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CONTENTS

Studies on genetic diversity and character association analysis in wheat (<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L. em. Thell)	337-344
P. SINGH, B. PRASAD, J. P. JAISWAL and A. KUMAR	
Study of Genetic Variability for yield and yield contributing characters in Bread Wheat (<i>Triticum aestivum</i> L.)	345-348
SHIVANI KHATRI, RAKESH SINGH NEGI and SHIVANI NAUTIYAL	
To assessment about the combining ability and heterosis studies in pea [<i>Pisum sativum</i> L. var. <i>hortense</i>]	349-355
AKASH KUMAR, BANKEY LAL, P. K. TIWARI, PRANJAL SINGH and ASHUTOSH UPADHYAY	
Effect of integrated nutrient management on growth, yield, and quality traits in garden pea (<i>Pisum sativum</i> L.) under sub-tropical conditions of Garhwal hills	356-364
SUMIT CHAUHAN, D. K. RANA and LAXMI RAWAT	
To study of correlation and path coefficients analysis for pod yield in garden pea [<i>Pisum sativum</i> L. var. <i>hortense</i>]	365-370
CHANDRAMANI KUSWAHA, H. C. SINGH, BANKEY LAL, PRANJAL SINGH and ASHUTOSH UPADHYAY	
Black gram (<i>Vigna mungo</i> L.) response to plant geometry and biofertilizers in western Himalayan Agroecosystem	371-375
SANDEEPTI RAWAT, HIMANSHU VERMA and J P SINGH	
Integrated effect of natural farming concortions, organic farming practices and different fertilizer doses on productivity and profitability of wheat in western Himalayan zones of India	376-382
PRERNA NEGI, HIMANSHU VERMA, MOINUDDIN CHISTI, J. P. SINGH, PRIYANKA BANKOTI, ANJANA NAUTIYAL and SHALINI CHAUDHARY	
Economics of paddy cultivation in the salinity affected regions of Alappuzha district, Kerala	383-390
NITHIN RAJ. K, T. PAUL LAZARUS, ASWATHY VIJAYAN, DURGA A. R, B. APARNA and BRIGIT JOSEPH	
Persistent toxicity of insecticides, fungicides, and their combinations against <i>Spodoptera litura</i> (Fab.) on soybean	391-395
GUNJAN KANDPAL, R.P. SRIVASTAVA and ANKIT UNIYAL	

Productive and reproductive performance of dairy animals in district Varanasi of Uttar Pradesh RISHABH SINGH , YASHESH SINGH and PUSHUP RAJ SHIVAHRE	396-400
Role of nanotechnology in environmental pollution remediation A.K. UPADHYAY, ANUPRIYA MISRA, YASHOVARDHAN MISRA and ANIMESH KUMAR MISHRA	401-408
Effects of chemical industry effluents on humoral immune response in mice SEEMA AGARWAL and D.K. AGRAWAL	409-415
Correlation between sero-conversion and clinical score in Peste des petits ruminants disease in goats AMISHA NETAM, ANUJ TEWARI, RAJESH KUMAR, SAUMYA JOSHI, SURBHI BHARTI and PREETINDER SINGH	416-419
Length weight relationship and condition factor of Bengal corvina, <i>Daysciaena albida</i> (Cuvier, 1830) from Vembanad Lake KITTY FRANCIS C. and M. K. SAJEEVAN	420-424
Temporal changes in per capita consumption of meat in different countries of South East Asia region ABDUL WAHID and S. K. SRIVASTAVA	425-431
Temporal analysis of milk production and consumption in the Central Asian countries ABDUL WAHID and S. K. SRIVASTAVA	432-436
Development and quality evaluation of jackfruit rind incorporated vermicelli <i>Payasam</i> ATHIRA RAJ, SHARON, C.L., SEEJA THOMACHAN PANJIKKARAN., LAKSHMI, P.S., SUMAN, K.T., DELGI JOSEPH C. and SREELAKSHMI A. S	437-443
Optimizing pre-drying treatments of kale leaves for enhanced processing quality BINDVI ARORA, SHRUTI SETHI, ALKA JOSHI and AJAY NAROLA	444-452
Effect of training and visit (T & V) system on fish production (Aquaculture) in Ogun State, Nigeria UWANA G.U. and V.E OGBE	453-459
Use of social media by rural and urban youths: A study in Uttarakhand ANNU PARAGI and ARPITA SHARMA KANDPAL	460-465
Assessment of traditional knowledge of therapeutic potential of native crops among population of Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand A. DUTTA, A. BHATT, S. SINGH and K. JOSHI	466-472
Modernizing dairy operations: A comprehensive case study of mechanization in Bhopal farms M. KUMAR	473-477

Black gram (*Vigna mungo* L.) response to plant geometry and biofertilizers in western Himalayan Agroecosystem

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Pulses are the main source of dietary protein for vegetarians and contribute up to 14 % of the total protein of an average Indian diet (Mudryi *et al.*, 2014). Pulses improve the soil health by enriching nitrogen status and also maintain long term fertility and sustainability of the cropping systems. India is the largest producer and consumer of pulses in the world. Pulses contain a high percentage of quality protein and fibre besides they supply micronutrients, low fat and complex carbohydrates. Among the pulses, black gram (*Vigna mungo* L. Hepper) is the third-most consumed pulse crop in the world (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2021) cultivated in India and Asian countries including Pakistan, Myanmar and parts of Southern Asia. India occupies an area of 48.07 lakh hectare with production of 27.39 lakh tons and yield of 5.70 quintals per hectare (Calles, 2016). Black gram is beneficial in lowering cholesterol levels (Divyani *et al.*, 2020). It also acts as cover crop and its deep root system protects the soil from erosion. The crop also improves soil fertility by symbiotic fixation of atmospheric nitrogen in root nodules. It is grown well in moisture retentive light soil, but loamy and clay loam soils are suitable for the cultivation of Black gram.

Constraints limiting the productivity of black gram in India are non-availability of quality seeds of improved varieties, cultivation on marginal, less fertile soils with low inputs, lack of pest and disease management, cultivation under moisture stress conditions, imbalanced use of nutrients and unscientific post-harvest practices. Plant density can have a major effect on the final yield of most of the

legumes and the general response of yield to increasing population is well documented. Increase in spacing decreases the total population, but with more nutrition to the individual plant grows better and yield more. Row spacing is an important factor which ultimately effect nutrient uptake and growth and yield of plant. To realize the maximum yield potential of black gram during summer and rainy season, maintenance of optimum space made available to individual plant is of prime importance. The spacing requirement depends upon the growth behavior of genotype. So, it is required to maintain spacing for obtaining higher yield (Veeramani, 2019).

The main challenge for the researchers in the field is to reduce the use of intensive chemical fertilizers which negatively affect the environment and food quality, nutritional requirement of increasing population as well as soil health. Continuous use of chemical fertilizers increased crop yield in the early stages but had a negative impact on sustainability (Rana and Verma, 2021; Kumari and Verma, 2023; Juyal *et al.*, 2023). The indiscriminate application of major fertilizers resulted in deficiency of nutrients other than those applied and a decrease in soil organic carbon. Furthermore, the imbalance and continuous use of synthetic chemicals harm soil physical, chemical, and biological properties, affecting crop production sustainability and pose health and environmental risks. So, an alternative for chemical fertilizers is the use of bio fertilizers which could potentially play key roles in the productivity and sustainability of soil. Bio-fertilizers

are gaining importance as they are eco-friendly, non-hazardous and non-toxic. The use of bio fertilizers improves soil fertility by fixing atmospheric nitrogen, solubilizing insoluble phosphates, producing plant growth-promoting substances in the soil, and promoting nodulation ability. Thus, objective of the present research was to evaluate the influence of plant geometry and biofertilizers on the growth, yield and economics of black gram in western Himalayan regions of Uttarakhand.

Field trial was conducted during *kharif* 2022 at Crop Research Centre, School of Agricultural Sciences, SGR University, Dehradun, located in the north western region of Uttarakhand at an altitude of 450 meter above MSL and 29° 58' and 31° 2' 30" North latitude and 77° 34' 45" and 78° 18' 30" east longitudes. Summer temperatures ranged from 36.7 °C to 14.4 °C at their highest and lowest points, respectively, while the winter temperatures ranged from 24.1° C to 5.4° C. The average annual precipitation was 1424 mm. The soil in the experimental field had a sandy loam texture with somewhat neutral pH (7.12), medium in available nitrogen (352.3 kg ha⁻¹) and organic carbon (0.42 %), low in available phosphorous (9.1 kg ha⁻¹), and high in available potassium (236.3 kg ha⁻¹). The experiment was laid out in factorial randomized block design (RBD) with two factors i.e. plant geometry and bio-fertilizers each at 3 different levels making nine treatment combinations. Treatment combinations comprised of 25×10 cm + Rhizobium; 25×10 cm + VAM; 25×10 cm + Rhizobium + VAM; 30×10 cm + Rhizobium; 30×10 cm + VAM; 30×10 cm + Rhizobium + VAM; 35×10 cm + Rhizobium; 35×10 cm + VAM; 35×10 cm + Rhizobium + VAM. The field was thoroughly ploughed twice with a tractor-drawn harrow at an optimum moisture content followed by a single harrowing, and the final land preparation was carried out with a tractor-drawn leveller. The Pant Urd- 31 (PU-31) was sown on 23rd June 2022 using seed rate of 12 kg ha⁻¹. At the time of field preparation, recommended dose of fertilizer 20:40:40 kg NPK ha⁻¹ were applied. As per treatment, different bio-fertilizers viz., Rhizobium and VAM were mixed in the soil at the time of field preparation. After germination of the crop, gap filling

and thinning were also done between 20 and 25 days after sowing (DAS) in an order to maintain definite plant populations. Being *kharif* crop, water needs were being met by rain, however depending upon the soil moisture status, irrigations were provided. The first weeding was done at 25 DAS and the second-hand weeding was done at 35 DAS. The crop was harvested with the help of sickle on September 20, 2022, i.e., 90 DAS. The entire produce was then sun dried for about 4-5 days. The process of threshing was done manually by bashing the plants with sticks.

Dry matter accumulation of the crop at different stages was done by keeping in the hot air oven at 65°C for 72 hours followed by recording the dry weight.

Number of pods per plants, number of grains per pod, test weight, grain yield, straw yield and biological yields were calculated by adopting standard procedures.

The findings made it abundantly evident that alteration or changes in plant geometry and application of different bio-fertilizers significantly influenced plant growth, yield and net returns of the black gram (Table 1 and 2). Among the various treatment combinations, maximum plant height, number of branches per plant, dry matter production per meter square and leaf area index was recorded in 35×10 cm + Rhizobium + VAM followed by 30×10 cm + Rhizobium + VAM and 25×10 cm + Rhizobium + VAM respectively. However lowest values of these parameters were seen where only VAM was applied with the relatively closer plant stands confining the geometry of 25×10 cm.

In addition, 35×10 cm + Rhizobium + VAM also recorded maximum grain yield, net return and B: C ratio as compared to other treatment combinations. Due to the additive effects of these two bio-fertilizers i.e., Rhizobium and VAM in improving the nutritional environment, the growth in terms of branches and dry matter, leaf area index, and their translocation to reproductive structures were enhanced. This resulted in an increase in the yield attributes and, ultimately, the crop's yield. The significant increase in straw production that resulted

while narrower row spacing (25×10 cm) ensured late canopy coverage and minimal light interception owing to lesser growth rate and crop biomass, resulting in decreased growth pattern yielding lesser grain yield and net benefits. Similar results have also been reported by Boydak *et al.*, 2004; Malek *et al.*, 2012.

CONCLUSION

Plant geometry and application of different biofertilizers has influenced growth parameters, yield & yield attributes and net revenues of black gram. Sowing of black gram at the plant geometry of 35×10 cm along with soil application of Rhizobium + VAM showed 10 % and 25 % yield advantage and monetary benefit, respectively over 25×10 cm and 30×10 cm with soil application of biofertilizers suggested for enhancing grain yield and advantageous under Doon Valley areas of Uttarakhand.

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