A Comparison of Germination and Early Growth of Four Early Successional Tree Species of the Southeastern United States in Different Soil and Water Regimes

JAMES E. MOORE and ELIZABETH P. LACEY

Department of Biology, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro 27402

ABSTRACT.—To learn more about the basic biology of exotic relative to native tree species we conducted a greenhouse experiment comparing the germination and early seedling growth of four early successional tree species found in the southeastern United States: two exotics (Ailanthus altissima and Paulownia tomentosa) and two natives (Liquidambar styraciflua and Platanus occidentalis). Five soil types and three water regimes were used for the experiment. Liquidambar and Platanus, the native species, germinated significantly more quickly and were more sensitive to soil type than were the exotics, Ailanthus and Paulownia. Platanus grew tallest, and along with Paulownia, accumulated the greatest total biomass. Ailanthus alone exhibited a high root/shoot ratio in all soil types. In addition, species differed in their response to soil types for multiple growth traits. The results suggest that native tree species could be used to help retard the establishment of invasive tree species on bare soil.

INTRODUCTION

Because invasive exotics are often extremely difficult and expensive to control, it is important to identify efficient strategies for limiting their spread (Byers et al., 2002; Buckley et al., 2004). Studies have suggested that competition or predation from native species may slow invasive species (Newsome and Nobel, 1986; Simmons, 2005; Mandryk and Wein, 2006), which suggests that management programs might effectively use natives to control invasives. The value of this strategy, however, will depend on the basic biology of each species being used, e.g., conditions that favor the establishment of the invasive relative to the native, interactions between the invasive and exotic.

Because we have found only one study that compares the germination and early establishment of invasive and exotic trees that overlap in range (Butterfield et al., 2004), we conducted an experiment that compared the germination and early seedling growth of four tree species found in the southeastern United States: two native early successional tree species, Liquidambar styraciflua L. and Platanus occidentalis L., and two exotic species, Ailanthus altissima (Mill.) Swingle and Paulownia tomentosa (Thumb.) Sieb. & Zeeck. Ex Steud. Hereafter, we refer to the species by the genus only. Ailanthus is a USDA Forest Service “category 1” invasive (Owen, 2002), meaning it poses significant threats to natural ecosystems and commercial forestry practices (Miller, 1998). Paulownia has not yet been categorized, however, it is becoming a more prominent member of the local flora. Both exotics frequently establish on bare soil in disturbed areas, such as on construction sites, railroad rights of way and roadides. We compared the germination and seedling growth of the four species on five soil types and under three water treatments. The goals were to determine: (1) if germination and early growth differed between these four species and (2) if soil type and water regime affected germination and growth. Two other species were initially included in the study, Albizia julibrissin Durraz., an exotic and Liriodendron tulipifera L., a native, but were subsequently dropped from the experiment due to poor germination.

1Corresponding author present address: Department of Biology, The University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee 38152; e-mail: jmoore9@memphis.edu
Table 1.—Mean pH and soil macronutrient levels for each soil type representing two distinct regions of North Carolina. Bold letters indicate piedmont soils (PDs, Piedmont Disturbed no organic matter; PDu, Piedmont Disturbed + organic matter; PF, Piedmont forested); while italics indicate coastal plain soils (CD, Coastal Plain disturbed; CF, Coastal Plain forested). Nutrient analyses performed by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture (4 samples per soil)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>pH</th>
<th>P*</th>
<th>K*</th>
<th>Ca %</th>
<th>Mg %</th>
<th>Mn*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>4.9</td>
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<td>39.8</td>
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<td>43.3</td>
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<td>1224.3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.5</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>15.5</td>
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<td>17.8</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>24.8</td>
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<td>24.5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*’s indicate P, K, and Mn macronutrient index levels based on protocol from Mehlich, 1953
%’s show percent of macronutrient as % of the Cation Exchange Capacity (CEC)

METHODS

Seed and soil collections.—Seeds of Ailanthus, Paulownia and Platanus were collected from three – many trees along roadsides in North Carolina in fall 2004. Liquidambar seeds were collected from two North Carolina Forest Service stands. All seeds were cold/dry stratified at 12 C for 8 mo as suggested by Bonner (1974 a, b), Bonner and Burton (1974), and Little (1974). For each species, seeds from all sources were mixed before sowing.

Samples of five soil types were collected from the piedmont and coastal plain regions of North Carolina. The sandy loam coastal plain forested (CF) and clayey piedmont forested (PF) soils were collected from undisturbed (>50 y old) forests. Both soils had well developed O and A horizons. One of the piedmont disturbed (PDu) soils, a silty loam, came from a previously forested site that had been cleared for a small housing development less than 3 mo before we sampled it. The soil was oxidized and brown in color and resembled the two forest soils in that it contained organic matter from O and A horizons. However, it differed from the forest soils because the organic matter had been mixed with the B horizon in the process of clearing. The other piedmont disturbed (PDs) soil, a clay loam collected beside a newly constructed parking lot, was oxidized and orange in color. Organic matter from the upper soil layers was missing. The sandy loam coastal plain disturbed (CD) soil was collected from a sandy agriculture field used to produce a cover crop. The field had not been tilled for 15 y and lacked organic matter. The Georgville and Mecklenburg soils (PF, PDu and PDs) are found from Virginia to Georgia, while the Marvyn soils (CF, CD) are found in North Carolina and Alabama respectively (NRCS, 2008 Soil Extent Mapping Tool (SEM)). The coastal plain soils had the lowest water-retention capacity, based on wet weight-dry weight soil measurements (wet weight – dry weight: CD = 549.5 g; PDs = 652.4 g; PDu = 578.1 g; PF = 670.1 g; CF = 510.1 g). Nutrient analyses showed large differences in P and Mn but not in the other macronutrients tested (Table 1). The ribbon method was used for determining soil texture.

Experimental design.—We used a split plot design to examine the effects of soil type and soil water availability on germination and early seedling growth. Within each of two blocks were three water treatments. Within each water treatment per block, there were two randomly placed pots per soil type per species. Thus, the experiment included a total of 240 pots (2 blocks × 3 water treatments × 4 species × 5 soil types × 2 replicate pots/species/soil type/water treatment/block). In Jun. 2005, we placed on top of the soil in each pot 10 seeds to mimic natural dispersal. Thirty-percent shade cloth covered the greenhouse to prevent
Table 2.—Mixed-model results for germination and growth response variables. Statistically significant F-values indicated by asterisks: * = P < 0.05, *** = P < 0.001. Abbreviations: spp = Species

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Day to 1st Germination</th>
<th>% Germination</th>
<th>Shoot Height (cm)</th>
<th>Total Biomass (g)</th>
<th>Root/Shoot Ratio</th>
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<td>3.24 (P = 0.051)</td>
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<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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</table>

seedlings from being damaged by extreme heat on hot summer days. The mean temperature for the greenhouse during the experiment was 29.4 C, with a high and low of 40 C and 26.1 C, respectively, from Jun. to Oct. 2005, when the experiment was terminated.

The water treatments differed in the number of watering days per week (High = 6 d; Intermediate = 4 d; Low = 2 d) and total water per week. The average amount of water that a pot received per watering day was 115 ml. Thus, the total water applied per pot per week was 690 ml, 460 ml and 230 ml for high, intermediate and low water treatments, respectively.

We recorded the day of first seed germinating in each pot and total germination after thirty-five days. At that time, we thinned seedlings to one per pot, retaining the largest and the closest to the center in each pot. In early Oct., when some plants appeared ready to abscone leaves, we recorded shoot height and harvested the shoots and roots separately, using soil sieves to minimize the loss of fine roots. Plant parts were dried in an oven (70 C) for 1 wk and then weighed.

Statistical analysis.—We used mixed-model analyses of variance (PROC MIXED, SAS, 2003) to determine the effects of species, soil type and water regime on the dependent variables: days to first germination, final % germination, shoot height, total biomass and root/shoot ratio. Percent germination and total biomass were arcsine and log-transformed, respectively, before analysis. Block was treated as a random factor, and Type III Sums of Squares were used to determine significance. We performed multiple pairwise comparisons, using Least Squares Means (LSMEANS) and Tukey’s adjustment, to determine where significant differences existed between species and soil types.

Results

Germination.—Species differed significantly in germination time (Table 2). The first seedlings of Liquidambar and Paulownia appeared significantly earlier than did seedlings of Ailanthus and Paulownia by approximately 7 d (Fig. 1a). Also, species differed in their response to soil type, as measured in day of first appearance. Paulownia germinated later than did the other species in the disturbed soils but not in forested soils (e.g., for PDs: Ailanthus vs. Paulownia P = <0.0001; Liquidambar vs. Paulownia P = 0.0007; Platanus vs. Paulownia P = <0.0001). Species-specific differences in timing were most apparent in the piedmont disturbed soil containing organic matter (PDd) soil: Ailanthus vs. Platanus P = 0.0434; Ailanthus vs. Paulownia P = 0.0274; Liquidambar vs. Paulownia P = 0.0042; Platanus vs. Paulownia P = <0.0001).
By the end of 5 wk, 90% of recorded germination had occurred in all species, and species significantly differed in final % germination (Table 2). Paulownia and Liquidambar exhibited higher germination (>50%) than did Ailanthus and Platanus (30–40%) averaged over soil types (Fig. 1b). Also, soil significantly influenced total germination averaged over species (Table 2). Percent germination was higher on the piedmont organic soils (mean % germination: CD = 39.5, PD = 44.8, PDU = 61.4, PF = 61.2, CF = 51.2). Only in these soils did we observe species-specific differences in % germination. Paulownia and/or Liquidambar showed higher germination than did the other species (pairwise comparisons for PDU soil: P = 0.0318 for Ailanthus vs. Liquidambar; P = 0.0410 for Ailanthus vs. Paulownia; for PF soil: P =
<0.0001 for Ailanthus vs. Liquidambar. P = 0.0004 for Liquidambar vs. Platanus). In contrast to soil, water treatment did not affect % germination (Table 2).

Seedling growth.—Species and soil type, but not water, contributed significantly to the observed variation in total biomass, shoot height and root/shoot ratio (Table 2). Across all soil types, Platanus and Paulownia had greater total biomass compared to Ailanthus and Liquidambar (Fig. 1c). Platanus produced the most while Ailanthus produced the least. Total biomass was greatest on organic soils (CF, PDV and PF soils), and it was in these soils that species showed significant pairwise differences in biomass (for PF soil: Liquidambar vs. Paulownia P = 0.0190; for PDV soil: Ailanthus vs. Platanus P = 0.0405; for CF soil: Ailanthus vs. Platanus P = 0.0009; Ailanthus vs. Paulownia P = 0.0440).

Shoot height significantly differed among species and soils (Table 2). Seedlings were shorter and showed only one species-specific difference in the non-organic soils (for CD soil: Platanus vs. Paulownia P = 0.0004) (Fig. 1d). In the organic soils, species on average grew taller, and they differed in height. Liquidambar and especially Platanus grew taller than did Ailanthus and Paulownia (Fig. 1d). PDV and CF soils showed the greatest number of species-specific differences (for PDV soil: Ailanthus vs. Liquidambar P = 0.0089; Ailanthus vs. Platanus P = <0.0001; Liquidambar vs. Platanus P < 0.0001; Platanus vs. Paulownia P = <0.0001; for CF soil: Ailanthus vs. Liquidambar P = 0.0010; Ailanthus vs. Platanus P = <0.0001; Liquidambar vs. Platanus P = 0.0113; Platanus vs. Paulownia P = <0.0001).

Biomass partitioning significantly differed among species and soils (Table 2). Ailanthus, which produced short shoots and the least total biomass, also produced only one-third to one-half the shoot biomass as did the other species (Mean Shoot Biomass for Ailanthus = 0.310 ± 0.042; Liquidambar = 0.666 ± 0.080; Platanus = 1.05 ± 0.118; Paulownia = 0.958 ± 0.128). Its root biomass was also relatively low (Mean Root Biomass for Ailanthus = 0.535 ± 0.073; Liquidambar = 0.467 ± 0.052; Platanus = 0.897 ± 0.122; Paulownia = 0.665 ± 0.0918). However, because the root biomass was more similar to that of other species than was shoot biomass, Ailanthus showed the highest and most variable root/shoot ratio across soil types (Fig. 1e). Root/shoot ratios among the other species were not significantly different. Thus, the significant species by soil interaction was explained by Ailanthus (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

From the standpoint of germination and early seedling growth, our study suggests that broadcasting seeds of native tree species, such as Platanus and Liquidambar, onto bare disturbed sites may help slow the establishment of exotic species, such as Ailanthus and Paulownia. Both Platanus and Liquidambar germinated more quickly that did Ailanthus and Paulownia. Liquidambar’s germination percentage was among the highest for all species, and its germination was rapid over all soil types. Platanus had moderate germination; however, it germinated most quickly. Platanus seedlings appeared about 5-10 d earlier, on average, than Ailanthus or Paulownia. In a land restoration context, differences in germination are likely to be important. For example, as illustrated by our data, Ailanthus puts most of its resources into root growth in the first year (also see Pan and Bassuk, 1986). Once established, its rapid clonal growth and high reproductive output make the species difficult to eradicate (Adamik and Brauns, 1957; Cozzo, 1972; Hu, 1979; Hoshovsky, 1988; Kowarik, 1995; Knapp and Canham, 2000). Numerous studies have shown that earlier germination gives seedlings more time to capture space and resources needed for growth (e.g., Steng et al., 1989; Jones et al., 1997). Also, when natural precipitation events that promote germination are short-lived (not the case in our experiment) rapid germination may be
critical for successful germination. Earlier germination also enhances a seedling’s subsequent competitive ability (e.g., Jones and Sharitz, 1989; Jones et al., 1989). For example, increased height is advantageous when subsequent competition for light intensifies. The natives Platanus and Liquidambar produced significantly taller shoots than did Paulownia and Ailanthus.

Established seedlings of native tree species, including Platanus, have been successfully used in the restoration of surface mine operations throughout the eastern US (Zeleznik and Skousen, 1996). Liquidambar tree seedlings have been used for transplanting into deforested areas in Mexican cloud forests (Pedraza and Williams-Linera, 2003; Pedraza-Perez and Williams-Linera, 2005). Our study suggests that seeds, in addition to seedlings, might be effectively used for land restoration. We have found only one study that evaluates the effects of sowing seeds of native onto bare land. Simmons (2005) observed that oversowing seeds of a native herbaceous species Indian blanket (Gaillardia pulchella Foug.) reduced the aboveground productivity of the invasive annual bastard cabbage (Rapistrum rugosum (L.) All.) by 72% and reduced seed set by 83%. Such experiments using native tree species would be worthwhile.

Although our experiment is limited by the fact that it was conducted in a greenhouse, the results do suggest that Liquidambar and Platanus could potentially be good candidates for use in management programs designed to slow the spread of invasive tree species and to facilitate the restoration of native plant communities. The results also suggest that additional studies comparing the competitive abilities of natives and exotics would be valuable. Preventing the invasion of an exotic is usually more cost-effective than eradication or containment after an invasive has established locally (Mack et al., 2000; Rejmanek, 2000; Leung et al., 2002).

Acknowledgments.—We thank Bill Adams for the City of Greensboro and Dr. Clyde Bogle from the Upper Coastal Plain Research Station for their assistance with soil collection sites, Scott J. Richter for statistical help, P. Dan Royall, Paul Mou and Bruce Kirchoff for helpful suggestions, Robert M. Northington for logistic help, and UNCG Biology Department for financial support.

LITERATURE CITED


Submitted 9 June 2008

Accepted 11 December