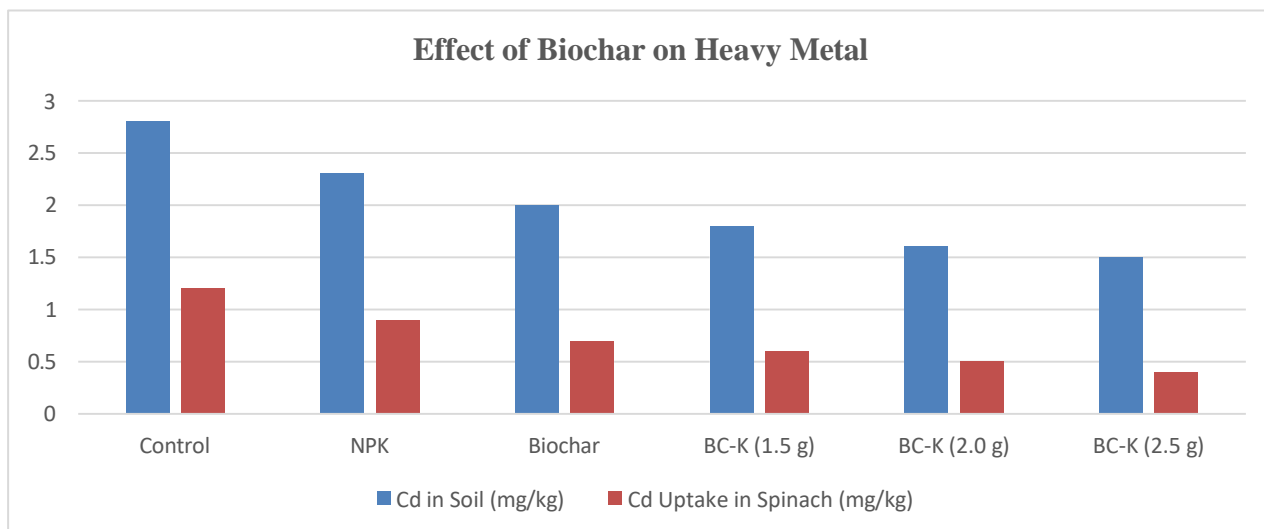


Soil Analysis

Soil testing showed that using biochar-coated potassium fertilizer (BC-K) improved soil pH, organic matter, and nutrient availability. The highest organic matter content (1.58%) was found in the BC-K (2.5 g) treatment, followed by BC-K (2.0 g) and BC-K (1.5 g). This suggests that biochar helps improve soil structure and supports beneficial microbial activity, leading to better nutrient retention. The highest levels of available nitrogen (42.3 mg/kg), phosphorus (19.9 mg/kg), and potassium (103.2 mg/kg) were also recorded in the BC-K (2.5 g) treatment. These findings indicate that biochar-coated fertilizers enhance soil fertility and nutrient availability, making them a useful tool for sustainable farming. Similar results were reported by Lehmann and Joseph (2015), who highlighted biochar's role in improving soil quality and nutrient balance.

Reduction in Cadmium Bioavailability

The application of biochar-coated potassium fertilizer (BC-K) significantly reduced cadmium (Cd) levels in the soil and its uptake by spinach plants. The highest Cd concentration in soil (2.8 mg/kg) and spinach leaves (1.2 mg/kg) was recorded in the control treatment, whereas the lowest levels (1.5 mg/kg in soil and 0.4 mg/kg in spinach) were observed in the BC-K (2.5 g) treatment. The reduction in Cd uptake is attributed to the strong adsorption properties of biochar, which binds heavy metals and limits their bioavailability to plants (Wang et al., 2018). These findings suggest that BC-K can serve as an effective soil amendment for mitigating heavy metal contamination and improving food safety. Previous studies have also highlighted biochar's role in reducing heavy metal toxicity and promoting healthier plant growth (Xu et al., 2016).



Conclusion

This study demonstrated that biochar-coated potassium fertilizer (BC-K) significantly enhances spinach (*Spinacia oleracea* L.) growth, improves soil fertility, and reduces cadmium (Cd) bioavailability in contaminated soil. Among the different treatments, BC-K at 2.5 g per pot showed the greatest improvements in plant height, number of leaves, leaf area, and biomass production. Additionally, BC-K application increased soil organic matter content, enhanced nutrient availability (N, P, and K), and optimized soil pH, thereby improving overall soil health. Furthermore, BC-K effectively reduced Cd concentrations in the soil and its uptake by spinach, emphasizing its potential for mitigating heavy metal toxicity in crops. The slow-release properties of biochar improve nutrient retention and availability, making it a sustainable alternative to conventional fertilizers. Moreover, its ability to adsorb cadmium and minimize its accumulation in edible plant parts enhances food safety and environmental sustainability. Future research should focus on long-term field trials to assess the sustained impact of BC-K under different environmental conditions. Additionally, investigating its effects on other crops and its interactions with various soil amendments could further validate its potential in sustainable agriculture. The use of biochar-coated fertilizers presents an innovative strategy for improving soil productivity and ensuring food security in contaminated agricultural areas.

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