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Optimising mirid control on cocoa farms through complementary monitoring systems

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Abstract

Mirids (*Sahlbergella singularis* and *Distantiella theobroma*) are the most important insect pests affecting cocoa production across West Africa. Understanding the population dynamics of mirids is key to their management, however, the current recommended hand-height assessment method is labour intensive. The objective of the study was to compare recently developed mirid sex pheromone trapping and visual hand-height assessment methods as monitoring tools on cocoa farms and to consider implications for a decision support system. Ten farms from the Eastern and Ashanti regions of Ghana were used for the study. Mirid numbers and damage were assessed fortnightly on twenty trees per farm, using both methods, from January 2012 to April 2013. The mirid population increased rapidly in June, reached a peak in September and began to decline in October. There was a significant linear relationship between numbers of mirids sampled to hand-height and mirid damage. High numbers of male mirids were recorded in pheromone traps between January and April 2012 after which there was a gradual decline. There was a significant inverse relationship between numbers of trapped adult mirids and mirids sampled to hand-height (predominantly nymphs). Higher temperatures and lower relative humidities in the first half of the year were associated with fewer mirids at hand-height but larger numbers of adult males were caught in pheromone traps. The study showed that relying solely on one method is not sufficient to provide accurate information on mirid population dynamics and a combination of the two methods is necessary.

Key words: mirid, pheromone, population dynamics, *Sahlbergella singularis*, *Distantiella theobroma*, timing

Introduction

Cocoa is an economically important crop in many parts of the humid tropics. In West Africa, where over 70% of cocoa is produced (ICCO 2010/11), crop damage by mirid species (mainly

Sahlbergella singularis and *Distantiella theobroma*) represents one of the major constraints to production. In a recent survey, Ghanaian farmers typically reported cocoa losses to mirids in the region of 30 to 40%(Awudzi et al. 2016). Past research efforts on mirid control in Ghana and elsewhere in West Africa have concentrated on developing biological and chemical control strategies (Bruneau de Miré 1977; Owusu-Manu 1995; Padi 1997). More recently, emphasis has been placed on an integrated pest management approach that is environmentally safe and easily adopted by smallholder cocoa farmers (Padi and Owusu 1998). To reduce losses due to pests and diseases on cocoa in Ghana, the government in 2001 introduced a number of interventions including the cocoa diseases and pests control programme (CODAPEC) (Asante et al. 2002). This has involved the spraying of cocoa farms with recommended conventional insecticides and fungicides. Although the programme has achieved some success in increasing yields, application of pesticides on a routine rather than a need basis can result in excessive pesticide use, with negative environmental consequences. With global concerns on pesticide use and food safety, it is increasingly necessary for a need-based assessment to be carried out before pesticides are applied on cocoa farms. Mirid population monitoring could be used to provide such a system alongside climatic data to decide on the most appropriate time to apply a control strategy. Pest monitoring is an important tool as it helps to determine when pest numbers have built up to warrant control or to predict the correct timing for interventions (Diana and Sannino 1995; Taylor 1984; Van-Emden 1996).

Pheromone trapping has been tested as a means to assess mirid numbers in some countries in West Africa. This has shown promise as a monitoring tool and could be incorporated into pest control programmes for effective mirid management (Mahob et al. 2011; Sarfo 2008). However, the method currently used for determining mirid populations is the visual hand-height assessment method described by Collingwood (1971). In contrast to the pheromone trapping method where mirids caught in traps can be counted at any time of the day, the visual hand-height assessment method must be done between 6:30 am and 9:00 am since the pest is less active in the early mornings of the day. The visual hand-height assessment method is tedious and difficult to adopt by smallholder farmers. Both assessment methods were therefore compared to ascertain whether pheromone trapping could provide a true representation of mirid populations and give an indication of the level of damage in cocoa farms compared to the visual hand-height method. Since pest numbers are influenced by climatic factors, the relationship between climate, pest numbers and their damage was also investigated.

The specific objectives of the study were therefore:

i. To evaluate pheromone trapping as a means of monitoring mirid population dynamics in cocoa farms in comparison to the currently used hand-height method.
ii. To examine the relationship between mirid numbers, damage caused and climatic factors.

Materials and methods

Study site

The study was conducted in the Ashanti and Eastern regions of Ghana at Adobewura (2º 0’ 49.3’’ W, 6º 32’ 11.4’’ N); Ntobrosu (2º 2’ 46.7’’ W, 6º 31’ 50’’ N); Achiase (2º 2’ 20.9’’ W, 6º 28’ 37.3’’ N) and Tafo (2º 22’ 10.4’’ W, 6º 13’ 25.8” N). Six farms were used on which hybrid cocoa (bi-parental crosses) was grown and four farms on which the Amelonado variety was grown. Planting distance for hybrid farms were 3m x 3m while that for farms with Amelonado varied and was planted irregularly. Farm size averaged 0.4 hectares with approximately 445 cocoa trees per farm. The age of farms used ranged between 6 and 15 years. These farms were lightly shaded (averagely 5 to 9 trees per 0.4 hectares) with *Terminalia ivorensis*, *Terminalia superba*, *Funtumia elastica* and *Albizia coriaria* as the most encountered shade trees. The farms were organic certified and had not received conventional insecticide for at least five years. Sampling for mirid population was carried out by pheromone trapping and the conventional visual hand-height assessment methods. Mirid population size and field assessment of mirid damage on cocoa pods and chupons were carried out fortnightly for sixteen months from January 2012 to April 2013.

Visual hand-height assessment method

The visual hand-height assessment of mirid population (Collingwood 1971) was carried out on twenty randomly selected trees per farm. This involved visually inspecting mirid inhabiting sites (pods, pod peduncles, chupons, flower cushions, crevices on pods as well as the pod-stem interface) on each tree for mirids at hand-height and recording their numbers. Assessments were carried out from the base of the tree up to maximum hand stretch of the assessor (about 2 m) along the stem between 6:30 am and 9:00 am since mirids are less active before sunrise. Trained insect assessors helped in data collection to ensure that data were collected within this limited time frame. Data collected by trained insect assessors were cross checked in the field to ensure accuracy and reliability. Pods and chupons were also assessed visually for mirid damage. Pods and chupons with characteristic vivid circular or elliptical dark feeding lesions were counted as mirid damage.

Mirid sex pheromone trapping method

Mirid pheromones produced by the Natural Resources Institute (NRI), UK and previously tested in Ghana (Sarfo 2008) were used for this study. The study relied on the optimum pheromone blend, lure longevity, optimum trap design and optimum trap height reported by Sarfo (2008) to investigate mirid trapping suitability as a monitoring tool. The traps were made from 4.5 litre plastic containers. Two 15 cm x 8 cm oblong holes or windows were created on opposite sides at 5 cm from the base of each container. At 2 cm below the lower edge of the cut surfaces, small holes (<5mm) were made to drain off excess water from traps when it rained, to ensure that trapped mirids do not overflow from the traps. Traps were hung upside down, filled with water to a level just below the overflow holes. Lures containing the pheromone impregnated in vials were suspended in the traps about 2 cm above the water surface and held in place by a copper wire attached to the central top of the trap. Ten traps were evenly distributed in each farm at a height of 2.7 m above ground level with an average inter-trap distance of 30 m (Sarfo 2013). Lures in each trap were changed at monthly intervals. Traps were inspected every other week for trapped mirids (*Sahlbergella singularis* and *Distantiella theobroma*) and their numbers recorded from January 2012 to April 2013.

Meteorological data

Data on rainfall, temperature and relative humidity were taken fortnightly from the nearest meteorological stations (Kumasi: 000º10’02.6”W; 05º36’16.8”N; Tafo: 2º 22’ 10.4’’ W, 6º 13’ 25.8” N). Miniature data loggers (Gemini Tiny Tags, UK) in Stevenson screens were also placed in farms to record temperature and relative humidity to compare with data obtained from the meteorological stations. Data loggers were set to log weather data at 1 hour intervals each day and downloaded every other week for comparison.

Data analysis

The number of mirids counted (both to hand height and by pheromone trapping) were analysed using the linear mixed model approach to repeated measurements where the correlation within the subjects was modelled as first order auto-correlation AR (1). The fixed effects in the model were specified to account for location, variety, assessment method and the interaction between variety and assessment method. This was done using the Mixed Model procedure in GenStat. The relationship between mirid numbers, their damage and climatic data was investigated by means of regression analysis in GenStat.

Results

Mirid population: The visual hand-height assessment method

Mirids numbers recorded by the hand-height method were generally low from January to May for both 2012 and 2013 (Fig. 1). Rapid mirid population increase began in June, reaching a peak in September and began to decline after October. Temperature, relative humidity and rainfall patterns from January 2012 to April 2013 for the Ashanti and Eastern regions are presented in Figure 2. A significant inverse relationship was observed between mirids sampled at hand-height and mean temperatures for the Ashanti ($y=-0.0515x + 1.491$; $r^2=0.25$; $p=0.03$) and Eastern regions ($y=-0.137x + 4.1934$; $r^2=0.30$; $p=0.02$) such that more mirids were sampled at lower temperatures. In addition, there was a positive correlation between relative humidity and mirid numbers for both regions (Ashanti: $y=0.0098x – 0.6984$; $r^2=0.23$; $p=0.02$ and Eastern: $y=0.1024x – 8.0151$; $r^2=0.33$; $p<0.001$). Significantly more mirid nymphs (mean=0.31) than adults (mean=0.10) were counted to hand-height (Lsd=0.04, $p<0.001$). Higher temperatures and low relative humidity prevail between January and May compared to the rest of the year; whilst rainfall patterns varied greatly across the year with the highest rainfall figures recorded in June (see Figure 2). However, no relationship was found between rainfall and mirid population assessed to hand-height. There was a significant positive linear relationship between the number of mirids assessed to hand-height and mirid damaged pods and chupons (Fig. 3).

[Figure 1 here]

[Figure 2 here]

[Figure 3 here]

The pheromone trapping method of assessing mirid populations

The population dynamics of mirids recorded from pheromone traps differed from that observed using the visual hand-height assessment method (Fig. 1). This method indicated that mirids were present on cocoa all year round as observed with the visual hand-height method but with different peak periods. With pheromone trapping, three major peaks in mirid numbers were observed in January, February and April followed by a gradual decline through the rest of the year. The population profile in the first quarter of 2013 was similar to that observed during the same period in 2012. There was a significant positive linear relationship between the number of mirids caught in traps and mean temperatures for the Ashanti (Fig. 4A) and Eastern (Fig. 4B) regions even though the regression coefficient for the Eastern region only explained a small proportion of the variation making the relationship a weak one (r^2=0.22, p=0.02). There was no significant relationship between numbers of mirids caught in traps with rainfall, relative humidity and mirid damage on cocoa trees.

[Figure 4 here**]**

Comparison of mirid numbers sampled with pheromone trapping and the visual hand-height assessment methods

When comparing the two assessment methods, the first half of the year showed a significant difference in monthly mean mirid numbers caught in traps (3.0) compared to mirids counted at hand-height (0.1) (p<0.001; Lsd=0.55). Population dynamics were the same for the second half of the year although more mirids were caught in traps (mean=2.6) than mirids assessed to hand-height (mean=0.25) (p<0.001; Lsd=0.42). Data analysed for the whole year therefore showed significantly more mirids in traps (monthly mean=2.3) than to hand-height (monthly mean=0.3) (p<0.001; Lsd=0.47). The trend in the total number of mirids recorded from January to April 2012 was similar to the pattern observed in the same period of 2013 for the two sampling methods. A significant inverse relationship was established between the two assessment methods even though the coefficient of determination explained a relatively small proportion of the variation (r^2= 0.25, p=0.01).

Differences between regions and varieties in mirid numbers and mirid damage

The Mixed Model approach used to analyse the repeated measurements showed a substantial auto-correlation (0.64±0.22) among the measurements. The fixed effects of interest in this study are sampling method, variety and location. There was no effect of location on the number of mirids caught in traps (mean value for the Eastern Region=2.26 and for the Ashanti Region

=2.25; p=0.97, Lsd=0.46). The mean number of mirids caught in traps in the Eastern and Ashanti regions were similar through most of the year except in the period between August and December (Fig. 5A) where the number of mirids increased in the Ashanti region and decreased in the Eastern region. The number of mirids assessed to hand-height was different for the locations as significantly more mirids were counted to hand-height in the Eastern (mean=0.53) than the Ashanti (mean= 0.13) region (p<0.001; Lsd=0.12). The number of mirid damaged pods and chupons were also significantly greater in the Eastern region (0.42) than in the Ashanti region (0.14) (p<0.001; Lsd=0.1). The pattern of the number of mirids assessed to hand-height in the two locations across the study period is presented in figure 5B. Generally, differences observed in mirid populations between the different locations occurred in the second half of the year.

Significantly more mirids were caught in traps on farms growing Amelonado (mirids per trap=2.57) compared to farms growing hybrid cocoa (mirids per trap=1.94) (p=0.001, Lsd=0.38). Significantly more mirids were counted to hand-height on farms growing hybrid cocoa (mean=0.40) than farms growing Amelonado (mean=0.28) (p=0.03, Lsd=0.10). Mirid damage assessed visually to hand-height on pods and chupons, was significantly higher in farms growing Amelonado compared to those growing hybrid cocoa (1.53 and 0.26 respectively; p<0.001, Lsd=0.4. The trends in the number of mirids counted to hand-height and in traps on hybrid and Amelonado cocoa is presented in figure 6.

[Figure 5 here]

[Figure 6 here]

Discussion

Understanding the population dynamics of insect pests is crucial for monitoring, forecasting pest populations and designing IPM programmes (Dormon et al. 2007). Pest population monitoring is also a means for determining when pests enter a crop and when their numbers have built up sufficiently to warrant separate control measures or to predict correct timing for such measures (Van-Emden 1996).

The broad pattern of mirid numbers across the season recorded by the visual hand-height assessment method was broadly similar to other reports on mirid population dynamics on cocoa in West Africa (Anikwe et al. 2009; Babin et al. 2010). However, the results from the hand-height method did not correlate with the observation of high mirid numbers in the first half of the year as seen using pheromone trapping. Visual hand-height assessment largely provides information on nymph populations whilst winged adult males were caught in traps. In the first half of the year, adult male mirids caught in traps reached their peaks while mirids assessed to hand-height (both adults and nymphs but mostly nymphs) reached their peak in the second half of the year. The difference between the two sampling methods reflects generational changes of the pest. Pheromone traps mainly catch adults when they are abundant. After mating, eggs are laid and as a result nymph numbers rise while the numbers of adults then decline. On the other hand, when nymph numbers decline a concomitant increase in the number of adult males caught in pheromone traps is observed.

The visual hand-height assessment method indicated that mirid populations (predominately nymphs) began to increase rapidly in April with an initial peak in May, followed by a rapid build-up in June. This is a couple of months earlier than reported in the major producing countries in West Africa (Anikwe et al. 2010; Padi and Owusu 1998). Between June and July 2012, there was a significant increase in the number of adult mirids in traps, due to the progression of nymphs seen in April/May. Therefore, given that nymph numbers are starting to build up in April this would be the most effective time to disrupt the population cycle. Application of insecticides at the point when pest numbers are beginning to rise may be a more effective strategy to supress the mirid population before it reaches damaging levels. Timely application of insecticides could alter or delay the onset of subsequent peaks in the growing season observed in our data. Whether or not subsequent applications of insecticides are needed in August/ September would depend on how effective the early applications were. The results support a re-appraisal of the optimum timing of insecticide application in Ghana (Adu-Acheampong et al. 2014).

Indirectly, seasonal variation in climate can modify the population dynamics of mirids by altering the physiology of host cocoa trees making them more or else unpalatable to insect pests. However, it has been difficult to identify the direct effect of environmental factors on the population dynamics of cocoa mirids because of the interaction between environmental factors and host plant factors (such as the availability of feeding and breeding sites) as well as favourable climatic factors necessary for the growth and development of the pest and its natural enemy complex (Gurr and Kvedaras 2010). However, it was clear from this study that there exists a positive relationship between mirid number counted to hand height and relative humidity which is inversely related to temperature. Lower temperatures and higher humidity therefore favour mirid survival. High temperatures result in lower population size due to high desiccation risk for mirids because of their soft bodies (Babin et al. 2010). Anikwe et al. (2010) also noted that mirid populations decline in periods of low humidity. Higher temperature and lower humidity in the West African dry season would also reduce the survival rate of mirids by reducing the amount of water in feeding sites and the availability of suitable feeding and breeding sites. In a study of water stress in cocoa under greenhouse conditions, plants watered less frequently had lower water and nitrogen contents in their leaves relative to those watered frequently (Acheampong 2010), suggesting that availability of moisture alters the physical and nutritional properties of host plants which may eventually affect feeding. In contrast to mirids counted to hand height (mainly nymphs), this study showed a significant positive linear relationship between trapped adult mirid numbers and mean temperatures. A possible hypothesis for this apparent contradiction is that at higher temperatures winged adults may fly to cooler parts of the canopy. Attraction to pheromones in traps then becomes stronger as mirids get closer and so they are more likely to be trapped.

Differences in mirid numbers and levels of damage observed in the Eastern and Ashanti regions may be due to slight differences in weather conditions. Although farming practices (e.g. insecticide application and pruning) were not observed in surrounding farms, it is possible that these may also have had an impact on mirid numbers. The present study suggests the need for multi-locational studies to ascertain regional differences in mirid numbers, damage trends and for location-specific control strategies to be put in place. More mirids were caught in traps and greater tissue damage was observed on Amelonado compared to hybrid cocoa farms and is in agreement with reports suggesting that hybrid cocoa varieties are more resistant to mirid attack than the Amelonado varieties (Anikwe et al. 2009; Sounigo et al. 2003).

When considering practical applications of the two methods, this study confirmed that the visual hand-height assessment method is effective in predicting the level of mirid damage in cocoa farms. This method mostly provides information on mirid nymphs (over 85% of mirids counted at hand-height were wingless nymphs). In contrast, pheromone trapping provides information on winged male adults, but does not account for female adults and nymphs and so will not give a true representation of the mirid population in farms. However, it has the practical advantage that data can be collected at any time of the day, unlike the hand-height method which must be done between 6:30am and 9:00am (Collingwood 1971; N'Guessan et al. 2008).

Ideally, a combination of both the hand-height method and the pheromone trap method should be employed in the field by extension agents to monitor different stages of the mirid life-cycle. In practice, the distances between farmers' farms and their homes could sometimes make hand-height assessment difficult and tedious particularly when farmers have more than one plot of land. In the absence of capacity to carry out hand-height assessments, the pheromone trap could provide an early warning of future nymph numbers.

For efficient monitoring and scouting as a component of integrated pest management strategy, the use of economic threshold levels to inform pest management decisions becomes important. Work is therefore needed to estimate the economic threshold level for mirids in the presence of natural enemies and prevailing environmental conditions when using the pheromone trap and hand-height methods (Owusu-Manu 1995).

In Ghana and most West African countries, mirid control is carried out using a calendar-date system. Blanket applications of insecticides are made from August to December but omitting November. This is based on work done on mirid population dynamics decades ago (Owusu-Manu 1974; Raw 1959) and not on current or expected population trends. In the case of Ghana 111.3 million US Dollars was spent on the cocoa pest and diseases control programme during the 2009/10 cocoa season (World Bank 2009/2010). Instituting a monitoring component to complement control activities would be very useful and cost effective. Communication systems could be developed to disseminate information on the expected mirid population and inform farmers and cocoa pest and diseases sprayers on when to spray recommended insecticides. Insecticide application could therefore be carried out on a need-based system based on information from a national monitoring programme. To achieve this, a well-coordinated national pest management framework with a monitoring component is needed.

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Figure 1: Mirid numbers recorded by the visual hand-height and pheromone trapping assessment methods from January 2012 to April 2013 (at each two-weekly interval data points represent the mean values from 10 farms; 20 observations per farm for the visual hand-height method and 10 observations for pheromone trapping). Vertical bars represent standard error of means.

Figure 2: Rainfall totals (15 day intervals), mean daily relative humidity and mean daily temperatures from January 2012 to April 2013 for the Ashanti (A) and Eastern (B) regions

Figure 3: Relationship between the number of mirids assessed at hand-height and their damage on pods & chupons (total mirid damage) (mean values measured at two-weekly intervals over a period of 15 months)

Figure 4: Relationship between the mean numbers of mirids caught per trap and the mean daily temperatures (at two-week intervals over a period of 15 months) for the Ashanti (A) and Eastern (B) regions

Figure 5: Comparison of the mean number of mirids caught in pheromone traps (A) and that counted to hand-height (B) in the Ashanti and Eastern regions from January 2012 to April 2013 (at each two-weekly interval data points represent the mean values from 6 farms in the Ashanti Region and 4 farms in the Eastern Regions; 20 observations per farm for the visual hand-height method and 10 observations for pheromone trapping). Vertical bars represent standard error of means. Note differences in scales.

Figure 6: Difference in mirid damage trends (A), mirid population trends using the pheromone trapping (B) and the visual hand-height assessment method (C) for farms growing Amelonado and farms growing hybrids from January 2012 to April 2013 (For A. at each two-weekly interval data points represent mean values from 10 farms and 20 trees per farm. For (B) and (C) at each two-weekly interval data points represent the mean values from four farms growing Amelonado and six farms growing hybrids; 20 observations per farm for the visual hand-height method and 10 observations for pheromone trapping). Vertical bars on line graph represent standard error of means. Note difference in scale between B and C.

FIGURE 1

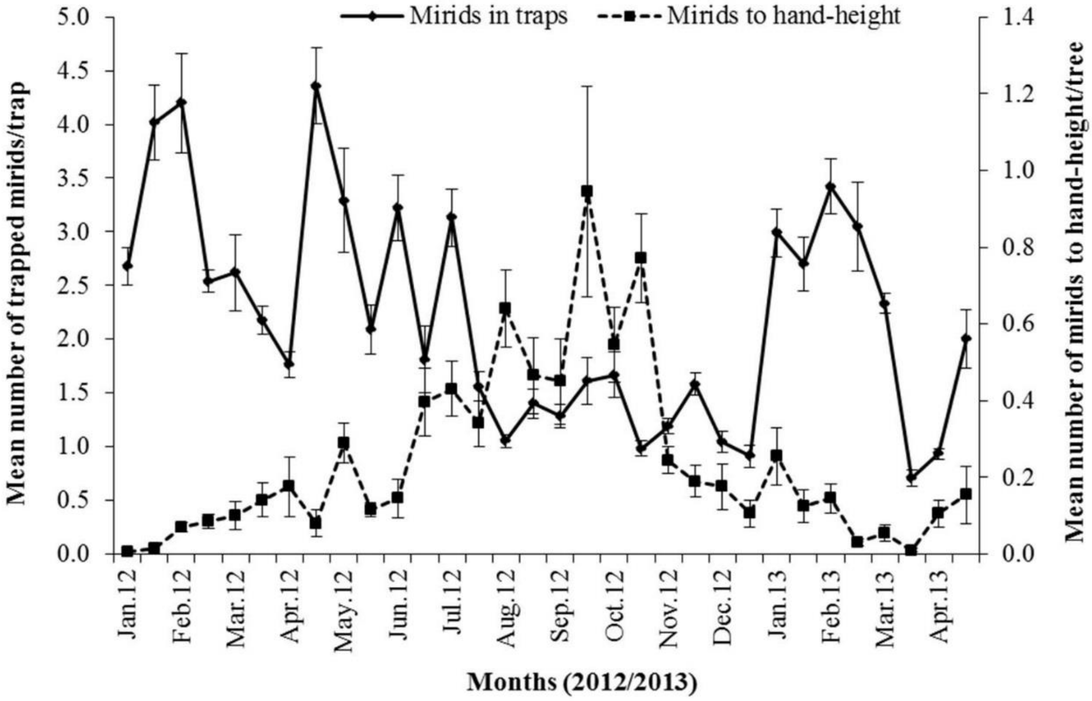
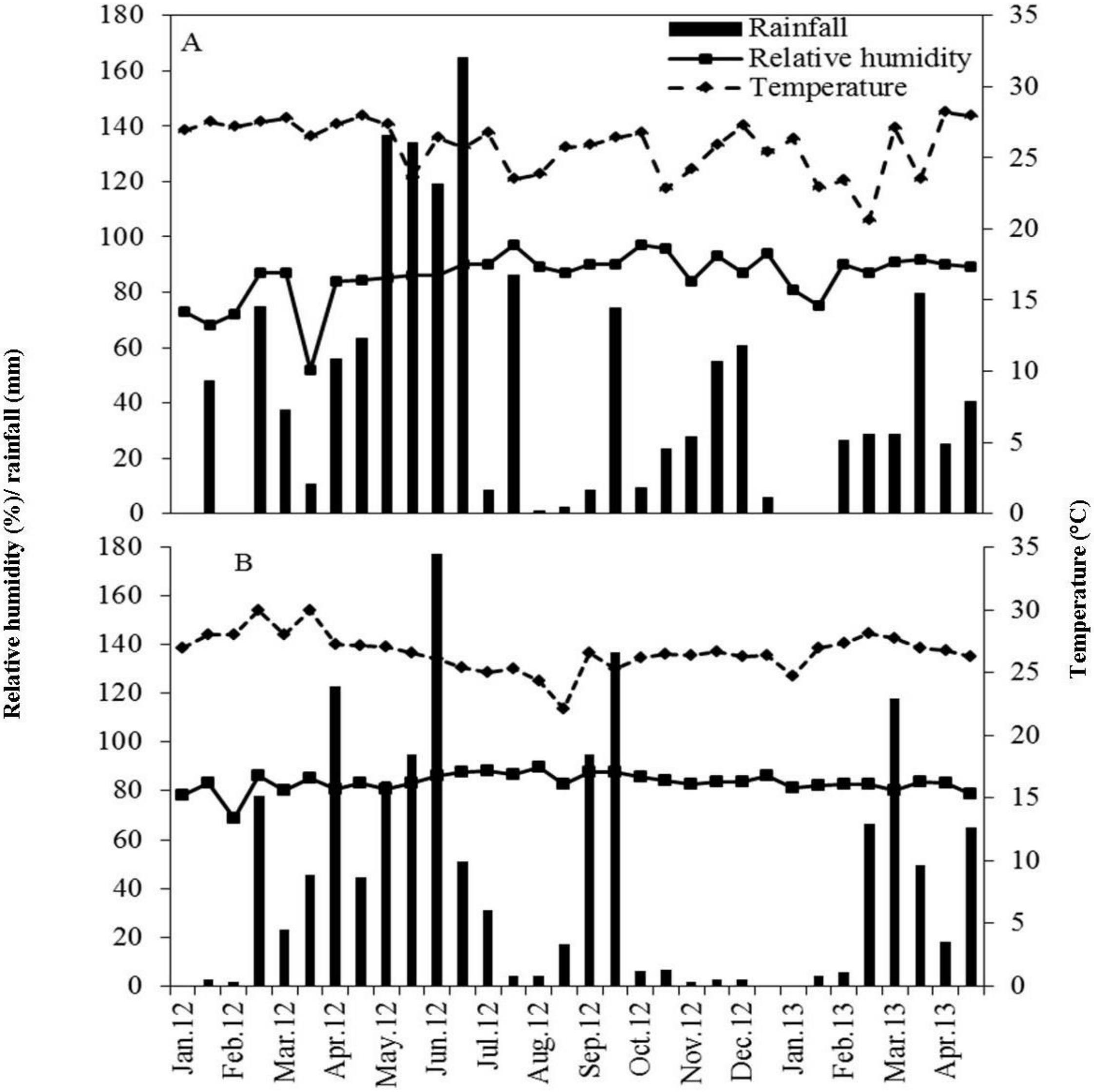


FIGURE 2


A
B
Rainfall
Relative humidity
Temperature
Relative humidity (%)/ rainfall (mm)
Temperature (°C)
180
160
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
0
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Jan.12
Feb.12
Mar.12
Apr.12
May.12
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Nov.12
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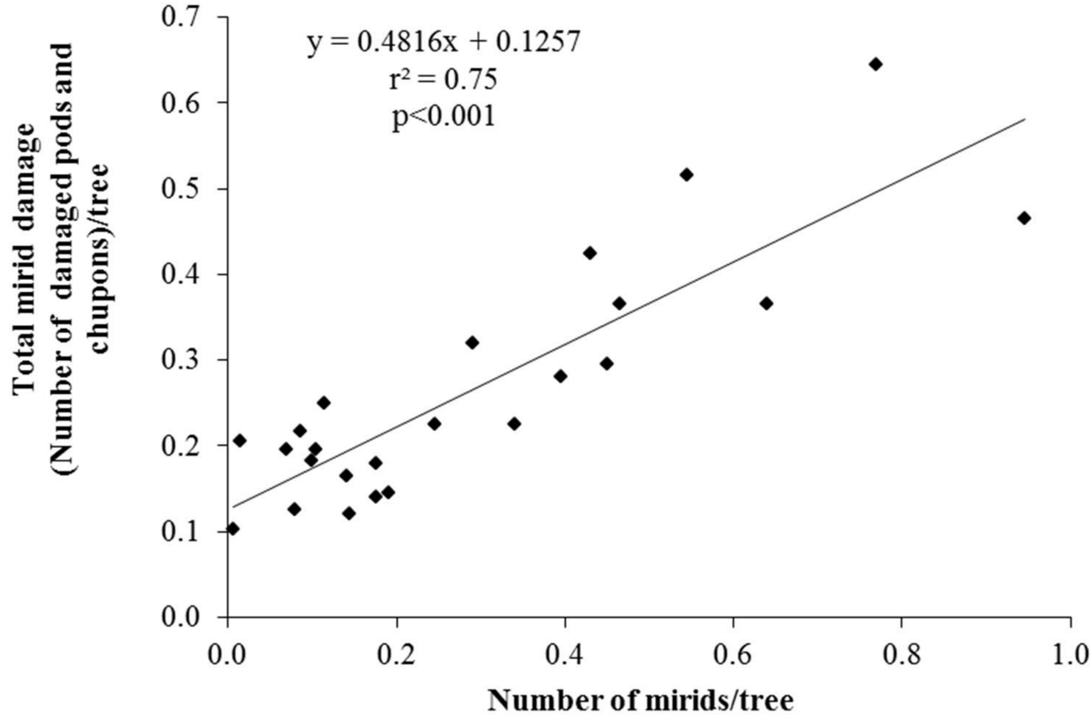
Apr.13

FIGURE 3



y = 0.4816x + 0.1257
r² = 0.75
p<0.001
Total mirid damage
(Number of damaged pods and
chupons)/tree
Number of mirids/tree
0.0
0.1
0.2
0.3
0.4
0.5
0.6
0.7
0.0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
1.0

FIGURE 4

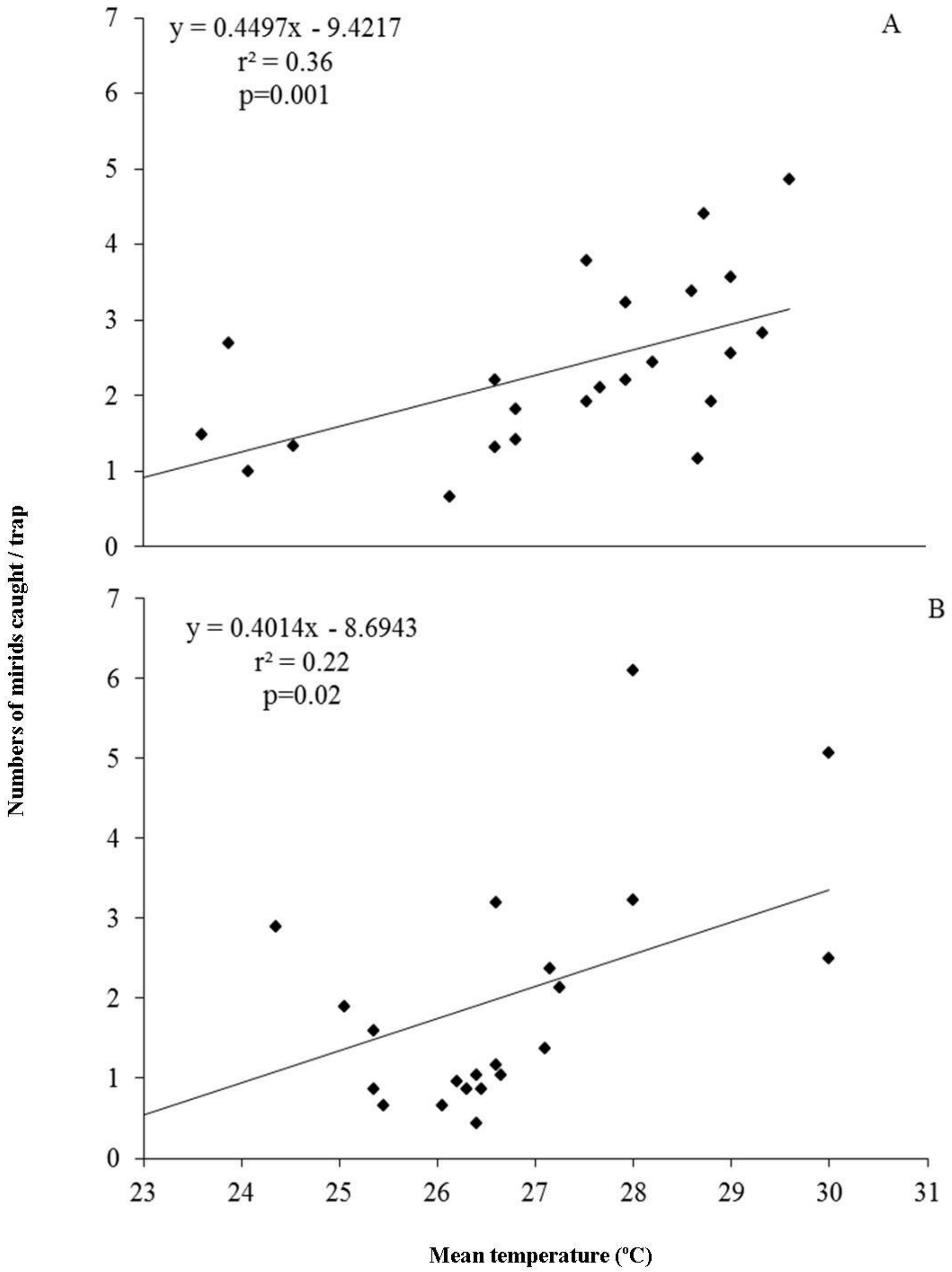

y = 0.4497x - 9.4217
r² = 0.36
p=0.001
A
y = 0.4014x - 8.6943
r² = 0.22
p=0.02
B
Numbers of mirids caught / trap
Mean temperature (°C)
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31

FIGURE 5

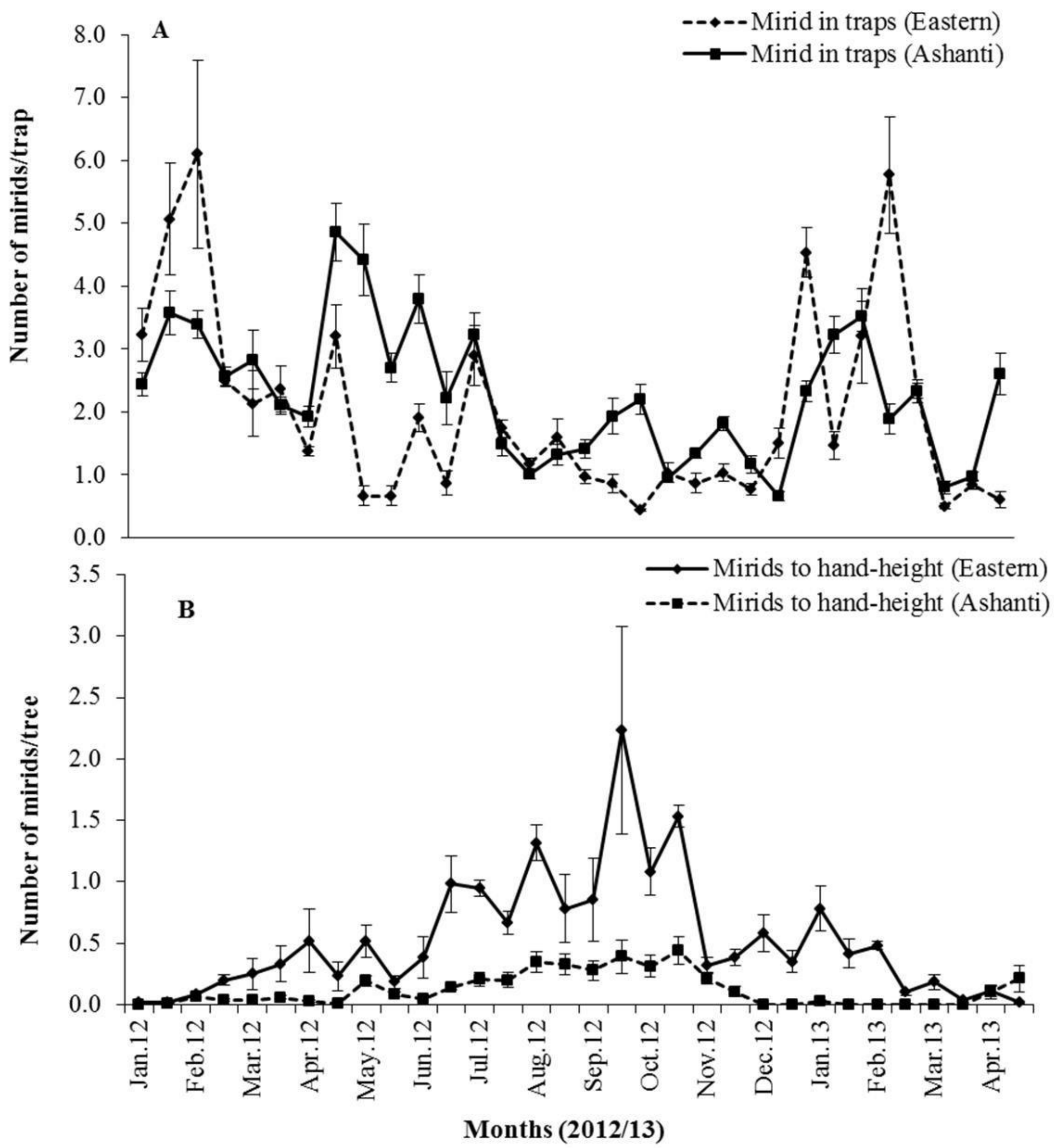
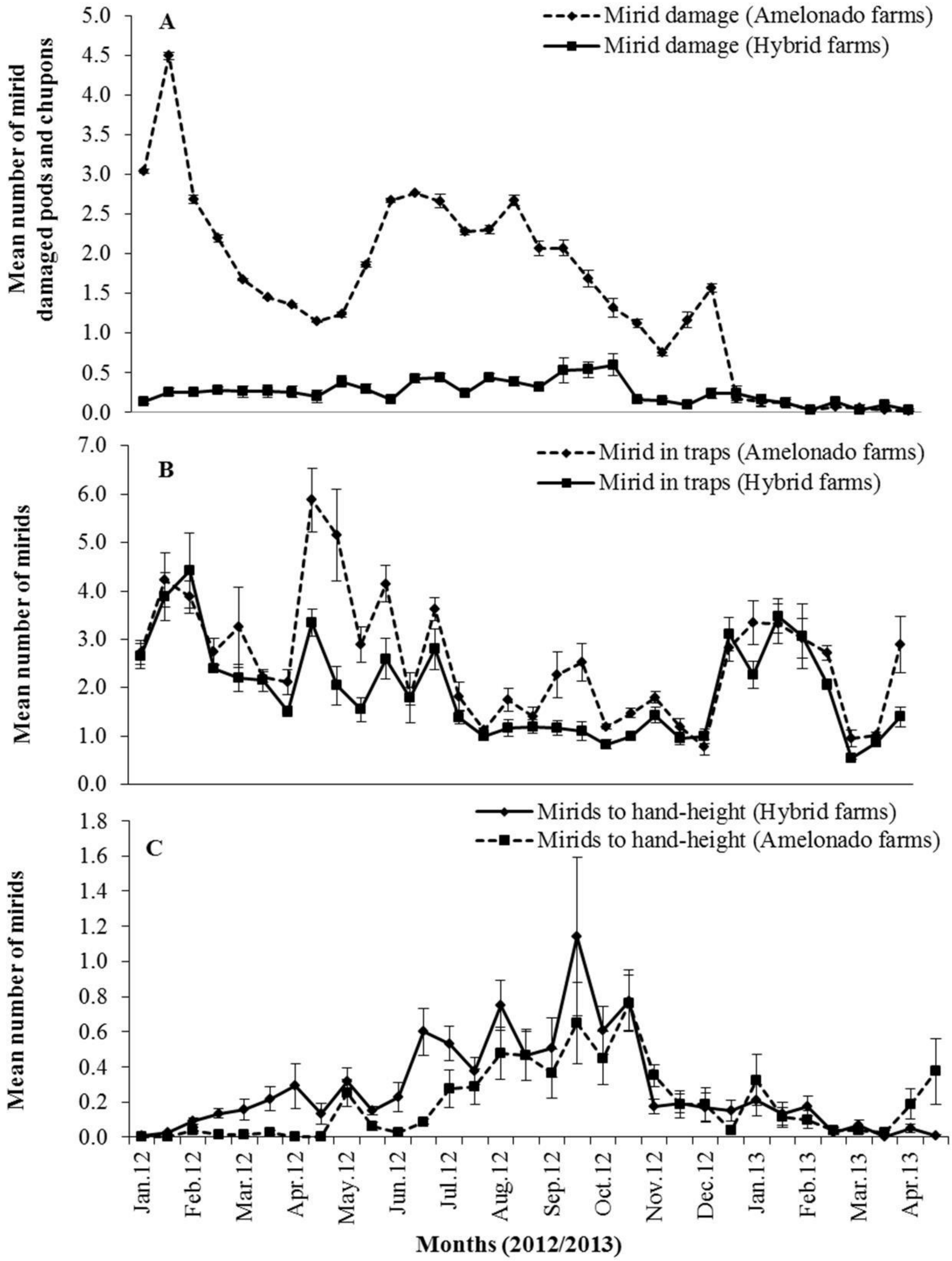

A
Mirid in traps (Eastern)
Mirid in traps (Ashanti)
Number of mirids/trap
8.0
7.0
6.0
5.0
4.0
3.0
2.0
1.0
0.0
B
Mirids to hand-height (Eastern)
Mirids to hand-height (Ashanti)
Number of mirids/tree
3.5
3.0
2.5
2.0
1.5
1.0
0.5
0.0
Jan.12
Feb.12
Mar.12
Apr.12
May.12
Jun.12
Jul.12
Aug.12
Sep.12
Oct.12
Nov.12
Dec.12
Jan.13
Feb.13
Mar.13
Apr.13
Months (2012/13)

FIGURE 6


A
Mirid damage (Amelonado farms)
Mirid damage (Hybrid farms)
Mean number of mirid damaged pods and chupons
B
Mirid in traps (Amelonado farms)
Mirid in traps (Hybrid farms)
Mean number of mirids
C
Mirids to hand-height (Hybrid farms)
Mirids to hand-height (Amelonado farms)
Mean number of mirids
Jan.12
Feb.12
Mar.12
Apr.12
May.12
Jun.12
Jul.12
Aug.12
Sep.12
Oct.12
Nov.12
Dec.12
Jan.13
Feb.13
Mar.13
Apr.13
Months (2012/2013)