

# Exploring the effect of humic acid on chlorophyll levels in Japanese mint under drip and flood irrigation amidst water and nutrient constraints

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## ABSTRACT

A field experiment on mentha (*Mentha arvensis* L.) was conducted during spring season of 2022 and 2023 at G.B. Pant University of agriculture and technology, Pantnagar to investigate the effect of foliar spray of humic acid on SPAD values under limited water and nutrient conditions. The experiment comprising two drip irrigation levels (80 and 100% crop evapo-transpiration) and four nutrient management practices (25% NPK basal +75% NPK fertigation, 50% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation, No basal + 75% NPK fertigation + three foliar spray of humic acid @ 0.3% and 25% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation + three foliar spray of humic acid @ 0.3%) was laid out in three times replicated randomized block design (factorial) with extra control. Control was conventional practice where, crop was fertilized with recommended doses of fertilizers (N: P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>: K<sub>2</sub>O @ 120:60: 40 kg/ha) and irrigated at IW: CPE ratio of 1.2 with 5 cm irrigation depth. Significantly higher SPAD values were observed at 100% ET<sub>c</sub> level of drip irrigation and nutrient management practices with foliar application of humic acid as compared to 80% ET<sub>c</sub> level of drip irrigation and total NPK supply through chemical fertilizers, respectively. At harvest crop irrigated at 100% ET<sub>c</sub> level recorded 11.1 and 18% higher value of SPAD reading than 80% ET<sub>c</sub> level during 2022 and 2023, respectively. Humic acid application was able to maintain the SPAD values even after 25% reduction in nutrient dosage. The SPAD values for control were significantly lower than the combination of best nutrient management practices with either 80 or 100% ET<sub>c</sub> level of drip irrigation.

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*Keywords: (Japanese mint, Humic acid, SPAD, Drip fertigation)*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Mentha, belonging to the Lamiaceae family, is an economically vital herbaceous crop due to its essential oil content, finding extensive applications in pharmaceuticals, food, and cosmetics. In India, Japanese mint (*Mentha arvensis*) holds a significant presence, solidifying the nation's position as the leading global producer of this mint species. Japanese mint, referred to as menthol mint for its remarkably high menthol content ranging from 75-80%, surpasses other mint species. In India, mentha cultivation is primarily concentrated in the central regions of the Indo-Gangetic plains, including the Tarai belt of Uttarakhand. In this area, mentha is cultivated as a spring season crop, receiving minimal rainfall. Being a shallow-rooted crop that produces a substantial amount of biomass renders it particularly susceptible to water stress. Water deficit in mentha has, intriguingly, been observed to enhance oil content within the plant. However, this apparent benefit is overshadowed by a significant reduction in herbage yield, ultimately leading to an overall decline in oil yield. This trade-off raises compelling questions about the underlying physiological mechanisms that govern these contrasting responses. One such vital physiological function that comes under scrutiny is photosynthesis, the process driving biomass accumulation in plants. This process is closely linked to the maintenance of chlorophyll structure, an important pigment facilitating the capture of light energy. Disruption in chlorophyll integrity, particularly under drought stress, poses a formidable challenge to normal physiological functions. The SPAD meter, reading recognized as a reliable indicator of chlorophyll content, has proven instrumental in quantifying the stress related alterations. The findings of Szeles et al. (2023) [1] underscores the significant reduction in SPAD values under water stress conditions, offering a tangible measure of the impact on chlorophyll dynamics. Humic acid is known for its beneficial effects on root growth and expansion, therefore it has demonstrated its ability to enhance water uptake and improve plant water status, offering a promising remedy to subside the harmful effects of water stress. The application of humic acid has been shown to alleviate the decrease in SPAD values associated with water stress conditions (Matuszak-Salmani et al., 2022) [2]. Apart from this, the humic acid not only enhances nutrient supply but also allows for reduced nitrogen doses, addressing another challenge associated with conventional nutrient management practices that adversely impact SPAD values. The present study was conducted for evaluating the potential of humic acid as an effective strategy to maintain proper chlorophyll content and corresponding SPAD values even under limited nitrogen and water supply.

## **2. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

A field study was conducted during spring season of 2022 and 2023 at Govind Ballabh Pant University of Agriculture and Technology (GBPUAT), Pantnagar. The research area is located at an altitude of 243.83 m above mean sea level on 29°N latitude and 79.3°E longitude. The soil of the experimental field was sandy loam in texture with a pH of 7.5 and EC of 0.32 dS m<sup>-1</sup>, medium in organic carbon (0.71%) and low available nitrogen (178.4 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>), medium available phosphorus (24.8 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>) and potassium (265.6 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>). At field capacity and PWP, the soil moisture contents were 20.8 and 8.4 per cent, respectively. Total rainfall during the year 2022 was about 48.1 mm and in the year 2023, it was about 233 mm. The study comprised of two levels of drip irrigation (80 and 100% ET<sub>c</sub>) and four nutrient management practices (25% NPK basal +75% NPK fertigation, 50% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation, No basal + 75% NPK fertigation + three foliar sprays of humic acid @ 0.3% and

25% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation + three foliar sprays of humic acid @ 0.3% was laid out in randomized block design (factorial) and one extra control replicated thrice. In control, recommended doses of fertilizers (half of the nitrogen (N) along with the entire quantity of phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) was administered as a basal application; while the remaining 50% of nitrogen was split into two equal portions and top-dressed at 40 and 60 DAP through NPK (12:32:16), MOP and urea fertilizers. Irrigation was applied at IW: CPE ratio of 1.2, utilizing flood surface irrigation with a depth of 5 cm.

Suckers of variety "CIM Kranti" were planted at 40 cm apart in the second fortnight of February. Fertigation was started at 25 days after planting (DAP). Urea (46% N) and mono potassium phosphate (0:52:34) water soluble fertilizers were used for fertigation purpose. In drip treatments, fertigation was done in 07 equal splits at 10 days interval. In respective treatments, the application of humic acid was performed at 30, 60 and 90 days after planting (DAP). Drip irrigation was applied at two days interval. Amount of water applied was as per to the crop evapo-transpiration (ETc).

It was calculated by using following formula:

$$ETc = ET_0 \times Kc$$

$$ET_0 = CPE \times Kpan$$

$$Kpan = 0.7$$

Where,

ETc= Crop evapo-transpiration,

ET<sub>0</sub>= Reference evapo-transpiration, K

Kc = Crop coefficient,

CPE = Cumulative pan evaporation and

Kpan = Pan Coefficient.

Kc values for mint crop at different crop growth stages as given by FAO, 1998 [3] were used to calculate ETc.

SPAD reading and relative leaf water content (RLWC) were recorded at 60, 90 DAP and at harvest stage. SPAD readings were taken with the help of SPAD meter (model CCM-200). RLWC values were worked out by using the following formula developed by Barrs and Weatherley (1962) [4].

$$RLWC(\%) = \frac{(\text{Fresh weight of leaf sample}(g) - \text{dry weight of leaf sample}(g))}{(\text{Turgid weight of leaf sample}(g) - \text{dry weight of leaf sample}(g))} \times 100$$

Crop was harvested at 120 DAP. Statistical evaluation of the experiment was conducted in two parts. Comparison of drip fertigation treatments was done by analysis of variance (ANOVA) for randomized block design (factorial) as per the statistical program OPSTAT, developed by Sheoran et al., 1998 [5] at CCS Hissar Agricultural University, Haryana. The

comparison of control plot was made with the best combination of nutrient management practice with each 80 and 100% ETc level of irrigation by using independent sample 't' test with the help of statistical software packages in 'R' version 1.2.1335 (R Core Team, 2016) [6].

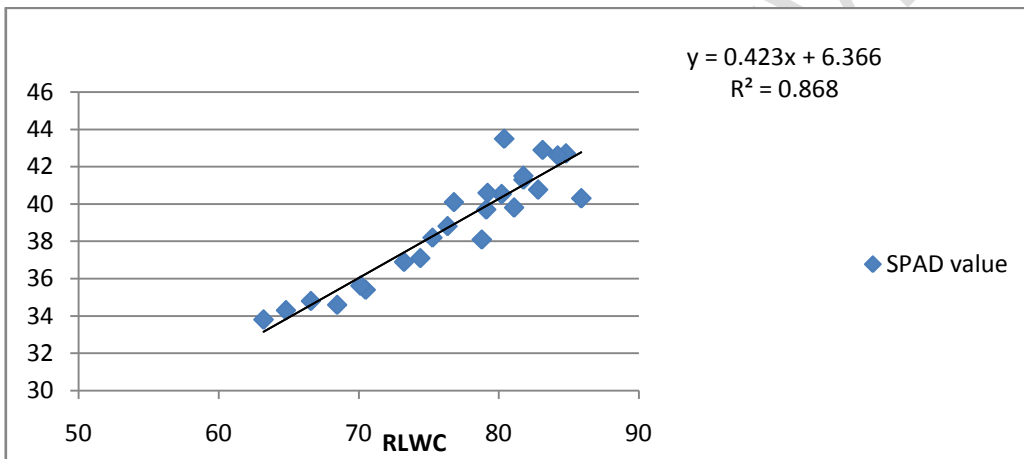
### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SPAD meter reading is an important indicator of chlorophyll content. The significantly higher values of SPAD were obtained for the drip irrigation level of 100% ETc as compared to the 80% ETc level of drip irrigation at all the stages of crop growth. The trend was consistent for the year 2022 and 2023. At harvest stage, the increase in SPAD values under 100% ETc level were about 11.1 and 18% for the year 2022 and 2023, respectively. The reduction in SPAD values under 80% ETc levels might be due to the decrease in chlorophyll content under this treatment which indicates the possibility of water stress. Under limited availability of water there is reduction in photosynthetic electron transport which can potentially reduce the evolution of molecular oxygen, resulting in the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS), which can damage the photosynthetic apparatus (Basu et al., 2016) [7]. Damage in structure of photosynthetic apparatus causes the reduction in chlorophyll content. Kapoor et al. (2020) [8] reported that exposure to the drought stress causes the increase in activity of chlorophyllase enzyme and ultimately the photo-oxidation of chlorophyll. Among the nutrient management practices, there was significant difference in SPAD values at all the crop growth stages for both years of the study. At 60 DAP the significantly lower SPAD values were observed for the treatment without basal application of NPK and 75% NPK fertigation and supply of humic acid @ 0.3% by foliar spray (36.42 and 37.07) in the year 2022 and 2023, respectively. Lower SPAD values in this treatment are the consequent effect of exclusion of basal nitrogen doses which might have affected the chlorophyll content of plants in initial stages. The SPAD values of all other treatments at 60 DAP were statistically at par during both years of the study. Application of 25% nitrogen as basal dose was able to maintain the SPAD values at 60 DAP, similar to the treatment with 50% nitrogen application as basal fertilizer.

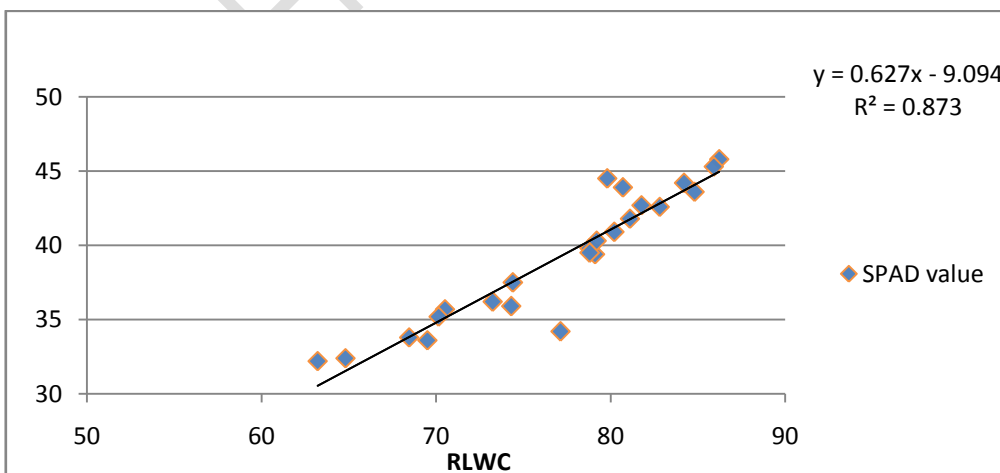
Treatment	SPAD Value					
	60 DAP		90 DAP		At harvest	
	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023
<b>Drip irrigation level (I)</b>						
I <sub>1</sub> : 80% ET <sub>c</sub>	35.26	35.08	35.58	35.69	36.81	35.93
I <sub>2</sub> : 100% ET <sub>c</sub>	40.78	41.83	42.04	42.58	40.88	42.39
SEm±	0.373	0.341	0.274	0.256	0.294	0.351
CD at 5%	1.13	1.03	0.83	0.78	0.89	1.07
<b>Nutrient management practices (N)</b>						
N <sub>1</sub> : 25% NPK basal +75% NPK fertigation	38.33	38.95	37.53	38.23	37.92	38.02
N <sub>2</sub> : 50% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation	38.8	39	38.2	38.6	37.23	37.5
N <sub>3</sub> : No basal + 75% NPK fertigation + three foliar spray of humic acid @ 0.3%	36.42	37.07	39.75	40.05	39.87	40.43
N <sub>4</sub> : 25% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation + three foliar spray of humic acid @ 0.3%	38.53	38.78	39.77	39.67	40.37	40.7
SEm±	0.53	0.48	0.39	0.36	0.42	0.50
CD (P=.05)	1.60	1.75	1.18	1.10	1.26	1.51
<b>Control vs Best I×N</b>						
<b>Control</b>	34.87	35.2	34.47	34.03	35.97	34.83
<b>Under 80% ET<sub>c</sub></b>	36.07	35.67	37.3	37.03	39.14	38.5
t- value	1.25	0.67	4.53	3.23	4.71	4.02
Significance	NS	NS	S	S	S	S
<b>Under 100% ET<sub>c</sub></b>						
t- value	9.26	11.15	12.51	20.71	6.53	7.32
Significance	S	S	S	S	S	S
<b>Interaction (I×N)</b>						
SEm±	0.75	0.68	0.55	0.51	0.59	0.70
CD (P=.05)	NS	NS	1.66	1.55	1.78	2.13

**Table 1: SPAD values as affected by drip irrigation levels and nutrient management practice**

At 90 DAP and at harvest, the similar trends of variation in SPAD values for different nutrient management practices were emerged. Even with reduction in NPK doses the treatments with humic acid supply were able to maintain the SPAD values at later stages, which suggest that humic acid was able to provide required nourishment for chlorophyll synthesis. Significantly higher values of SPAD with humic acid supply can be attributed to the regulation of ROS (Hasanuzzaman et al., 2021) [9] which is capable of causing photo-oxidation of the chlorophyll. ROS production is enhanced under drought stress and humic acid can help to alleviate such stress conditions as it is known to maintain the higher plant water status. Relative leaf water content, a parameter that reflects plant water status is improved by addition of humic acid. By improving root growth humic acid shows its ultimate effect on the water uptake. It was observed that there was strong correlation between RLWC and SPAD reading as evident by figure 1 and figure 2. In the year 2022, the coefficient of determination between these parameters was about 86.8 and it was about 87.3% in the next year of the study. These high values of coefficient of determination suggest the strong and reliable relationship between these two parameters.



**Fig.1. Relationship between RLWC and SPAD values in the year 2022**



**Fig.2. Relationship between RLWC and SPAD values in the year 2023**

Comparison of SPAD values under control treatment was made with the maximum values of SPAD in conjunction with both 80 and 100%  $ET_c$  levels of drip irrigation. During 2022 the highest values of SPAD under 100%  $ET_c$  treatment were found in combination with the 25% NPK application as basal and 50% as fertigation along with humic acid application except at 90 DAP. At this stage, the maximum value of SPAD in 100%  $ET_c$  level was observed for the nutrient management practice with 75% NPK application as fertigation in combination with humic acid. This combination was able to achieve the highest SPAD values at 90 DAP and at harvest for the year 2023. However, the highest SPAD at 60 DAP in 2023 was achieved for the treatment where 25% NPK application was done as basal and 75% as fertigation. At all the stages of the crop growth, the highest SPAD values under 100%  $ET_c$  level of drip irrigation were significantly higher than the control treatment. Lower SPAD values under control suggest that plants in this treatment might have faced the water stress which caused the degradation of chloroplast aperture. At 60 DAP, the highest SPAD value in 80%  $ET_c$  level was observed in combination of the treatment with 50% NPK application as basal and 50% NPK application as fertigation (36.07) for the year 2022. For subsequent year the highest value of SPAD (35.67) was observed for the combination of 80%  $ET_c$  with 25% NPK application as basal and 50% NPK application as fertigation along with foliar applied humic acid. In both years of the study the highest values under 80%  $ET_c$  at 60 DAP were statistically at par with the control treatment. With progression of crop growth, the significant difference between SPAD values for control and best combination of nutrient management practices with 80%  $ET_c$  level of irrigation were emerged. The highest values of SPAD were continuously observed for the treatments with foliar application of humic acid in both years of the study. These values were significantly higher than the control, which might be due to the ability of humic acid to subside the chloroplast degeneration under drought condition. Interaction effect of humic acid and irrigation level was found significant at 90 DAP and at harvest for both years of the study. At 90 DAP and harvest, there was significant difference in SPAD values between different nutrient management practices under 80%  $ET_c$  level of drip irrigation. The trend was consistent for both years of the study. It was observed that higher values under 80%  $ET_c$  level of drip irrigation were observed for the nutrient management practices where foliar spray of humic acid was performed. However, the difference was non-significant for all the combinations of nutrient management practices with 100%  $ET_c$  level of drip irrigation. Chlorophyll degradation is more pronounced under water stress conditions and humic acid is able to subside the adverse effect of drought by maintaining chlorophyll ultra-structure (Fan et al. 2014) [10]. Drip irrigation level of 80%  $ET_c$  imparted the water stress in mentha and chlorophyll content decreased. Foliar spray of humic acid was able to plummet the effect of drought on chlorophyll content and ultimately on SPAD values.

**Table 2: Interaction effect of drip irrigation levels and nutrient management practices on SPAD value at 90 days after planting.**

Drip irrigation levels	Nutrient management practices			
	25% NPK basal +75% NPK fertigation	50% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation	No basal + 75% NPK fertigation + three foliar spray of humic acid @ 0.3%	25% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation + three foliar spray of humic acid @ 0.3%
<b>Year 2022</b>				
80% ET <sub>c</sub>	33.57	34.40	37.07	37.3
100% ET <sub>c</sub>	41.5	42	42.43	42.2
<b>SEm±</b>	0.55	<b>C.D. (P=.05)1.66</b>		
<b>Year 2023</b>				
80% ET <sub>c</sub>	33.97	35.37	36.4	37.03
100% ET <sub>c</sub>	42.5	41.83	43.7	42.3
<b>SEm±</b>	0.51	<b>C.D. (P=.05)1.55</b>		

**Table 3: Interaction effect of drip irrigation levels and nutrient management practices on SPAD at harvest**

Drip irrigation levels	Nutrient management practices			
	25% NPK basal +75% NPK fertigation	50% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation	No basal + 75% NPK fertigation + three foliar spray of humic acid @ 0.3%	25% NPK basal +50% NPK fertigation + three foliar spray of humic acid @ 0.3%
<b>Year 2022</b>				
80% ET <sub>c</sub>	34.6	34.91	38.61	39.14
100% ET <sub>c</sub>	41.23	39.55	41.13	41.6
<b>SEm±</b>	0.59	<b>C.D. (P=.05)1.78</b>		
<b>Year 2023</b>				
80% ET <sub>c</sub>	33.9	33.57	37.77	38.5

100% ET <sub>c</sub>	42.13	41.43	43.1	42.9
<b>SEm±</b>	0.70	<b>C.D. (P=.05) 2.13</b>		

#### 4. CONCLUSION

There is a critical impact of water stress on chlorophyll content in Japanese mint, indicating a decline in chlorophyll levels. However, the application of humic acid through foliar spray proved to be an effective strategy in mitigating the negative effects of water stress on chlorophyll content, consistently yielding higher SPAD values. The findings emphasize that humic acid can be used as a supplement with the chemical fertilizers to maintain proper nitrogen supply even after 25% reduction in the applied dosage.

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