

Matching roots to their environment

Article

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1 **Overview Article**

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3 **Matching Roots to Their Environment**

4
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14 **Running title:** Matching Roots to their Environment

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ABSTRACT

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3 • *Background* Plants form the base of the terrestrial food chain and provide medicines, fuel,
4 fibre and industrial materials to humans. Vascular land plants rely on their roots to acquire the
5 water and mineral elements necessary for their survival in nature or their yield and nutritional
6 quality in agriculture. Major biogeochemical fluxes of all elements occur through plant roots,
7 and the roots of agricultural crops have a significant role to play in soil sustainability, carbon
8 sequestration, reducing emissions of greenhouse gasses, and in preventing the eutrophication
9 of water bodies associated with the application of mineral fertilisers.

10 • *Scope* This article provides the context for a Special Issue of *Annals of Botany* on
11 ‘Matching Roots to Their Environment’. It first examines how land plants and their roots
12 evolved, describes how the ecology of roots and their rhizospheres contributes to the
13 acquisition of soil resources, and discusses the influence of plant roots on biogeochemical
14 cycles. It then describes the role of roots in overcoming the constraints to crop production
15 imposed by hostile or infertile soils, illustrates root phenotypes that improve the acquisition of
16 mineral elements and water, and discusses high-throughput methods to screen for these traits
17 in the laboratory, glasshouse and field. Finally, it considers whether knowledge of adaptations
18 improving the acquisition of resources in natural environments can be used to develop root
19 systems for sustainable agriculture in the future.

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21 **Key words:** Anatomy, arabidopsis, cereal, evergreen revolution, fertiliser use efficiency,
22 legume, morphology, nitrogen, phosphorus, physiology, potassium, water.

INTRODUCTION

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Land plants support most terrestrial life. They form the base of the food chain and also provide medicines, fuel, fibre and industrial materials for humans. Cultivated plants provide about 83% of the dietary energy for the world's population directly and 16% indirectly through animal products (Figure 1). Less than 1.2% of the dietary energy for the world's population comes from aquatic products, fish and seafood. Similarly, edible crops deliver between 83-94% of the minerals and 70-99% of the vitamins (with the exception of vitamins A and B12, which mostly come from animal products) to human diets (Figure 1). Meyer *et al.* (2012) estimated that just over 100 terrestrial plant species contribute more than 90% of the world's food supply. Plants must acquire the water and mineral elements, essential for their survival in nature or their yield and nutritional quality in agriculture, through their roots (White and Brown, 2010).

Major fluxes of all elements occur through land plants and, in particular, their root systems (Figure 2). Interactions between plant roots and their surroundings during evolutionary time have led to many fundamental changes in the Earth's environment, including a decrease in atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂), a lowering of the temperature of the Earth's surface, and the formation of complex soil environments (Kenrick and Crane, 1997; Raven and Edwards, 2001; Pires and Dolan, 2012). The interactions between plant roots and their surroundings continue to influence the planet's carbon (C) cycle, which has been distorted recently through the burning of fossil fuels, and the cycles of other mineral elements including nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and sulphur (S), which have been influenced significantly by their use in intensive agriculture (Figure 2; Rockström *et al.*, 2009; Canfield *et al.*, 2010). The roots of agricultural crops, both annual and perennial, have a significant role to play in sequestering C belowground (Norby and Jackson, 2000; Kell, 2011), in decreasing

1 the emissions of greenhouse gasses (GHG; CO₂, NO, N₂O) from agriculture (Smith *et al.*,
2 1997, 2008; Hofstra and Bouwman, 2005; Galloway *et al.*, 2008; Rockström *et al.*, 2009;
3 Canfield *et al.*, 2010; Good and Beatty, 2011), and in preventing the eutrophication of water
4 bodies associated with the application of mineral fertilisers (Conley *et al.*, 2009; Rockström *et*
5 *al.*, 2009; Vitousek *et al.*, 2009; Good and Beatty, 2011). Plant roots also have a role to play
6 in sustaining the productivity of agricultural soils, by stabilising them physically, by
7 improving their structure, and by driving microbial processes, through substrate inputs, that
8 maintain soil fertility (Feeney *et al.*, 2006; Hinsinger *et al.*, 2009; Hallett and Bengough,
9 2013).

10 Thus, an understanding of the root/soil interface is essential to address the immediate
11 issues facing humankind, from food security and human nutrition to the climate and wellbeing
12 of the planet itself. This article, which provides the context for a Special Issue of *Annals of*
13 *Botany* on 'Matching Roots to Their Environment', first examines how land plants and their
14 roots evolved, describes how the ecology of roots and their rhizospheres contributes to the
15 acquisition of soil resources, and discusses the continued influence of plant roots on
16 biogeochemical cycles. It then describes the role of roots in overcoming the constraints to
17 crop production imposed by hostile or infertile soils, illustrates root ideotypes (ideal attributes
18 of a plant root system) for improving the acquisition of mineral elements and water, and
19 discusses high-throughput methods to screen for these traits in the laboratory, glasshouse and
20 field. Finally, the article considers whether knowledge of root adaptations that improve the
21 acquisition of resources in natural environments can be used to develop root systems for
22 sustainable agricultural intensification.

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25 **MATCHING ROOTS TO THEIR ENVIRONMENT: PHYSIOLOGICAL ECOLOGY**

1

2 *The evolution of land plants and their roots*

3

4 Life originated about 3.5 billion years ago in the oceans of the Earth (Hodson and
5 Bryant, 2012). At that time, the planet's atmosphere contained no oxygen gas. The evolution
6 of photosynthetic organisms, and the oxygenation process that led to the evolution of aerobic
7 organisms, occurred 2.20-2.45 billion years ago. The first photosynthetic eukaryotes evolved
8 about 1.6 billion years ago, but it was not until 450-490 million years ago that plants
9 successfully colonised the land (Dolan, 2009). It is possible that mycorrhizal symbioses
10 between plants and fungi enabled this (Brundrett, 2002; Taylor *et al.*, 2004; Karandashov and
11 Bucher, 2005). Mycorrhizal symbioses can protect plants from a variety of abiotic and biotic
12 challenges and assist in their acquisition of essential mineral elements (Morgan *et al.*, 2005;
13 Smith and Read, 2008). The proliferation of land plants led to a decrease in atmospheric CO₂,
14 both through photosynthesis and by the weathering of calcium (Ca) and magnesium (Mg)
15 silicate minerals, a lowering of the planet's surface temperature, and global alterations in the
16 fluxes of energy, carbon, water and mineral elements (Kenrick and Crane, 1997; Raven and
17 Edwards, 2001; Pires and Dolan, 2012). This resulted in the formation of complex soils and
18 the bioengineering of new terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems. The flowering plants
19 (angiosperms) evolved during the Jurassic period (208-144 million years ago) and their rapid
20 diversification to occupy diverse ecological niches on land occurred during the Cretaceous
21 period, 100-65 million years ago (Kenrick and Crane, 1997; Raven and Edwards, 2001; Pires
22 and Dolan, 2012).

23 The colonisation of land by plants required a number of adaptations (Kenrick and
24 Crane, 1997; Raven and Edwards, 2001; Pires and Dolan, 2012). These included adaptations
25 for the uptake and movement of water and solutes within the plant, adaptations to prevent

1 desiccation and overheating, adaptations to regulate gas exchange, adaptations enabling an
2 upright stature, and the development of specialised sexual organs. The evolution of roots
3 served both to anchor plants to their substrate and to acquire water and mineral elements from
4 the substrate. Roots probably evolved at least twice during the Devonian period (480-360
5 million years ago), first in lycophytes and then in euphyllophytes, from the ancestral generic
6 meristems of dichotomizing rhizome axes (Kenrick and Crane, 1997; Raven and Edwards,
7 2001; Brundrett, 2002; Friedman *et al.*, 2004; Dolan, 2009; Pires and Dolan, 2012). Further
8 elaborations, such as root hairs, had evolved at least 400 million years ago (Raven and
9 Edwards, 2001).

10 The article by **Seago and Fernando (2013)** in this Special Issue provides an insight to
11 the evolution of the anatomy of angiosperm roots, illustrated by representative species from
12 the basal angiosperms, magnoliids, monocots and eudicots. The authors begin by noting that
13 the primary root system derived from the radicle is dominant in eudicots and gives rise to
14 lateral roots with various degrees of branching, whereas in monocots the primary root system
15 is often ephemeral and their root system is composed mainly of seminal (derived from the
16 mesocotyl) and adventitious (derived from stems and leaves) roots and the lateral roots arising
17 from these (Taiz and Ziegler, 2002; Osmont *et al.*, 2007). They then note that the key
18 anatomical features of roots of all angiosperms include the rootcap, root apical meristem
19 (RAM), epidermis, endodermis, pericycle, xylem and phloem. The rootcap protects the RAM
20 from damage and assists in penetrating the soil, the RAM ensures apical elongation, the root
21 hairs of the epidermis acquire water and mineral elements to sustain plant growth, the
22 endodermis ensures the selectivity of solute transport to the shoot and protects the vasculature
23 from ingress of alien organisms, the pericycle is the site of lateral root initiation, and the
24 xylem and phloem are the pathways for long-distance transport of solutes and signals between
25 root and shoot (White, 2012*ab*). Seago and Fernando (2013) observe that Nymphaeales

1 resemble monocots in their root-system architecture and root anatomy, whereas the
2 Amborellales, Austrobaileyales and magnoliids resemble eudicots. Specifically, they observe
3 that (1) the same group of initials give rise to the protoderm and the ground meristem in
4 Nymphaeales and monocots, whereas the protoderm and the lateral rootcap are derived from
5 the same group of initials in other basal angiosperms, magnoliids and eudicots, (2) the root
6 systems of most Nymphaeales and monocots are dominated by adventitious roots, but primary
7 roots that give rise to a taproot system dominate the root systems of other basal angiosperms,
8 magnoliids and eudicots, and (3) the Nymphaeales and monocots often have polyarch
9 (heptarch or more) steles, whereas other basal angiosperms, magnoliids and eudicots usually
10 have diarch to hexarch steles (Figure 3). **Shishkova *et al.* (2013)** test the hypothesis that early
11 exhaustion of the RAM and determinate primary root growth, as observed for some Cactaceae
12 for example, is an evolutionary adaptation to arid environments and provide some insight to
13 the genetic basis of this trait.

14 During the colonisation of the land, plants evolved strategies to acquire water and
15 essential mineral elements from the soil. These included the development of appropriate root
16 architectures and the manipulation of rhizosphere physical, chemical and biological properties
17 to improve the acquisition of resources. During the Devonian period, the depth of roots of
18 vascular plants increased and their access to mineral elements in the soil improved (Raven
19 and Edwards, 2001). This increased terrestrial biomass production and the cycling of mineral
20 elements. The acquisition of essential mineral elements with limited mobility in the soil, but
21 required in high amounts by plants, benefitted from associations with arbuscular mycorrhizal
22 fungi (Brundrett, 2002; Karandashov and Bucher, 2005) and the evolution of long, thin,
23 branching roots with abundant root hairs (Raven and Edwards, 2001). The release of organic
24 compounds capable of solubilising mineral elements contained in rocks and the secretion of
25 enzymes capable of releasing mineral elements from organic compounds further benefitted

1 the mineral nutrition of angiosperms. The translocation of photoassimilates via the phloem (or
2 analogous tissues) to the roots, and the redistribution of carbon and mineral elements from
3 mature or senescent tissues to juvenile and perennial plant tissues through the vasculature,
4 facilitated the growth of the root system and improved mineral economies of evolving plants
5 (Raven and Edwards, 2001). Associations between N₂-fixing bacteria (Rhizobiales,
6 Burkholderiales, *Frankia*) and roots of the ancestral Rosid I clade evolved on multiple
7 occasions from about 65-55 million years ago, improving their nitrogen nutrition and fitness
8 (Gualtieri and Bisseling, 2000; Karandashov and Bucher, 2005, Sprent and James, 2007,
9 Gyaneshwar *et al.*, 2011). Possession of traits improving the acquisition of scarce mineral
10 resources provided an advantage for successful plant species.

11

12 *The ecology of roots and their rhizospheres*

13

14 The evolution and survival of a species depends on the success of its interactions with
15 its neighbours and its environment. Plants can interact with each other both negatively and
16 positively, either directly or indirectly (Tilman, 1990; Brooker and Callaghan, 1998; Grime,
17 2001; Brooker *et al.*, 2008). Competition between plants for limiting resources is an example
18 of a negative interaction. It is thought to drive the evolution of traits allowing species to
19 occupy different niches, and therefore to access separate resources, either in space or time
20 (Tilman, 1990; Grime, 2001). An example of a positive interaction is facilitation, whereby
21 benefactor plants provide the environment or resources for beneficiary plants to establish
22 themselves (Brooker *et al.*, 2008). Thus, both negative and positive interactions can promote
23 the coexistence of species and, through their complementarity, increase the productivity of an
24 ecosystem (Temperton *et al.*, 2007; Brooker *et al.*, 2008; Marquard *et al.*, 2009; Bessler *et al.*,
25 2012).

1 Many interactions between neighbouring plants occur belowground. Competitive
2 interactions often dominate in environments with ample supplies of mineral elements
3 (Schenk, 2006; Brooker *et al.*, 2008; Trinder *et al.*, 2012). The root systems of fast-growing,
4 competitive species appear to be adapted for rapid exploration of the soil volume, especially
5 the topsoil, by having low tissue densities and highly branched architectures, both of which
6 contribute to high specific root lengths (Wright and Westoby, 1999; Wahl and Ryser, 2000;
7 Craine *et al.*, 2001; Comas and Eissenstat, 2004; Holdaway *et al.*, 2011). This phenotype is
8 also observed in many invasive species and is typical of most crops (Craine *et al.*, 2001;
9 White *et al.*, 2005; Lynch, 2007). Greater seed reserves and efficient root foraging also
10 improve the establishment and growth of seedlings in resource-poor soils (White and
11 Veneklaas, 2012), but the roots of adapted species tend to be thinner and tissues denser than
12 those of other species, especially in P-limited environments (Wright and Westoby, 1999;
13 Holdaway *et al.*, 2011). In resource-poor environments, more facilitative interactions appear
14 to occur between plants (Brooker *et al.*, 2008). One well-studied example is the improved N-
15 nutrition and growth of beneficiary plants in the presence of legumes. Beneficiary plants are
16 able to acquire more N in the presence of legumes either because competition for soil N from
17 legumes is not as intense as that from other species or because they obtain additional N
18 indirectly from legumes either because they release more N into the soil or because resources
19 are exchanged between plants through mycorrhizae (Temperton *et al.*, 2007; Fornara and
20 Tilman, 2009; Bessler *et al.*, 2012). Similarly it has been observed that neighbouring
21 mycorrhizal plants can benefit the mineral nutrition of non-mycorrhizal plants (Schenk,
22 2006). It has been speculated that increased secretion of protons, organic acids or enzymes
23 into the soil by benefactor plants can facilitate the mineral nutrition of neighbouring plants
24 directly, and that interactions between roots of benefactor plants and soil organisms, whether
25 beneficial or pathogenic, can improve the growth of beneficiary plants (Schenk, 2006; Li *et*

1 *al.*, 2007; de Kroon *et al.*, 2012). However, detailed studies reporting the interactions between
2 roots of neighbouring plants and the rhizosphere changes effected by roots are scarce.

3 In this Special Issue, **Faget *et al.* (2013)** and **Blossfeld *et al.* (2013)** describe a variety
4 of novel, non-invasive methods to study spatial and temporal aspects of root development and
5 rhizosphere processes *in vivo*. Faget *et al.* (2013) review methods that will allow researchers
6 to identify the roots of individual plants (or particular species) within the soil including
7 genotype-marking using the expression of fluorescent proteins (Faget *et al.*, 2009, 2012) or
8 ¹¹CO₂-labelling combined with positron emission tomography (Jahnke *et al.*, 2009). Formerly,
9 dyes might have been injected into the phloem to identify the roots of individual plants or
10 species-specific infrared or fluorescence characteristics might have been used (Rewald *et al.*,
11 2012). Faget *et al.* (2013) also discuss methods for tracking individual roots in sequential
12 images from rhizotron tubes or high-throughput phenotyping systems (Dupuy *et al.*, 2010b;
13 Iyer-Pascuzzi *et al.*, 2010; Galkovsky *et al.*, 2012; Nagel *et al.*, 2012) and from the sequential
14 3D images obtained using magnetic resonance imaging (Rascher *et al.*, 2011), X-ray
15 computed tomography (Gregory *et al.*, 2003; Perret *et al.*, 2007; Flavel *et al.*, 2012; Mairhofer
16 *et al.*, 2012) or optical computed tomography (Clark *et al.*, 2011; Downie *et al.*, 2012). These
17 methods will complement and parameterise architectural and continuum root system models
18 to facilitate studies of the interactions between roots, rhizospheres and soils (Dunbabin, 2007;
19 Dupuy *et al.*, 2010a; Postma and Lynch, 2012). Blossfeld *et al.* (2013) describe the use of
20 commercially available planar optodes and fluorescence microscopy to quantify the spatial
21 and temporal dynamics of changes in pH and CO₂ concentrations in the rhizospheres of
22 durum wheat (*Triticum durum*), chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*) and the native Australian legume
23 *Viminaria juncea* whilst growing in rhizoboxes either separately or together.

24 It is evident that plant roots influence the physical, chemical and biological properties
25 of the rhizosphere profoundly (Hinsinger *et al.*, 2009; Marschner, 2012; Neumann and

1 Römheld, 2012). In this Special Issue, **Carminati and Vetterlein (2013)** discuss whether the
2 manipulation of the hydraulic properties of the rhizosphere by roots could be a strategy by
3 which plants control the part of the root system that will have greatest access to water and
4 solutes. They propose two classes of rhizosphere, the first (Class A) dominated by hydrated
5 mucilage that connects root and soil hydraulically, which would facilitate the uptake of water
6 from drying soils, and the second (Class B) dominated by air-filled pores and/or hydrophobic
7 compounds that isolate roots from the soil hydraulically. They present evidence (1) for the
8 occurrence of Class A and Class B rhizospheres, (2) that the hydraulic properties of the
9 rhizosphere change with both root development and soil water status, and (3) that the
10 chemical properties of mucilage secreted at the root tip could be a major determinant of
11 rhizosphere hydraulic properties. They then explore hypotheses (1) that the secretion of
12 hydrated mucilage facilitates water and solute uptake by younger root tissues at the root apex
13 (Read *et al.*, 2003; Dunbabin *et al.*, 2006) and (2) that the degradation and drying of mucilage
14 restricts the loss of water from older root tissues and facilitates long-distance transport of
15 water. Such changes in hydraulic properties of the rhizosphere might complement the
16 hydraulic architecture of the root system (Garrigues *et al.*, 2006) and also influence
17 preferential flow pathways for water and solute transport through the bulk soil (Ghestem *et*
18 *al.*, 2011; Bengough, 2012).

19

20 *The continued influence of roots on biogeochemical cycles*

21

22 Terrestrial vegetation has a large effect on the cycling of carbon, water and mineral
23 elements (Figure 1). Today, forests are responsible for most of the CO₂ fixed by terrestrial
24 ecosystems (Luyssaert *et al.*, 2007; Pan *et al.*, 2011). This is enabled by canopy
25 photosynthesis, but is counteracted by plant respiration. A large proportion of plant

1 respiration is attributed to roots. Information on the root systems of trees is scarce, principally
2 because of their large size and their depth. Biomass partitioning between canopy and root is
3 an important parameter for estimating the balance of photosynthesis and respiration and,
4 therefore, the modelling of regional and global carbon cycles (Luyssaert *et al.*, 2007; Kattge
5 *et al.*, 2011; Kempes *et al.*, 2011; Makita *et al.*, 2012). In this Special Issue, **Eshel and**
6 **Grünzweig (2013)** describe a large-scale aeroponics system in which the roots of saplings of
7 tropical trees can be studied. They report the allometric relationships between the relative
8 biomass of stem, branch and leaves of two tropical forest species, the rapid-growing kapok
9 (*Ceiba pentandra*) and the slow-growing African mahogany (*Khaya anthotheca*), grown
10 aeroponically or in containers filled with soil. They observe identical allometric relationships
11 between stem, branch and leaves for saplings grown in both systems and conclude that
12 aeroponics can be used to determine the partitioning of biomass. For saplings growing in
13 aeroponics the shoot/root biomass quotients approximated two for both species and 92-95%
14 of the length of the root systems of both species had a diameter <2 mm. This information is
15 important for assessing the role of fine roots as C stores, the rates of root turnover, and the
16 chemistry of belowground organic inputs to soil.

17 The role of terrestrial ecosystems in global N cycles is discussed by **Subbarao *et al.***
18 **(2013)**. Various authors have estimated N inputs to terrestrial ecosystems (Figure 2;
19 Galloway, 2008; Schlesinger, 2009). These occur primarily through lightning (~5 Tg N y⁻¹),
20 biological N₂-fixation (100-300 Tg N y⁻¹, of which 20-50 Tg N y⁻¹ occurs in agricultural
21 systems), burning of fossil fuels (~25 Tg N y⁻¹) and the application of N-fertilisers (>125 Tg
22 N, of which about 106 Tg N was applied in the form of chemical fertilisers in 2010; FAO,
23 2011). Subbarao *et al.* (2013) observe that N availability is generally low in natural
24 ecosystems and N cycling efficient, but excess N is often applied in agricultural systems,
25 which results in inefficient use of N-fertilisers, problematic leaching of nitrate to

1 watercourses, and high emissions of greenhouse gasses. The land accumulates about 9 Tg N
2 y^{-1} , whilst about 77 Tg N y^{-1} is accumulated in rivers and groundwater, about 54 Tg N y^{-1} is
3 accumulated in the oceans via the atmosphere, and about 109 Tg N y^{-1} is returned to the
4 atmosphere through denitrification processes (Schlesinger, 2009). About 25 Tg N y^{-1} is
5 emitted into the atmosphere as N_2O from terrestrial ecosystems (Galloway *et al.*, 2008;
6 Schlesinger, 2009). There can be no doubt that anthropogenic activities are altering global
7 nitrogen cycles. Hence, improving the efficiency by which N-fertilisers are used in
8 agriculture, and the efficiency by which N is acquired by roots of crops, is an imperative for
9 humankind.

10

11

12 **MATCHING ROOTS TO THEIR ENVIRONMENT: AGRICULTURE**

13

14 Since agriculture began 13,000 years ago, humans have domesticated about 2,500 plant
15 species (Barker, 2006; Pickersgill, 2007; Meyer *et al.*, 2012). These species were selected for
16 a greater yield of harvested product, effective competition with other plants, resistance to
17 pests and diseases, and, initially, a low resource requirement for growth. Thus, it is likely that
18 they were selected indirectly for root vigour and the ability to acquire water and mineral
19 elements in hostile and infertile environments. However, modern crops have been selected for
20 greater yields in high input / high output monoculture agricultural systems, especially
21 following the advent of the chemical fertiliser industry 200 years ago. It is possible, therefore,
22 that modern crops have lost beneficial root traits for low input agricultural systems because
23 there has been no requirement for these adaptations (Wissuwa *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, modern
24 crops often have reduced fitness in the natural environment (Meyer *et al.*, 2012). In addition,
25 current breeding programmes generally use ploughed soils that might not present the

1 mechanical constraints found in the reduced tillage systems that are gaining prominence in
2 modern agriculture (Newton *et al.*, 2012).

3 Soil properties restrict crop production worldwide (Broadley *et al.*, 2007; Ismail *et al.*,
4 2007; Lynch, 2007; White and Brown, 2010; White *et al.*, 2012). It is estimated that >40% of
5 agricultural soils are acidic (Von Uexküll and Mutert, 1995; Sumner and Noble, 2003), 25-
6 30% are alkaline or calcareous (White and Broadley, 2009), and 5-15% are saline or sodic
7 (Munns and Tester, 2008). These soils are compromised not only by high phytoavailability of
8 toxic mineral elements, for example aluminium (Al) and manganese (Mn) in acidic soils and
9 sodium (Na), chlorine (Cl) or boron (B) in saline and sodic soils, but also by low
10 phytoavailability of essential mineral elements (Ismail *et al.*, 2007; White and Brown, 2010;
11 White *et al.*, 2012; White and Greenwood, 2013). The phytoavailabilities of N, P and
12 potassium (K) limit crop production in most agricultural soils (Lynch, 2007, 2011; Fageria *et*
13 *al.*, 2011; Mueller *et al.*, 2012).

14 The success of the Green Revolution, which increased crop production dramatically
15 during the last half century, was founded on the development of semi-dwarf crops resistant to
16 pests and pathogens, whose yields are maintained through applications of herbicides,
17 fungicides and pesticides, chemical fertilisers, and irrigation (Evans, 1997; Godfray *et al.*,
18 2010; Fageria *et al.*, 2011). The amounts of mineral fertilisers applied to crops during this
19 period also increased dramatically (Erisman *et al.*, 2008; Galloway *et al.*, 2008; Cordell *et al.*,
20 2009; Vitousek *et al.*, 2009; Good and Beatty, 2011) and it is estimated that almost half the
21 world's food production now depends upon manufactured N fertilisers (Erisman *et al.*, 2008;
22 Dawson and Hilton, 2011). The environmental consequences of using mineral fertilisers in
23 agriculture include the emissions of GHG from their production, transport and application,
24 and the eutrophication of natural environments (Galloway *et al.*, 2008; Smith *et al.*, 2008;
25 Conley *et al.*, 2009; Vitousek *et al.*, 2009; Good and Beatty, 2011). Furthermore,

1 commercially viable geological reserves required for the production of mineral fertilisers are
2 depleting rapidly (Kesler, 2007; Dawson and Hilton, 2011) and fluctuating prices of energy
3 and raw materials cause uncertainty in the supplies of mineral fertilizers, with detrimental
4 impacts on food security (Cordell *et al.*, 2009). Nevertheless, crop production must increase if
5 the projected future human population is to be supplied with sufficient food (Cordell *et al.*,
6 2009; Godfray *et al.*, 2010; White *et al.*, 2012).

7 It has been argued that sustainable intensification of crop production will require an
8 “Evergreen Revolution” that must continually focus on reducing inputs without
9 compromising yield or quality (Lynch, 2007; Wissuwa *et al.*, 2009; Godfray *et al.*, 2010;
10 Fageria *et al.*, 2011; Good and Beatty, 2011; White *et al.*, 2012). It is envisaged that a
11 judicious combination of agronomy and breeding might be employed to decrease inputs of
12 mineral fertilisers (Fageria, 2009; Wissuwa *et al.*, 2009; White *et al.*, 2012). Agronomic
13 strategies to improve fertiliser use efficiency seek to address (1) soil pH through amendments,
14 (2) soil physical characteristics through composts and amendments, tillage and restricted
15 traffic, (3) water availability through irrigation and drainage management, and (4) soil biology
16 through inoculants or manure and compost inputs, intercropping or rotations, in addition to
17 reducing losses from leaching and runoff, and optimising the placement, timing, chemistry
18 and quantity of any fertiliser applications (Fageria *et al.*, 2011; Good and Beatty, 2011;
19 McLaughlin *et al.*, 2011; Richardson *et al.*, 2011; Simpson *et al.*, 2011; James and Baldini,
20 2012; Mueller *et al.*, 2012; White *et al.*, 2012). Approaches to breed crops for greater yields
21 in environments with limited phytoavailability of mineral nutrients focus on improving the
22 efficiency by which mineral elements are acquired from the soil and the efficiency by which
23 nutrients are utilised physiologically to produce yield (Hirel *et al.*, 2007; Lynch, 2007, 2013;
24 White *et al.*, 2012; Veneklaas *et al.*, 2012; White, 2013). It is generally observed that
25 physiological N utilisation efficiency (NUE; yield / N acquired) contributes more than N

1 acquisition efficiency (NUpE; N acquired / N available) to agronomic N use efficiency (NUE,
2 yield / N available), although greater NUpE and, in particular, continued N uptake after
3 anthesis, often improves NUE when crops are grown with a restricted N supply (Hirel *et al.*,
4 2007; Fageria, 2009; Sylvester-Bradley and Kindred, 2009; Barraclough *et al.*, 2010; Beaty *et*
5 *al.*, 2010; Berry *et al.*, 2010; Bingham *et al.*, 2012) and genotypes of both legumes and non-
6 legumes that foster greater biological nitrogen fixation often have higher yields in N-limited
7 environments (Rengel, 2002; Ainsworth *et al.*, 2012; James and Baldani, 2012; Kumar *et al.*,
8 2012; Urquiaga *et al.*, 2012). By contrast, differences between genotypes in agronomic P use
9 efficiency (PUE) are generally correlated with P acquisition efficiency (PUpE), and with root
10 architectural traits, rather than with physiological P utilization efficiency (PUtE; White *et al.*,
11 2005; White and Hammond, 2008; Hammond *et al.*, 2009; White *et al.*, 2012). Similarly,
12 although there is significant genetic variation in both K uptake efficiency (KUpE) and K
13 utilisation efficiency (KUtE) within crop species, agronomic K use efficiency (KUE) is often
14 correlated with KUpE rather than KUtE (Rengel and Damon, 2008; Fageria, 2009; White *et*
15 *al.*, 2010; White, 2013). Thus, root traits affecting the acquisition of mineral elements will
16 often determine yields in reduced-input agricultural systems. In this Special Issue **Brown *et***
17 ***al.* (2013)** suggest root ideotypes for improving P acquisition by barley (*Hordeum vulgare*),
18 **Rose *et al.* (2013)** suggest root ideotypes for improving the acquisition of P and Zn by rice
19 (*Oryza sativa*), **Lynch (2013)** describes a root ideotype for optimising water and N
20 acquisition by maize (*Zea mays*), and **Botwright Acuña and Wade (2013)** describe how
21 exploration of the interactions between Genotype and Environment (G×E) can be used to
22 identify root traits to overcome mechanical impedance in different soils.

23 The ideotype of ‘*topsoil foraging*’ has been proposed for improving P acquisition by
24 roots (Figure 4A; Lynch and Brown, 2001; White *et al.*, 2005; Lynch, 2007, 2011, 2013;
25 Richardson *et al.*, 2011). The basic premise for this ideotype is that P is immobile in the soil

1 and concentrated in the topsoil (Barber, 1995). Breeding for this root ideotype has proven
2 successful for the development of crops for the low P soils of Africa, Asia and Latin America
3 (Lynch, 2007, 2011, 2013). This ideotype should also suit the acquisition of other immobile
4 mineral elements concentrated in the topsoil, such as manganese, copper and nickel (White
5 and Greenwood, 2013). It is complemented by proliferation of lateral roots locally in regions
6 of high P availability, the production of long root hairs, associations with mycorrhizal fungi,
7 development of cortical aerenchyma, increasing P uptake capacity of root cells, and the
8 secretion of organic acids and phosphatases into the rhizosphere (White *et al.*, 2005; Lambers
9 *et al.*, 2006; Lynch, 2007, 2011, 2013; White and Hammond, 2008; Richardson *et al.*, 2011).

10 Cost-benefit analyses of root traits for improving the P nutrition of crops generally suggest
11 that root hairs have the greatest potential for P acquisition relative to their cost of production,
12 and that the greatest gains are likely to be made by increasing the length and longevity of root
13 hairs rather than by increasing their density (Junk, 2001; Lynch and Ho, 2005; Brown *et al.*,
14 2013). **Brown *et al.* (2013)** suggest that breeding for a combination of appropriate
15 architectural, anatomical and biochemical traits, such that more root hairs are located in the
16 topsoil, on roots that are metabolically cheap to construct and maintain, that release sufficient
17 organic acids and enzymes to exploit soil P reserves, will improve PUE in systems with low P
18 input. **Rose *et al.* (2013)** describe root traits that increase the acquisition of P and Zn by rice.
19 These include traits that (1) increase the phytoavailability of P and Zn in soils, such as the
20 efflux of protons, organic acids, chelating agents (e.g. siderophores for Zn) and hydrolytic
21 enzymes (e.g. phosphatases), or the release of carbon compounds that foster a beneficial
22 microbial community that increase soil P and Zn turnover, (2) increase the volume of soil
23 explored by roots, such as the traits discussed above, and (3) enhance the affinity or capacity
24 for P and Zn uptake by root cells. They discuss the prospects of exploiting these traits in
25 conventional plant breeding using a marker-assisted selection or through modern transgenic

1 approaches. In a complementary paper, **Claus *et al.* (2013)** use a mathematical model to
2 investigate how membrane transport processes and root anatomy interact to control the uptake
3 and movement of Zn to the xylem in roots of *Arabidopsis thaliana*. Their model suggests that
4 (1) restricted loading of Zn^{2+} into the xylem by Heavy Metal ATPases (HMA4) results in
5 symplastic Zn concentrations increasing from the epidermis to the pericycle, (2) Zn^{2+} influx to
6 root cells through ZIP (ZRT-, IRT-like Protein) transporters is regulated on a timescale that
7 provides sufficient Zn for plant nutrition without cytosolic Zn concentrations reaching
8 toxicity, and (3) the rate of transpiration has a profound influence on the radial gradient in
9 symplastic Zn concentration.

10 **Shi *et al.* (2013)** report QTLs associated with heritable root architectural traits of
11 oilseed rape (OSR; *Brassica napus*) in a double haploid mapping population developed from
12 a cross between a European winter OSR (cv. Tapidor) and a Chinese semi-winter OSR (cv.
13 Ningyou 7) using a high-throughput, agar-based, phenotyping system. They identified a
14 cluster of highly significant QTLs for the number of lateral roots (LRN), the density of lateral
15 roots (LRD), root dry weight (RDW) and shoot dry weight (SDW) at low Pi supply on
16 chromosome A03, and QTLs for primary root length (PRL) on chromosomes A07 and C06.
17 Interestingly, the QTLs associated with LRN, RDW and SDW on chromosome A03 between
18 36.8 and 46 cM co-locate with a QTL with pleiotropic effects on RDW, SDW, root volume,
19 root surface area and plant height reported in a cross between P-efficient (cv. Eyou Changjia)
20 and P-inefficient (cv. B104-2) OSR cultivars (Yang *et al.*, 2010, 2011; Ding *et al.*, 2012) and
21 overlap with a QTL affecting shoot biomass and PUE traits on chromosome C03 of *Brassica*
22 *oleracea* (Hammond *et al.*, 2009). Similarly, the QTLs associated with PRL on chromosomes
23 A07 and C06 are syntenous with a QTL for PRL in *Arabidopsis thaliana* (Loudet *et al.*,
24 2005). These observations suggest that QTLs associated with root architectural traits are

1 conserved within the Brassicaceae, which should facilitate breeding improved root
2 phenotypes in crop brassicas.

3 It is becoming evident that root architecture is controlled by complex interactions
4 between hormones and other signalling molecules, such as sugars and microRNAs (Hermans
5 *et al.*, 2006; Osmont *et al.*, 2007; Chiou and Lin, 2011; Hammond and White, 2011; Péret *et*
6 *al.*, 2011; Smith and De Smet, 2012). In this Special Issue, **Niu *et al.* (2013)** review progress
7 in identifying the signalling cascades co-ordinating alterations in root architecture in response
8 to low P availability, emphasising the roles of the classical plant hormones, nitric oxide and
9 reactive oxygen species, and **Koltai (2013)** reviews the involvement of strigalactone
10 biosynthesis and signalling in the induction of lateral roots and the increase in root hair length
11 and density in response to P starvation, noting that strigalactones appear to exert their effects
12 by altering the balance between auxin and ethylene signalling pathways (Ruyter-Spira *et al.*,
13 2011; Mayzlish-Gati *et al.*, 2012). A particular response to P starvation is the initiation of
14 lateral roots, and a detailed study of the maize *lrt1* mutant by **Husáková *et al.* (2013)** in this
15 Special Issue suggests that the *Lrt1* gene affects the spatial distribution and morphology of
16 lateral roots, but not in their abundance. This gene is also required for correct cell division in
17 the cortex and the development of the exodermis of primary roots.

18 An ideotype termed ‘*steep, cheap, and deep*’ has been proposed for the acquisition of
19 nitrogen from agricultural soils (Figure 4B; Dunbabin *et al.*, 2003; Lynch, 2013). The basic
20 premise for this ideotype is that nitrate, which is the dominant form of nitrogen in agricultural
21 soils, is highly soluble and its location moves deeper in the soil during the growing season as
22 the water table drops (Lynch, 2013). The ideotype seeks to improve nitrate acquisition by
23 accelerating the development of roots at depth and, thereby, reduce nitrate leaching and
24 improve NUE. **Lynch (2013)** describes root traits contributing to this ideotype in maize.
25 These include: (1) a thick, unbranched primary root, (2) the combination of a few deep, thick

1 and relatively unbranched seminal or crown roots with many thin, shallow seminal or crown
2 roots with prolific lateral branching and an abundance of root hairs, (3) a whorl of relatively
3 unbranched brace roots of high occupancy, that are shallower than the crown roots, (4) lateral
4 branching that is unresponsive to local N availability, (5) an abundance of cortical
5 aerenchyma, and (6) a high affinity and high capacity for nitrate uptake by root epidermal
6 cells. Lynch (2013) suggests that many features of this ideotype are relevant to other cereals
7 and also to dicotyledonous crops. Furthermore, breeding crops with deep, extensive root
8 systems, is not only a strategy to capture water and nitrate, but should also be effective in
9 capturing other mineral elements subject to leaching, such as sulphate (Eriksen, 2009; Chien
10 *et al.*, 2011), minimising soil erosion (Loades *et al.*, 2010), and sequestering C in the soil
11 (Kell, 2011).

12 **Subbarao *et al.* (2013)** discuss the possibilities of manipulating the release of
13 inhibitors of nitrification from roots to limit the amount of N cycling through the soil
14 nitrification pathway and, thereby improve NUE and minimise N pollution from agricultural
15 systems. Substances effecting ‘biological nitrification inhibition’ (BNI) include the
16 unsaturated fatty acids linoleic acid and linolenic acid and their esters, the phenyl propanoids
17 methyl-p-coumarate and methyl ferulate, the di-terpenoid brachialactone, various
18 isothiocyanates, methyl 3-(4-hydroxyphenyl) propionate and sorgoleone (Subbarao *et al.*,
19 2013). The release of these substances appears to occur in regions of the root exposed directly
20 to NH_4^+ under mildly-acidic conditions. The authors report extensive genetic variation in BNI
21 both between and within plant species. In general, forage grasses adapted to low N-input
22 systems have higher BNI than those adapted to high N-input systems, cereals often have low
23 BNI, and many legumes have negative BNI (Subbarao *et al.*, 2007, 2013). However, there is
24 considerable variation in BNI between genotypes of, for example, the forage grass *Brachiaria*
25 *humidicola*, small-grained cereals, and soybean (Subbarao *et al.*, 2007, 2013), which allows

1 the possibility of breeding crops with increased BNI. Subbarao *et al.* (2013) provide evidence
2 that crops with high BNI capacity can improve NUE whilst reducing the rate of ammonium
3 oxidation, nitrate leaching and N₂O emissions from agricultural soils.

4 Water scarcity limits food production in many regions of the world (Boutraa, 2010; de
5 Fraiture and Wichelns, 2010). The ‘*steep, cheap, and deep*’ root architectural ideotype allows
6 greater acquisition of water during progressive drought as the water table drops (Lynch,
7 2013). Genotypes with deeper roots generally have greater yields than shallow-rooted
8 genotypes under drought conditions (Ho *et al.*, 2005; Hund *et al.*, 2009; Lopes and Reynolds,
9 2010; Henry *et al.*, 2011) and deeper rooting is more prevalent among species found in dry
10 environments (Schenk and Jackson, 2005). Reducing the metabolic cost of roots, either by
11 producing thinner roots or roots with more aerenchyma, allows longer root systems to be
12 produced and maintained (Zhu *et al.*, 2010; Lynch, 2013). In this Special Issue, **Jaramillo *et***
13 ***al.* (2013)** observe that root respiration among six maize genotypes growing in soil columns
14 was positively correlated with living cortical area (LCA), and that increasing the area of root
15 cortical aerenchyma decreased root respiration. They report that a 3.5 fold reduction in LCA
16 is associated with a 2.5 fold improvement in growth under drought, which supports the
17 hypothesis that drought tolerance can be improved by decreasing the metabolic costs of root
18 exploration of the soil.

19 The root system of cereals comprises at least two distinct root types: primary roots,
20 which originate from the embryo, and nodal roots, which emerge subsequently from stem
21 nodes. The relative contribution of each type of root to resource acquisition and crop yield
22 depends greatly upon environmental conditions. In this Special Issue, **Rostamza *et al.* (2013)**
23 report that the responses of primary and nodal roots to soil water availability differ both
24 between root types and between plant species. They grew the drought-tolerant cereals
25 sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) and pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) for three weeks in pots in

1 which primary and nodal roots were contained in separate compartments. They observed that
2 decreasing water availability to either the entire root system or just nodal roots decreased the
3 length of the whole root system in both sorghum and pearl millet and that the nodal roots of
4 both millet and sorghum grew more vertically in dry soil. Reducing water availability to
5 either the entire root system or just nodal roots decreased the length of the primary root
6 system but not that of the nodal root system in sorghum. By contrast, although decreasing
7 water availability to the entire root system similarly decreased the length of the primary root
8 system but not that of the nodal root system in pearl millet, reducing water availability to just
9 nodal roots decreased the length of the nodal root system but not the primary root system in
10 pearl millet.

11 Many techniques are available to assess root architectures of young seedlings grown in
12 the laboratory or glasshouse (Gregory *et al.*, 2009; Zhu *et al.*, 2011), but these have rarely
13 been compared with measurements obtained under field conditions. In this Special Issue,
14 **Watt *et al.* (2013)** have assessed whether simple measurements of the length of the longest
15 seminal roots of bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) seedlings grown for 15-20 days in rolls of
16 moist germination paper are correlated with measurements of length and depth of root
17 systems of plants grown in the field. They observe that the sum of the lengths of the two
18 longest seminal roots was positively correlated with the total root length of seedlings grown in
19 germination paper. They also observed positive correlations between the sum of the lengths of
20 the two longest seminal roots of wheat seedlings grown in germination paper and the length
21 and depth of root systems of plants with 2-5 leaves growing in the field. However, they did
22 not observe any significant correlation between rooting depth at the reproductive stage and
23 either the sum of the lengths of the two longest seminal roots of seedlings grown in
24 germination paper or the rooting depth of young plants grown in the field. They attribute this

1 lack of correlation to environmental factors that might change during the season or through
2 the soil profile that affect wheat genotypes differently.

3 Many agricultural soils have compacted subsoils that can occur naturally but are often
4 the result of the passage of heavy machinery. The dense soil, together with the absence of
5 continuous macropores, limits the depth of root systems, their access to water and mineral
6 elements and, ultimately, crop yields (Hamza and Anderson, 2005; Whalley *et al.*, 2006;
7 Valentine *et al.*, 2012). To penetrate soil the root requires pressure both to expand a cavity
8 and to overcome the root-soil friction associated with elongating into the cavity (McKenzie *et*
9 *al.*, 2013). The friction component can be a substantial part of the total penetration resistance.
10 Root traits improving penetration of strong soils include greater root diameter, increased
11 release of border cells and secretion of mucilage at the root tip, stiffening of cell walls, and
12 the proliferation of longer root hairs closer to the root tip for anchorage (Clark *et al.*, 2008;
13 Bengough *et al.*, 2011; McKenzie *et al.*, 2013). Several researchers have reported genotypic
14 variation in the ability of cereal roots to penetrate wax barriers in the laboratory, which is
15 often, but not always, correlated with rooting depth and crop performance under field
16 conditions (Clark *et al.*, 2002; Samson *et al.*, 2002; Cairns *et al.*, 2004; Botwright Acuña *et*
17 *al.*, 2007; Kubo *et al.*, 2008). In the field, significant G×E interactions occur for this trait,
18 which has major implications for breeding strategies (Botwright Acuña *et al.*, 2007;
19 Botwright Acuña and Wade, 2012). For broad selection, the root system of ideal genotypes
20 will have a high mean depth irrespective of environment, whereas genotypes that will perform
21 best in particular environments will have high mean rooting depth but this trait will vary
22 between environments (Botwright Acuña and Wade, 2012). In this Special Issue, **Botwright**
23 **Acuña and Wade (2013)** explore the reasons for G×E interactions for rooting depth observed
24 in the field trials of 24 wheat genotypes performed in six environments in Australia. They
25 observe that G×E interactions accounted for 40 % of the variation in this trait, which was

1 more than three times greater than that attributed to genotype alone. Clustering of the
2 experimental data using Principal Component Analysis and using genotype plus G×E
3 interaction (GGE) biplots allowed them to explore (1) the characteristics driving separation
4 into different environments and (2) the attributes of the root system partitioning genotypes
5 into these environments. They conclude that this approach is applicable to many crop
6 phenotypes and not only allows the interpretation of complex interactions between plants and
7 their environment but can also inform the selection of appropriate traits for target
8 environments in a crop breeding programme.

9 In addition to assaying root system architecture in controlled environments, there is a
10 need for simple, cost-effective methods to estimate the size of root systems in the field.
11 Measurement of the electrical capacitance between an electrode in the rooting substrate and
12 an electrode inserted at the base of a stem has been proposed as a suitable technique for
13 screening large plant populations (Chloupek, 1977; Chloupek *et al.*, 2006, 2010; Středa *et al.*,
14 2012). Many studies have reported good linear correlations between the measured capacitance
15 and root mass (Dietrich *et al.*, 2012; Ellis *et al.*, 2013), and these relationships have generally
16 been interpreted using an electrical model in which roots are considered to behave as
17 cylindrical capacitors wired in parallel (Dalton, 1995). Recently, however, this model has
18 been re-evaluated (Dietrich *et al.*, 2012; Ellis *et al.*, 2013). In this Special Issue, **Dietrich *et***
19 ***al.* (2013)** have tested and validated, for plants growing in soil, an alternative electrical model
20 in which plant tissues and the rooting substrate behave as capacitors wired in series. These
21 results imply that, whilst the measured capacitance might often be correlated with root mass,
22 capacitance is not a direct measure of root mass, and previous capacitance measurements
23 should be reinterpreted.

24

25

CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVE

1
2
3 Cultivated plants provide most of the dietary energy, vitamins and minerals for the world's
4 human population. In the recent past, crop production has kept pace with the increasing
5 human population. This was achieved primarily through irrigation and the application of
6 pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilisers to high-yielding crop genotypes adapted to
7 specific climates and agronomic practices in monoculture systems (Evans, 1997; Godfray *et*
8 *al.*, 2010; Fageria *et al.*, 2011). There is still the possibility of increasing crop yields,
9 especially in rainfed and extensive agricultural systems (Mueller *et al.*, 2012; White *et al.*,
10 2012). Globally, yield gaps of 45-70% of the theoretically possible yield are observed for
11 most crops (Lobell *et al.*, 2009; Neumann *et al.*, 2010; Mueller *et al.*, 2012). However, there
12 is now an imperative for sustainable intensification of crop production, which entails the
13 reduction of inputs whilst increasing yield and quality (Lynch, 2007; Wissuwa *et al.*, 2009;
14 Godfray *et al.*, 2010; Fageria *et al.*, 2011; Good and Beatty, 2011; White *et al.*, 2012). This
15 will require greater efficiency in the utilisation of natural resources, such as water, mineral
16 elements and soils, for agricultural production. The efficient acquisition of water and mineral
17 elements by plant roots is, therefore, a prerequisite for sustainable intensification of crop
18 production. Improving resource capture by roots can help reduce irrigation and fertiliser
19 inputs, emissions of greenhouse gasses and the eutrophication of water bodies. This
20 concluding section provides a brief summary of the strategies described in this Special Issue
21 for developing crops with appropriate root systems for reduced-input monoculture systems,
22 and examines whether knowledge of plant ecology could be used to increase resource use
23 efficiency and yields using traditional or novel polyculture systems.

24

25 *Developing crops for reduced-input monoculture systems*

1
2 The success of reduced-input monoculture systems will require greater efficiencies in
3 the acquisition and utilization of water and mineral elements by crops. The development of
4 crop genotypes with greater resource use efficiencies requires the identification of beneficial
5 traits, the availability of genetic variation in these traits, and the ability to select either for the
6 trait itself or for the alleles conferring this trait. Several articles in this Special Issue describe
7 root ideotypes associated with efficient capture of water and mineral elements (Botwright
8 Acuña and Wade, 2013; Brown *et al.*, 2013; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2013; Lynch, 2013; Rose *et al.*,
9 2013). These include the ‘*topsoil foraging*’ root architectural ideotype for the efficient
10 acquisition of phosphorus from agricultural soils (Figure 4A) and the ‘*steep, cheap, and deep*’
11 root architectural ideotype that allows greater acquisition of water during progressive drought
12 and the efficient acquisition of nitrogen from agricultural soils (Figure 4B). There is
13 substantial variation among genotypes of many crops in the individual root traits that
14 comprise these ideotypes and chromosomal loci (QTL) affecting these traits have been
15 identified (White *et al.*, 2005, 2012; Beebe *et al.*, 2006; Lynch, 2007, 2013; Cichy *et al.*,
16 2009; Hammond *et al.*, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2009; Liang *et al.*, 2010; Chin *et al.*, 2011; Hund *et al.*,
17 2011; Cai *et al.*, 2012; Gamuyao *et al.*, 2012; Ren *et al.*, 2012; Shi *et al.*, 2013). Indeed,
18 selection and breeding for the ‘*topsoil foraging*’ root architectural ideotype has already
19 proven successful for the development of crops for the low P soils of Africa, Asia and Latin
20 America (Lynch, 2007, 2011, 2013). The development of high-throughput techniques for
21 assessing aspects of root architecture linked to greater yields in reduced-input agricultural
22 systems will allow larger plant populations to be screened for the identification of appropriate
23 genotypes and the mapping of further QTL affecting root architectural traits, accelerating crop
24 improvement (Gregory *et al.*, 2009; Trachsel *et al.*, 2011; Zhu *et al.*, 2011; Clark *et al.*, 2013;
25 Lynch, 2013).

1 Crops could also be developed to improve the sustainability of soil resources. The
2 roots of such crops might deposit more, or more recalcitrant, carbon into the soil (Kell, 2011),
3 promote the presence of beneficial biological communities and processes (Subbarao *et al.*,
4 2007), or exert a direct impact on the physical structure and stability of soils (Loades *et al.*,
5 2010). Two of the greatest ecological disasters of the past century, the Great Dust Bowl in the
6 USA and the erosion of the Loess Plateau in China, were caused by agricultural practices that
7 resulted in a deficiency in root traits providing soil stability (Kaiser, 2004).

8 In addition to reducing the use of mineral fertilisers, proponents of sustainable
9 agricultural practices often advocate a reduction in the use of herbicides. It is estimated that
10 20-40% of crop production is lost to competition with weeds when herbicides are not applied
11 (Oerke, 2006). The roots of weeds compete with those of crops for belowground resources.
12 Dunbabin (2007) explored how root architecture affected crop productivity in the presence of
13 weeds using the ROOTMAP model. She observed that crop yield was improved by rapid root
14 growth and greater foraging intensity. These traits denied weeds access to soil resources and,
15 thereby, maintained crop yields (Dunbabin, 2007). The development of crop genotypes for
16 rapid establishment and exploitation of the soil volume might allow a reduction in the use of
17 herbicide.

18

19 *Translating ecological observations to improve the productivity of polyculture systems*

20

21 Traditional low-input agricultural systems are often based on rotations or polycultures
22 of different plant species (Gliessman, 1992; Stoate *et al.*, 2001; Ndakidemi, 2006; Eichorn *et*
23 *al.*, 2006; Knörzer *et al.*, 2009; Lithourgidis *et al.*, 2011; Zegada-Lizarazu and Monti, 2011;
24 Altieri *et al.*, 2012; Feike *et al.*, 2012). Traditional polycultures include pastoral systems,
25 cereal / legume and cereal / vegetable polycultures, such as the ‘Three Sisters’ polyculture of

1 maize, beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) and squash (*Cucurbita* sp.), intercropping with cassava
2 (*Manihot esculenta*), silvoagricultural systems, home-gardens, and the rice / fish systems
3 prevalent in the paddies of Asia and elsewhere (Gliessman, 1992; Altieri, 2004; Ndakidemi,
4 2006; Amanullah *et al.*, 2007; Knörzer *et al.*, 2009; Koohafkan and Altieri, 2010; Seran and
5 Brintha, 2010; Lansing and Kremer, 2011; Altieri *et al.*, 2012; Feike *et al.*, 2012; Nerlich *et*
6 *al.*, 2013). It has been hypothesised that both niche complementarity and facilitation enable
7 polyculture systems to yield more than their corresponding monocultures (Gliessman, 1992;
8 Altieri, 2004; Li *et al.*, 2007; Seran and Brintha, 2010; Lithourgidis *et al.*, 2011; Altieri *et al.*,
9 2012; Postma and Lynch, 2012). In particular, it is believed that crops grown with legumes
10 benefit greatly from the extra nitrogen that N₂-fixation brings into the system (Ndakidemi,
11 2006; Temperton *et al.*, 2007; Bessler *et al.*, 2012), and that roots of benefactor species might
12 secrete organic acids and enzymes that increase the phytoavailability of, for example, P in the
13 soil (Ndakidemi, 2006; Li *et al.*, 2007). Postma and Lynch (2012) have investigated niche
14 complementarity of rooting in the maize, bean, squash (*Cucurbita pepo*) polyculture using the
15 functional-structural plant model *SimRoot*. These crops differ in both root architectures and
16 foraging strategies. It was observed that, although polycultures acquired more N than the
17 corresponding monocultures in soils with low fertility, this was a consequence of
18 complementary root architectures and was independent of N₂-fixation by the legume. They
19 also observed that complementary root architectures had negligible effect on the acquisition
20 of phosphorus and potassium, and suggested that few roots of neighbouring plants are close
21 enough to benefit from the root exudates of their neighbours or for roots of neighbouring
22 plants to compete for immobile mineral elements (Postma and Lynch, 2012). Considering
23 these intriguing results, it would seem that the implementation of novel polycultures might
24 benefit from an improved understanding of how roots of different plant species complement
25 each other to achieve greater overall productivity. Some of these interactions might be

1 investigated using the methods reviewed in this Special Issue (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2013; Faget *et*
2 *al.*, 2013). If the nature and consequences of belowground interactions between plants can be
3 predicted accurately, it might then be possible to design and manipulate the species
4 composition of polycultures and the varietal composition of monocultures to achieve
5 consistently greater productivity in a sustainable manner.

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7

8

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- 5 118.

FIGURE LEGENDS

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FIG. 1. Contribution of terrestrial plant products (green), terrestrial animal products (purple), and aquatic products (blue) to (A) the quantity (kg) of, and dietary energy, protein, (B) mineral elements and (C) vitamins in, the global food supply. Data were estimated from the global supplies of foodstuffs (FAO, 2009) and the composition of individual food items (USDA-ARS, 2012).

FIG. 2. Global fluxes of (a) carbon, (b) nitrogen, (c) phosphorus and (d) sulphur through different compartments of the environment. Arrows represent fluxes into and out of each compartment. When fluxes into and out of a compartment are unequal the stock of an element in that compartment increases or decreases. Compartments represent: (1) plants in natural and agricultural ecosystems (green), (2) soils (brown), (3) wild and domesticated animals (orange), (4) industrial and domestic activities (red), (5) marine ecosystems (dark blue), and (6) the atmosphere (light blue). Fluxes are the average of a range of processes. Key processes include photosynthesis, respiration, plant uptake, nitrogen fixation, fertiliser application, cultivation, decay of plant material, erosion losses, denitrification, methanogenesis, biogenic sulphur production, volcanic eruptions, sewage production, animal feed production, animal manure production, mining, fossil fuel use, fertiliser production, food production, non-food industrial production, waste, dry deposition, lightening, wet deposition, sea-atmosphere exchange and ocean uptake. Data are presented as a percentage of the total global annual fluxes, which approximate 479 Tg yr⁻¹ for carbon, 3848 Tg yr⁻¹ for nitrogen, 3809 Tg yr⁻¹ for phosphorus and 890 Tg yr⁻¹ for sulphur.

1 **FIG. 3.** (A) Cross section of a root of *Nymphaea sp.* with a polyarch stele surrounded by a
2 broad cortex with aerenchyma and astrosclereids. (B) Cross section of a young rice (*Oryza*
3 *sativa*) root with a polyarch stele and aerenchyma cavities in the mid cortex. (C) Cross section
4 of a young root of *Magnolia x soulangeana* at an early stage of secondary thickening.
5 Cambium activity results in the formation of a few secondary xylem elements in a circle
6 (yellow and red) in addition to the originally triarch vascular cylinder (red xylem elements),
7 whilst the pericycle produces a limited number of suberized cells at an early stage of periderm
8 formation (yellow-green circle). (D) Cross section close to the root tip of a young *Noccaea*
9 *caerulescens* root with a diarch stele. All photographs courtesy of Professor Alexander Lux,
10 Comenius University, Bratislava. Section D courtesy of Dr Ivan Zelko.

11

12 **FIG. 4.** Root ideotypes for efficient acquisition of (A) nitrogen, (B) phosphorus and (C)
13 potassium.