

Full title: High-throughput profiling identifies resource use efficient and abiotic stress tolerant sorghum varieties

Short title: High-throughput phenotyping reveals abiotic stress responses in sorghum

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## ABSTRACT

Energy sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor* (L.) Moench) is a rapidly growing, high-biomass, annual crop prized for abiotic stress tolerance. Measuring genotype-by-environment (G x E) interactions remains a progress bottleneck. High throughput phenotyping within controlled environments has been proposed as a potential solution. Early, measureable indicators of desirable traits that translate to the field would increase the speed of crop improvement efforts. Here we identify shape, color and ionomic indicators of abiotic stress for genetically diverse sorghum varieties. We subjected a panel of 30 sorghum genotypes to either nitrogen deprivation or drought stress and measured responses within an automated phenotyping facility, followed by ionomic profiling. Images of growing plants were collected every day for three weeks, and key metrics are reported. Responses to stress were quantified using differences in shape (16 measureable outputs), color (hue and intensity) and ionome (18 elements). We found shape characteristics to be reliable indicators of performance under both stress conditions tested. In contrast, color was a defining indicator of nitrogen starvation but not drought stress. Through this analysis we were able to measure the speed at which specific genotypes respond to stress and identify individual genotypes that perform most favorably under these stress conditions. These data are made available through an open access, user-friendly, web-based interface. Ionomics profiling was conducted as an independent, low cost and high throughput option for characterizing G x E. The effect of genotype on the ionome was consistent between the two experiments confirming the robustness of the high throughput platform. In addition, multiple individual elements were identified as quantitative outputs of abiotic stress. While the important challenge of translation between controlled environment- and field-based experiments remains, the multiple revealed quantitative outputs from different abiotic stress conditions are genetically encoded. Consequently, the genetic explanations for these responses can now be elucidated using classical and molecular genetics. We propose this work as a time efficient method of dissecting the genetic mechanisms used by sorghum to respond to abiotic stress. In summary, this work provides a mechanism to overlay high throughput phenotyping with field studies to accelerate crop improvement.

## AUTHOR SUMMARY

Sorghum is important for food security in developing countries and has potential as a high yielding biofuel crop. In either setting, the plant is likely to experience resource limited growing conditions. ‘Resource use efficiency’ and ‘abiotic stress tolerance’ are distinct biologically important phenotypes. The former refers to the ability of a crop to translate a provided resource, such as fertilizer or water, into yield. The latter refers to the ability of a crop to survive within resource limited environments. Here we describe and apply high-throughput phenotyping methods and element profiling to sorghum under abiotic stress conditions. We quantify abiotic stress responses of genetically diverse sorghum accessions based on color fluctuations, biomass accumulation, growth rate over time and elemental profile. Through this analysis we report ‘resource use efficient’ and ‘abiotic stress tolerant’ sorghum.

## INTRODUCTION

The selection of efficient, stress-tolerant plants is essential for tackling the challenges of food security and climate change, particularly in hot, semiarid regions that are vulnerable to economic and environmental pressures (1–4). Many crop species, having undergone both natural and human selection, harbor abundant, untapped genetic diversity. This genetic diversity will be a valuable resource for selecting and breeding crops to maximize yield under adverse environmental conditions (5). Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor* (L.) Moench) originated in northern Africa and was domesticated 8,000 – 10,000 years ago. Thousands of genotypes displaying a wide range of phenotypes have been collected and described (6–8). *Sorghum bicolor*, the primary species in cultivation today, has many desirable qualities including the ability to thrive in arid soils with minimal inputs, and many end-uses (9,10). For example, grain varieties are typically used for food and animal feed production, sweet sorghum genotypes accumulate non-structural, soluble sugar for use as syrup or fuel production, and bioenergy sorghum produces large quantities of structural, lignocellulosic biomass that may be valuable for fuel production (11,12). Sorghum genotypes can be differentiated and categorized by type according to these end-uses.

Rising interest in sorghum over the last forty years has led to efforts to preserve and curate its diversity. To maximize utility, these germplasm collections must now be characterized for performance across diverse environments (13–15). Deficits in our understanding of genotype-by-environment interactions ( $G \times E = P$ , where  $G$  = genotype,  $E$  = environment and  $P$  = phenotype) are limiting current breeding efforts (16). Controlled-environment studies are quantitatively robust but are often viewed with skepticism regarding their translatability to field settings. Further, they can often accommodate only a limited number of genotypes at a time. In contrast, field level studies allow for large numbers of genotypes to be evaluated simultaneously. However, these studies provide limited resolution to resolve the effect of environment on phenotype and often require multi-year replication. This conundrum has motivated enthusiasm for both controlled environment and field level high throughput phenotyping platforms. However, the use of large-scale phenotyping and statistical modeling to predict field-based outcomes is challenging (17–19).

Here, we sought to define a set of measureable, environmentally-dependent phenotypic outputs to aid crop improvement. We utilize automated phenotyping techniques under controlled-environmental conditions to characterize  $G \times E$  interactions on a diverse panel of sorghum genotypes in response to abiotic stress. We describe and quantify statistically robust differences among the genotypes to nutrient-poor conditions and drought stress. Using image analysis to characterize leaf color and biomass over time in conjunction with ionomics, we report measureable, genetically-encoded, phenotypic traits that are responsive to abiotic stress. This work provides a foundation for understanding the range of sorghum early-responses to abiotic stress and defines biologically important characteristics that can subsequently be investigated within field settings.

## RESULTS

### Phenotypic effects of abiotic stress on a sorghum diversity panel

Nitrogen and water availability are two of the most important environmental factors constraining plant productivity (20,21). For this study, sorghum was chosen for its genetic diversity and wide range of abilities to thrive under semi-arid, nutrient-limited



conditions. In order to test the role that genotype plays in response to environmental stress, a panel of 30 sorghum lines was assembled (Table S1). This panel includes sorghum accessions from all five cultivated races (bicolor, caudatum, durra, guinea and kafir), representing a variety of geographic origins and morphologies (22,23). The genotypes also display a range of photoperiod sensitivities and are categorized into three general production types: grain, sweet, and bioenergy. Figure 1 illustrates the overall experimental design to test the phenotypic effects of nitrogen deprivation and drought stress with two independent, three-week-long experiments using high-throughput phenotyping. For the nitrogen deprivation experiment, we chose to analyze the effect of the source (i.e. ammonium vs. nitrate) and quantity of nitrogen on sorghum development (Figure 1A, methods). Plants were watered daily with the indicated solution. For the drought stress experiment, we tested the effect of mild water deprivation and recovery from extreme drought (Figure 1B). Fertilizer nutrient concentrations were similar to what was included in the 50%/10% ( $\text{NH}_4^+/\text{NO}_3^-$ ) nitrogen treatment, compensating for variable water volumes (see methods). Thus, the drought 70% and the nitrogen 50%/10% treatment groups are the most similar across the two experiments.

**Figure 1. Experimental Overview.** A, B) Watering regime used for nitrogen deprivation (A) and drought stress (B). The x-axis shows the age of the plants throughout the experiment and the y-axis indicates the estimated volume of water plus nutrients (ml), calculated based on the weight change of the pot before and after watering. Each dot represents the average amount of water delivered each day with vertical lines indicating error (99% confidence interval). Watering regime was increased due to plant age (shades of blue). The experimental treatments are listed above the plots. A) Volume of water and source of nitrogen is indicated and was scaled based on the 100% treatment group. Watering was kept constant between treatment groups B) Amount of water delivered was scaled based on the 100% treatment group (1 mM ammonium / 14.5 mM nitrate). Arrow indicates the end of extreme drought treatment and beginning of recovery. Nutrients were constant between treatment groups. C) Image analysis. From left to right: Example original RGB image taken from phenotyping system, plant isolation

mask generating using PlantCV, two examples of attributes analyzed (area and color).  
Scale bar = 15 cm.

All plants were photographed daily and images were processed using the open source PlantCV analysis software package ((24), <http://plantcv.danforthcenter.org>). Within each RGB image, the plant area was defined and isolated, allowing phenotypic attributes to be analyzed (Figure 1C). In total, 18 different shape characteristics were quantified (Figure S1). Principal component analysis (PCA) of all the quantified attributes revealed that shape characteristics could be used to separate treatments for both the nitrogen deprivation and the drought stress experiments (Figure 2A, B). Our results indicated that “area” was the plant shape feature that displayed the largest treatment affect (Figure 2A, B). Area measurements from plant images and biomass measurements have been shown to be correlated for a number of plant species, including sorghum (24,25). We also measured color attributes over time for the plants within both experiments. In contrast to shape, color attributes were only strongly altered by the lowest nitrogen treatment (Figure 2C). The effect of low nitrogen on plant color is well established and RGB image-based methods have been described to estimate chlorophyll content of leaves (26–31). Consequently, we focus on area and color to investigate genotypic differences in response to nitrogen deprivation and drought stress over time, though other shape attributes may prove to be useful for future analysis. To view the effect that our experimental treatments had on the measured shape characteristics and color for each individual genotype, an interactive version of the generated plant growth curves over time is available here: ([http://shiny.bioinformatics.danforthcenter.org/Bart\\_Lab\\_Sorghum](http://shiny.bioinformatics.danforthcenter.org/Bart_Lab_Sorghum)).

**Figure 2. Determining plant attributes affected by experimental treatments.** A) Left: Principle Component Analysis (PCA) plots of shape attributes for plants subjected to nitrogen deprivation (orange, green, purple) at the beginning and end of the experiment (plant age 8 days and 26 days). The shape attributes included in the PCA are as follows: area, hull area, solidity, perimeter, width, height, longest axis, center of mass X-axis, center of mass Y-axis, hull vertices, ellipse center x-axis, ellipse center Y-axis,

ellipse major axis, ellipse minor axis, ellipse angle and ellipse eccentricity. Right: Bar graph indicating measurability of shape attributes, showing the proportion of variance explained by treatment (i. e. treatment effect, y-axis) B) Similar to A, but for plants subjected to drought stress (red, blue, yellow). C) PCA plots showing analysis of color values within the mask for plants subjected to nitrogen deprivation (left) and drought stress (right) toward the beginning and the end of each experiment. All 360 degrees of the color wheel were included, binned every 2 degrees.

### Nitrogen source and availability affect growth over time in a genotype-specific manner

Many factors contribute to the ability of plants to utilize nutrients and presumably, much of this is genetically explained. Correspondingly, genotype was a highly significant variable ( $p$ -value = 0.003 when measuring area) within the nitrogen deprivation analysis. To investigate how much nitrogen use efficiency is explained by major genotypic groupings, we calculated the contribution of type, photoperiod, or race on treatment affect. Photoperiod was the only other category that significantly contributed to biomass outcomes (Figure 3A, B). To identify sorghum varieties tolerant to growth in nutrient limited conditions, we considered end biomass within the most severe nitrogen deprivation treatment group for all genotypes (Figure 3C). China 17 and San Chi San are considered nitrogen-use-efficient genotypes, while BTx623 and CK60B are thought to be less efficient (32,33). We found China 17 and San Chi San to be better than the average of all other genotypes at acquiring biomass under low nitrogen conditions. Similarly, CK60B was slightly smaller than average. However, BTx623 was one of the higher biomass varieties in our experiment indicating limitations associated with this definition of nitrogen use efficiency. Growth chamber, greenhouse and field experiments are each advantageous and at the same time imperfect for distinct reasons. With this in mind, next we aimed to more fully capitalize on the specific advantage of expanded temporal resolution available from high throughput phenotyping platforms. For these experiments we considered average growth rate across the experiment (Figure 3D). Overall, end biomass measurements correlated well with overall growth rates. For example, by both measures, Della displayed particularly weak growth characteristics under low nitrogen conditions while BTx623 performed well. However, the correlation

was imperfect. San Chi San displayed the largest end biomass but was statistically average in terms of growth rate across the experiment. Discrepancies between end-biomass and growth rate (e.g. large plants with average or low observed growth rates) may indicate differences in germination rates (e.g. being larger at the beginning of the phenotyping experiment).

**Figure 3. Growth response of genotypes to nitrogen deprivation.** A) Tables showing results of ANOVA indicating significance of experimental variation explained by either genotype, type, photoperiod or race as found by Wald's Chi-Square tests with their associated degrees of freedom (DF). Significant  $p$ -value < 0.1, bold. All three nitrogen treatments are included in the calculations. B) Line graphs representing changes in plant area (y-axis) with age (x-axis) for all 30 sorghum genotypes examined. The experimental treatments are listed above the plots and genotypes have been separated by photoperiod sensitivity (legend, right). C and D) Graphs showing average end biomass (C, box plot (area), \*  $q$ -values < 0.01) with outliers (colored dots), and growth rate (D, average change in area per day, days 10-22) for the 10/10 treatment group. The dotted lines indicate the treatment group average. Genotypes that displayed greater than average (blue) or less than average (magenta) growth are indicated. Error bars: 95% confidence intervals for both graphs.

To further explore nitrogen use efficiency, we factored timing of growth response into our analysis. For each day, we analyzed biomass for each genotype within the 100% control group (100  $\text{NH}_4^+$ /100  $\text{NO}_3^-$ ) and compared that to the biomass within the 10% treatment group (10  $\text{NH}_4^+$ /10  $\text{NO}_3^-$ ). Comparing these two populations allowed us to determine when, during the course of our experiment, those figures became significantly different (Figure 4A). This analysis separated the genotypes into two broad categories: “early” responding accessions and “late” responding accessions. Early- and late-responding lines were not found to be significantly different in terms of size before treatment administration (Figure 4B, top panel). Therefore, we hypothesized that either 1) lines would be late-responding because they were proficient at using any level of available nitrogen or 2) because they grew slowly regardless of quantity of nitrogen

supplied. We found that the early-responding lines were larger, on average, than the late-responding lines within the 100% treatment group (Figure 4B, bottom panel) suggesting that these lines are more competent at using available nitrogen. A subset of these genotypes are displayed in Figure 4C to illustrate our observations. The genotype Atlas is an example of a very early responding line, and it was one of the largest plants in the 100% treatment group, but also one of the worst-performing lines in the 10% treatment group (Figures 3C, 3D, 4C). In contrast, China 17 performed relatively well under nitrogen-limited conditions (10/10), but when nitrogen was abundant (100/100) the biomass accumulation was poor (Figure 3C, 3D, 4C). Taken together, these results point toward a potential inverse correlation between nitrogen use efficiency (defined as the ability to translate large quantities of nitrogen into biomass) and nitrogen deprivation tolerance (defined as ability to relatively thrive in low nitrogen conditions).

**Figure 4. Timing of nitrogen deprivation response: size changes in late and early responding genotypes to nitrogen deprivation.** A) Statistical analysis of differences in area over time (bottom, plant age) for the 30 sorghum genotypes analyzed.  $q$ -values for the heat map are indicated in blue, with darkest coloring representing most significance. The Canberra distance-based cluster dendrogram (right) was generated from calculated  $q$ -values. B) Box plots showing average biomass (area) with outliers (colored dots) for late- (left) and early- (right) responding lines from panel A at the beginning (day 8, top) and end (day 26, bottom) of the experiment. \*  $p$ -value  $< 5 \times 10^{-6}$ . C) Scatter plots representing plant area (y-axis) by treatment (x-axis) at the beginning (day 8), middle (day 19), and end (day 26) of the experiment for chosen late responding (left) and early responding (right) genotypes (key, right). Each dot represents an individual plant on a day and dotted lines connect genotypic averages. D and E) Color analysis (late responders, left; early responders, right) at day 14. Grey areas indicate standard error.

In addition to simply varying the amount of nitrogen available, we also tested whether any lines harbor a preference for nitrogen source. Nitrogen is typically available in two ionic forms within the soil, ammonium and nitrate, both of which are actively

taken up into plant roots by transporters located in the plasma membrane (34,35). Expression of these gene products and others have been shown to be responsive to nitrogen availability in sorghum (36). For example, San Chi San and China 17 are known to have higher levels of expression of nitrate transporters when compared to nitrogen-use-inefficient lines (33). Notably, San Chi San showed no change in average biomass when the ammonium levels were decreased from 50% to 10% while Atlas displayed the opposite response (Figure 4C). Among the 30 tested genotypes, 16 displayed little difference between the 50/10 and 10/10 groups in terms of biomass toward the end of the experiment (Figure S2). This highlights the importance of considering both quantity and source when investigating nitrogen use efficiency and points to yet another complexity surrounding our understanding of nitrogen use efficiency in plants.

In addition to affecting shape attributes, nitrogen starvation generally results in reduced chlorophyll content and increased chlorophyll catabolism. Other groups have used image analysis to estimate chlorophyll content and nitrogen use in rice (28). The RGB images contain plant hue channel information, and this was found to be a separable characteristic within our treatment groups (Figure 2C). We assessed color-based responses to nitrogen deprivation in the early- and late-responding genotypes as defined in Figure 4A. To facilitate this analysis we averaged the histograms of the chosen individuals within the early and late categories in each treatment group. We found that the histograms of the plant images contained two primary peaks: yellow and green. For both early- and late-responding lines, the yellow peak was larger and the green peak smaller for the plants in the 10% treatment group as compared to the 100% treatment group (Figure 5). Early responding lines within the 100% treatment group displayed the largest green-channel values. Late responding lines grown under nitrogen-limiting conditions displayed the largest yellow channel values (Figure 5, top row). In order to assign color-based treatment effects, we subtracted the 10% histograms from the 100% histograms and plotted this difference (Figure 5, bottom row). This revealed that although the late responding lines were more yellow, the magnitude difference from the treatment was similar for early and late lines in the yellow channel (Figures 5, S3). In contrast, the early-responding lines tended to have a larger green



channel difference between the 10% and the 100% treatment groups (Figure 5, S3), with early-responding lines showing a larger difference in the green channel. This analysis suggests that for nutrient-based studies known to affect chlorophyll accumulation, specifically nitrogen, color-based image analysis is consistent with and complimentary to the more-established biomass measures of fitness and performance.

**Figure 5. Color changes in late and early responding genotypes to nitrogen deprivation.** Top row: Average histograms illustrating percentage of identified plant image mask (y-axis) represented by a particular hue channel (x-axis). Presented is the average of the chosen early and late responding lines. Second row: Difference of histograms from top row. Grey areas indicate standard error.

#### Sorghum genotypes show a spectrum of drought tolerance over time

Sorghum is valued as a drought-tolerant  $C_4$  grass (7). Just as nitrogen deprivation can manifest in many different ways, so can drought stress. To define relative drought tolerance among diverse sorghum varieties, we designed an experiment that would simultaneously test genotypic responses to mild drought as well as recovery from extreme water deprivation (Figure 1B). First we visualized the effects of mild drought on growth for the diversity panel of 30 genotypes (Figure 6A). In contrast to our analysis of nitrogen deprivation (Figure 3A), only genotype was a significantly contributing factor for biomass accumulation by drought treatment over time. Here again San Chi San accumulated the most biomass at the end of the experiment within the 70% treatment group (Figure 6B, C). However, growth rate measurements indicate that San Chi San was average to below average in terms of accumulation per day (Figure 6D). Thus, the large biomass measurement is likely the product of quick germination and/or growth during the first few days after germination. In contrast, accession PI\_297155 was one of the lowest biomass-accumulating lines but showed a strikingly fast growth rate (Figure 6D). This particular genotype was very small at the beginning and displayed an accelerating growth rate toward the latter-half of the experimental timeframe (Figure 6B, Supplemental Shiny App

([shiny.bioinformatics.danforthcenter.org/Bart\\_Lab\\_Sorghum](http://shiny.bioinformatics.danforthcenter.org/Bart_Lab_Sorghum)). These observations highlight the importance of a multi-pronged approach to describing plant phenotypes.

**Figure 6. Growth response of genotypes to drought stress.** A) Tables showing results of ANOVA indicating significance of experimental variation explained by either genotype, type, photoperiod or race as found by Wald's Chi-Square tests with their associated degrees of freedom (DF). Significant  $p$ -value < 0.1, bold. Only 100 and 70 drought treatments are included. B) Line graphs representing changes in plant size (log area, y-axis) with age (x-axis) for all 30 sorghum genotypes examined (key, right). The experimental treatments are listed above the plots. C) Graphs showing average end biomass (top, box plot (log area), \*  $q$ -values < 0.01) with outliers (colored dots), and growth rate (bottom, average change in log area per day, days 10-22) for the 70% treatment group. The dotted lines indicate the treatment group average. Genotypes that displayed greater than average (blue) or less than average (magenta) growth are indicated. Error bars: 95% confidence intervals for both graphs.

To assess timing of response we used the biomass information for each genotype per day to look for when the 100% and 70% treatment groups became significantly different (Figure 7A). Using this method we found that the 30 genotypes separated into two distinct groups (early-responding and late-responding), though the  $q$ -value defining the difference in response timing between these groups was less significant than what was observed for the nitrogen deprivation experiment. This may indicate that the 70% watering regime was a relatively mild treatment as compared to the 50/10 nitrogen treatment, in terms of biological response. Contrary to what was seen for the nitrogen deprivation experiment, the average sizes of the early-and late-responding groups at the beginning of the experiment were measurably different (Figure 7B, top panel, T-test  $p$ -value = 0.00167). However, bootstrapping analysis failed to support a significant difference between the groups at day 8 ( $p$ -value 0.427). Therefore, we conclude that this difference in mean biomass at day 8 is unlikely to be biologically meaningful. At the end of the experiment, the early-responding lines were significantly larger than the late-responding lines, on average, in the 100% treatment group (Figure



7B, bottom panel). To illustrate our observations, we chose representative early- and late-responding lines to display in Figure 7C. Within the late-responding lines, Della and PI\_655972 performed well in the 100% treatment group. Notably, these lines were unremarkable among all 30 sorghum varieties when grown in the 70% treatment group (Figure 6C, D). This observation suggests a possible tradeoff between water use efficiency displayed in water sufficient conditions and tolerance to water limited conditions. Finally, in contrast to what was seen for nitrogen deprivation, where color was an informative metric by which to analyze plant response to treatment, color was not a defining factor for any of the treatment groups within the drought experiment (Figures 2B, 7D).

**Figure 7. Timing of response to mild drought stress: size and color changes in late and early responding genotypes to drought.** A) Statistical analysis of differences in log area at the population level over time (bottom, plant age) for the 30 sorghum genotypes analyzed.  $q$ -values for the heat map are indicated in blue, with darkest coloring representing most significance. The Canberra distance-based cluster dendrogram (right) was generated from calculated  $q$ -values. B) Box plots showing average biomass (area) with outliers (colored dots) for late- (left) and early- (right) responding lines from panel A at the beginning (day 8, top) and end (day 26, bottom) of the experiment. \*  $p$ -value  $< 5 \times 10^{-6}$ . C) Scatter plots representing plant area (y-axis) by treatment (x-axis) at the beginning (day 8), middle (day 19), and end (day 26) of the experiment for chosen late responding (left) and early responding (right) genotypes (key, right). Each dot represents an individual plant on a day and dotted lines connect genotypic averages. D) Difference of average histograms from chosen late-responding and early-responding genotypes (14-day-old plants). Shown is the difference in the percentage of identified plant image mask (y-axis) represented by a particular hue channel (x-axis) between the 70% and 100% treatment groups. Grey areas indicate standard error.

In addition to understanding sorghum response to mild drought, we aimed to assess performance during, and recovery from, extreme drought. Within the ‘recovery’

treatment plants received decreasing amounts of water for the first half of the experiment followed by a recovery period equivalent to the 70% watering regime (Figure 1B, 6B). With this experiment we tested the hypothesis that some genotypes may be able to endure temporary, extreme drought and later compensate with increased growth rates when conditions improve. During the recovery period, the majority of sorghum lines did not grow at a statistically different rate than those that had been maintained in the 70% water treatment group (Figure 8). However, several genotypes (highlighted in blue) grew significantly faster during recovery from extreme drought than the constant 70% treatment. This observation indicates that some sorghum varieties have evolved mechanisms to survive extreme drought conditions and are further equipped to rapidly take advantage of available resources when conditions improve.

**Figure 8. Rates of recovery from extreme drought treatment.** Shown are the differences in growth rates (change in log area, y-axis) for all 30 sorghum genotypes analyzed (x-axis) between the 70% watering regime and the recovery samples following extreme drought treatment (days 21-24, figure 1B). The dotted line indicates the average growth rate difference calculated between the two treatment populations, while the average growth rate difference for each genotype is plotted (dots). Genotypes that displayed significantly faster (blue) or slower (magenta) growth rates following extreme drought are indicated, in addition to those that were not significantly affected (black). Error bars: 95% confidence intervals.

#### Ionic profiling as a heritable, independent, measurable readout of abiotic stress response.

In addition to the image-based analysis used above to reveal measureable biomass- and color-based outcomes in response to abiotic stress, we also sought ionic signatures of stress response in sorghum at the end of the experiments (Figures S4, S5). This analysis had two objectives: 1) to validate the robustness and reproducibility of our experimental design and 2) to further define the G x E effect on sorghum subjected to either nitrogen deprivation or drought conditions (Figures 9, 10).

We were unable to include the recovery drought samples due to the small size of many of the genotypes at the end of the experiment. It has been established that both genetic and environmental factors and their interactions play a significant role in determining the plant ionome (37–42). Each element was modeled as a function of both genotype and treatment, and genotype was a significant factor for most elements in both nitrogen deprivation and drought stress experiments (Figures 9A, 10A).

**Figure 9. Ionomic profiling of genotypes at the end of nitrogen deprivation treatments.** A) Top Panel: A total variance partition model is created for every element and being shown is the percent variance explained by each partition of the model (yellow: genotype, green: treatment, purple: interaction between genotype and treatment, grey: unexplained variance). Bottom Panel: Significance of contribution from each partition is assessed using Wald's Chi-Square statistics. Significant cells (q-value < 0.05) are colored with levels of blue and non-significant cells are light grey. B) Top panel: Principal components are calculated over all elements, applied to the data and are color coded for treatment (left). 95% confidence ellipses are calculated for each of the treatment groups and the dots indicate the center of mass (right). The percent variance explained by each component is indicated in parenthesis. Bottom panel: Loadings for each element from the first two principal components are shown on the y-axis and are color filled based on the direction and strength of the contribution. Positive direction is colored blue and negative direction is colored red. For a given element, the color for PC1 and PC2 are related by the unit circle and saturation of the color is equal to the length of the projection into each of the two directions. C) Heat map by genotype testing the difference between the high (100/100) and low (10/10) treatment groups for every element using ANOVA. Significant cells (q-value < 0.05) are colored with levels of blue while non-significant cells are light grey.

**Figure 10. Ionomic profiling of genotypes after mild drought stress.** A) A total variance partition model is created for every element and being shown is the percent variance explained by each partition of the model (yellow: genotype, green: treatment, purple: interaction between genotype and treatment, grey: unexplained variance). B)

Top panel: Principal components are calculated over all elements, applied to the data and are color coded for treatment (left). 95% confidence ellipses are calculated for each of the treatment groups and the dots indicate the center of mass (right). The percent variance explained by each component is indicated in parenthesis. Bottom panel: Loadings for each element from the first two principal components are shown on the y-axis and are color filled based on the direction and strength of the contribution. Positive direction is colored blue and negative direction is colored red. For a given element, the color for PC1 and PC2 are related by the unit circle and saturation of the color is equal to the length of the projection into each of the two directions. C) Scatter plot showing percent contribution of genotype effect for each element (key: right) in both experiments (x-axis: nitrogen y-axis: drought). Solid black line represents linear best fit.  $R^2$  shown in upper-left corner.

Nitrogen deprivation had a measurable effect on every element (Figures 9A, B) while a treatment effect could not be resolved between 100% and 70% water availability for most elements (Figure 10A). PCA of the elements revealed more separation of the nitrogen deprivation treatments than the drought treatments, with the two lower nitrogen treatment groups separating from the high treatment group (Figures 9B, 10B). Both micro (Se, Rb, Mo, Cd) and macro (K, P) nutrients contributed strongly to the PCs separating the 100/100 treatment group away from the other two treatments within the PCA (Figure 9B, bottom panel). Using the change in each element between the 100/100 and 10/10 as the response variable we clustered the accessions (Figures 9C). These groupings did not correlate with the observed biomass differences discussed above (Figure 4A, 7A, S6) indicating that the ionomic profile reflects different physiological properties. Together, these observations provide a baseline for further investigation into the role of the ionome in abiotic stress and the effect of abiotic stress on the ionome.

## DISCUSSION

Crops adapted to nutrient-poor conditions will be an invaluable resource for realizing the goal of dedicated bioenergy crops grown without irrigation and limited

fertilizer on marginal lands. Robust, quantitative phenotypes are a prerequisite for genetic investigations and these can be gathered using high throughput phenotyping and image analysis. In order to test for and quantify G x E interactions we designed a strategy that utilized tightly controlled environmental conditions in a high-throughput manner in the genetically diverse, stress-resistant crop, sorghum. Responding to stress is costly to plants. As such, there may be inherent trade-offs associated with ability to thrive under multiple abiotic stress conditions. Overall our results indicate that no single variety is optimized for both abiotic stresses tested in terms of biomass accumulation. Within this context, we went beyond characterizing biomass as an output of stress tolerance and measured changes in color and elemental profile. This work highlights the fact that the generally observed and measured response to a given abiotic stress may often appear to be the same (i. e. stressed plants produce less biomass), but the biological and chemical signaling within the plant is distinct depending on the stress. These signals and responses are much more difficult to measure, but will be critical for understanding and improving plant resistance to abiotic stress going forward.

Previous work has shown that plants can utilize different forms of nitrogen, yet preference can be influenced greatly by genotype and the environment (35). Factors such as soil pH, CO<sub>2</sub> levels, temperature and the availability of other nutrients have an impact on nitrogen uptake (43,44). Ammonium causes acidification of the soil, which affects the uptake of other nutrients and likely alters the root microbiome. Additionally, root architecture is affected by nitrogen source and nutrient availability. It has been shown for a number of species, including maize and barley, that ammonium causes a reduction in lateral root branching that can be reversed with the addition of phosphorous (45,46,42,47). In *Arabidopsis*, nitrogen-phosphorous signaling has been studied in detail and the presence of nitrate has been shown to inhibit phosphorous uptake (48,49). We measured the effects of nitrogen deprivation as well as the source of nitrogen (ammonium vs nitrate). Some genotypes were more affected by nitrogen source in terms of end biomass than others, for example the difference between San Chi San and Atlas (Figure 4C). Through ionomic profiling after the nitrogen deprivation experiment, we show that phosphorous was one of the elements with the largest treatment effect

(Figures 9). Dry weight-based concentration of phosphorous was higher in the low nitrogen treatment groups, both of which received the same nitrate treatment, compared to the high nitrogen treatment group (Figure S4). This highlights the value of tightly controlled environments for elucidating the possible conservation and nuances of plant growth responses. Taken together, these data are consistent with what other studies that have shown: some genotypes have a preference for nitrogen source and other environmental factors influence that preference.

Some of the most productive crops in use today are C4 grasses like corn (*Zea mays*), sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), and sugarcane (primarily *Saccharum officinarum*) (Reviewed in Leakey, 2009). These crops have cellular functions and chemistries that result in high rates of photosynthesis in spite of drought and nutrient-poor conditions. However, within each crop group, significant genetic and phenotypic variety exists. The sorghum diversity panel presented here represents a wide, yet incomplete, range of known sorghum genotypic and phenotypic diversity. Tens of thousands of sorghum accessions are curated and maintained by a number of national and international institutions (22). The largest such institution, the US National Sorghum Collection (GRIN database), provides agronomic characteristic information for 40–60 % of the collection (e. g. growth and morphology characteristics, insect and disease resistance, chemical properties, production quality, photoperiod in temperate climates). Thus, much work is yet to be done to fully characterize and maximize the potential of this hearty, productive crop species.

Nitrogen and water use efficiency are traditionally defined by the difference in biomass between plants grown in resource sufficient versus resource limited conditions at the end of the growing season. Stated differently, this measure asks the question: How efficient is a plant at translating a provided resource (nitrogen or water) into plant biomass. Equally important is the ability to efficiently use a limited resource. Factors that play into these distinct definitions of resource use efficiency include ability to survive periods of extreme stress and rapid utilization of resources as they become available. In this manuscript, we make progress toward deconstructing the building blocks that make



up nitrogen and water use efficiency phenotypes. These analyses reveal diverse quantitative indicators of abiotic stress and genotypic differences in stress mitigation. Having deconstructed these building blocks, we are now in a position to discover the underlying genetic explanations for genotypic variability in resource use efficiency and tolerance to resource limited growth conditions. Further, this work forms a foundation for future research to overlay additional abiotic and biotic stress conditions to achieve a holistic view of sorghum G x E phenotypes. The overall goal of this research is to support such efforts and expedite the process of meaningful crop improvement.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### Plant growth conditions

Round pots (10 cm diameter) fitted with drainage trays were pre-filled with Profile® Field & Fairway™ calcined clay mixture (Hummert International, Earth City, Missouri) the goal being to minimize soil contaminants (microbes, nutrients, etc.) and maximize drainage. Before the beginning of each experiment, the thirty genotypes of *Sorghum bicolor* (L.) Moench (Table S1) were planted, bottom-watered once daily using distilled water (reverse osmosis), then allowed to germinate for 6 days in a Conviron growth chamber (day/night temperature: 32°C/22°C, day/night humidity: 40%/50% (night), day length: 16hr, light source: Philips T5 High Output fluorescent bulbs (4100 K (Cool white)) and halogen incandescent bulbs (2900K (Warm white)), light intensity: 400 µmol/m<sup>2</sup>/s). On day 6, plants were barcoded (including genotype identification, water treatment group, and a unique pot identification number), randomized, then loaded onto the Bellwether Phenotyping Platform (Conviron, day/night temperature: 32°C/22°C, day/night humidity: 40%/50% (night), day length: 16hr, light source: metal halide and high pressure sodium, light intensity: 400 µmol/m<sup>2</sup>/s) Plants continued to be watered using distilled water by the system for another 2 days, with experimental treatments (described below) and imaging beginning on day 8.

### Nitrogen deprivation treatments:

(100% Ammonium/100% Nitrate): 6.5 mM KNO<sub>3</sub>, 4.0 mM Ca(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 1.0 mM NH<sub>4</sub>H<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 2.0 mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, micronutrients, pH ~4.6

570

571 (50% Ammonium/10% Nitrate): 0.65 mM KNO<sub>3</sub>, 4.95 mM KCl, 0.4 mM Ca(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O,

572 3.6 mM CaCl<sub>2</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.5 mM NH<sub>4</sub>H<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 0.5 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 2.0 mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, pH

573 ~4.8

574

575 (10% Ammonium/10% Nitrate): 0.65 mM KNO<sub>3</sub>, 4.95 mM KCl, 0.4 mM Ca(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O,

576 3.6 mM CaCl<sub>2</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.1 mM NH<sub>4</sub>H<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 0.9 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 2.0 mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O,

577 micronutrients, pH ~5.0

578

579 The same micronutrients were used for all above treatments: 4.6 μM H<sub>3</sub>BO<sub>3</sub>, 0.5 μM

580 MnCl<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.2 μM ZnSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.1 μM (NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>6</sub>Mo<sub>7</sub>O<sub>24</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.2 μM MnSO<sub>4</sub>·H<sub>2</sub>O,

581 71.4 μM Fe-EDTA

582

583 Drought stress treatments: concentrations of macro- and micronutrients adjusted for

584 volume delivered, based on formulation used in 50% Ammonium/10% Nitrate treatment

585 above.

586

587 100% (same as 50% Ammonium/10% Nitrate): 0.65 mM KNO<sub>3</sub>, 4.95 mM KCl, 0.4 mM

588 Ca(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 3.6 mM CaCl<sub>2</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.5 mM NH<sub>4</sub>H<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 0.5 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 2.0 mM

589 MgSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, 4.6 μM H<sub>3</sub>BO<sub>3</sub>, 0.5 μM MnCl<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.2 μM ZnSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.1 μM

590 (NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>6</sub>Mo<sub>7</sub>O<sub>24</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.2 μM MnSO<sub>4</sub>·H<sub>2</sub>O, 71.4 μM Fe-EDTA, pH ~4.8

591

592 70% (days 8-26) and Recovery (days 19-26): 0.93 mM KNO<sub>3</sub>, 7.07 mM KCl, 0.57 mM

593 Ca(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 5.14 mM CaCl<sub>2</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.71 mM NH<sub>4</sub>H<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 0.71 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 2.86

594 mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, 6.57 μM H<sub>3</sub>BO<sub>3</sub>, 0.71 μM MnCl<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.29 μM ZnSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.14

595 μM (NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>6</sub>Mo<sub>7</sub>O<sub>24</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.29 μM MnSO<sub>4</sub>·H<sub>2</sub>O, 102 μM Fe-EDTA, pH ~4.7

596

597 Recovery (days 8-18): 1.3 mM KNO<sub>3</sub>, 9.9 mM KCl, 0.8 mM Ca(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 7.2 mM

598 CaCl<sub>2</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O, 1.0 mM NH<sub>4</sub>H<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 1.0 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 4 mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, 9.2 μM H<sub>3</sub>BO<sub>3</sub>,

599 1.0 μM MnCl<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.4 μM ZnSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.2 μM (NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>6</sub>Mo<sub>7</sub>O<sub>24</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O, 0.4 μM

600 MnSO<sub>4</sub>·H<sub>2</sub>O, 142.8 μM Fe-EDTA, pH ~4.5



## Image Processing

Images were analyzed by using an open-source platform named PlantCV. This package primarily contains wrapper functions around the commonly used open-source image analysis software called OpenCV. To get useful information from a given image, the plant must be segmented out of the picture using various mask generation methods to remove the background so all that remains is plant material (see figure 1). A pipeline was developed to complete this task for the side-view and top-view cameras separately and they were simply repeated for every respective image in a high-throughput computation cluster. For this dataset of approximately 90,000 images with the computation split over 40 cores, computation time was roughly four hours. Upon completion, data files are created that contain parameterizations of various shape features and color information from several color-spaces for every image analyzed.

## Outlier Detection and Removal Criteria

Outliers were detected and removed by implementing Cook's distance on a linear model (50) that only included the interaction effect of treatment, genotype and time. That is, for each observation, an influence measure is obtained as the difference of the model with and without the observation. After getting a measure for all observations in the dataset, outliers were defined as having an influence greater than four times that of the mean influence and were subsequently removed from the remaining analysis.

## Bootstrap Methods

To better understand the importance of the difference between the two responder types, an empirical distribution is created by randomly selecting 10 genotypes to be in one group, placing the remaining 20 to be in the other, and calculating the difference in mean biomass between them. This process is repeated 1000 times and the p-value is calculated as the number of times the absolute value of the difference is greater than the difference of the early and late responders divided by 1000.

## Exploratory PCA

Two types of PCA's are generated: one for the shape features and the other for color features. To get an idea of what shapes are important to examine further, all shape parameterizations that are generated from PlantCV are included in the dimensional reduction. Plotting PC1 vs PC2 shows that there is a separation of treatment groups along the PC1 axis in both drought and nitrogen experiments. Examining the eigenvalues and correlations for this axis shows the most important traits to be hull area, area, height, and perimeter and that these four traits are all highly correlated with each other. This observation is true in both experiments and the choice of using area for the primary outcome is two-fold. The first is that it is the trait that explains the most variance along PC1 and the second is that, relative to the other measures, area is the most robust to outlier pixels from image processing.

Along with the shape features, color as defined by the hue channel is examined with principal components. The hue channel is returned from PlantCV as the number of pixels in the image mask for a particular degree range of the hue spectrum. The resolution of color is within two degrees meaning that the hue circle, which is understood to be continuous, is broken up in two degree increments resulting in one hundred eighty bins and all of these bins are included in the dimensional reduction. While color does not appear to separate the treatment groups in the drought experiment, examining the eigenvalues of PC1 in the nitrogen experiment reveals that the degrees that correspond to yellow-like and green-like colors are the bins that are influencing the separation of the treatments.

### Trends GLMM-ANOVA

Using area as the primary outcome, a general linear mixed model was created to identify significance sources of variance adjusting for all other sources, otherwise known as type III sum of squares. Designating genotype as G, treatment as E, and time as T, there are six fixed effects: G, E, GxE, GxT, ExT, GxExT. The mixed effect is a random slope and intercept of the repeated measures over time. To get a p-value for each source of variation, Wald Chi-Square statistic was implemented and is a leave-one-out model fitting procedure which allows for adjustment of all other sources.

## Each Day GLM

Given that the ANOVA showed significance in the three-way interaction, it should be true that there is variance in how long it took for a given genotype to respond. The procedure was to simply loop through each genotype and each day and fit a linear model that only includes the treatment effect. The p-value is obtained from a F-statistic generated from the sum of squares of the treatment source of variation. After getting all the raw p-values, a Benjamini-Hochberg FDR multiple comparisons correction is done to aid in eliminating false positives. After the correction, there exists a small number of p-values that are extremely small and a linear color gradient would be uninformative so a log-transform of the q-values helps create a smoother, more informative, gradient. A hierarchical-agglomerative clustering routine is done on the corrected p-values to bring clusters within the data to light. Each line had an associated vector of p-values and a Canberra distance is calculated for all pairwise vectors which are then grouped by Ward's minimum variance method.

## Color Processing

PlantCV returns several color-space histograms for every image that is run through the pipeline (RGB, HSV, LAB, and NIR). Every channel from each color-space is a vector representing values (or bins) from 0 to 255 which are black to full color respectively. All image channel histograms were normalized by dividing each of the bins by the total number of pixels in the image mask ultimately returning the percentage of pixels in the mask that take on the value of that bin. The hue channel is a 360 degree parameterization of the visible light spectrum and contains the number of pixels found at each degree. The colors of most importance are between 0 and 120 degrees which correspond to the gradient of reds to oranges to yellows to greens. Colors beyond this range, like cyan and magenta, have values of all zeros and are not shown. Means and 95% confidence intervals as calculated on a per degree basis over the replicates.

## Ionomics Profiling and Analysis

The most recent mature leaf was sampled from each plant on day 26 of each experiment, placed in a coin envelope and dried in a 45°C oven for a minimum of 48

hours. Large samples were crushed by hand and subsampled to 75mg. Subsamples or whole leaves of smaller samples were weighed into borosilicate glass test tubes and digested in 2.5 mL nitric acid (AR select, Macron) containing 20ppb indium as a sample preparation internal standard. Digestion was carried out by soaking overnight at room temperature and then heating to 95°C for 4hrs. After cooling, samples were diluted to 10 mL using ultra-pure water (UPW, Millipore Milli-Q). Samples were diluted an additional 5x with UPW containing yttrium as an instrument internal standard using an ESI prepFAST autodilution system (Elemental Scientific). A Perkin Elmer NexION 350D with helium mode enabled for improved removal of spectral interferences was used to measure concentrations of B, Na, Mg, Al, P, S K, Ca, Mn, Fe, Co, Ni, Cu, Zn, As, Se, Rb, Mo, and Cd. Instrument reported concentrations are corrected for the yttrium and indium internal standards and a matrix matched control (pooled leaf digestate) as described (51). The control was run every 10 samples to correct for element-specific instrument drift. Concentrations were converted to parts-per-million (mg analyte/kg sample) by dividing instrument reported concentrations by the sample weight.

Due to low analyte concentrations, data from samples with less than 20 mg of tissue were removed from further analysis. This left very few samples in the 50% field capacity drought treatment, so this entire treatment was removed from further elemental analysis. Outliers were identified by analyzing the variance of the replicate measurements for each line in a treatment group and excluding a measurement from further analysis if the median absolute deviation (MAD) was greater than 6.2 (52).

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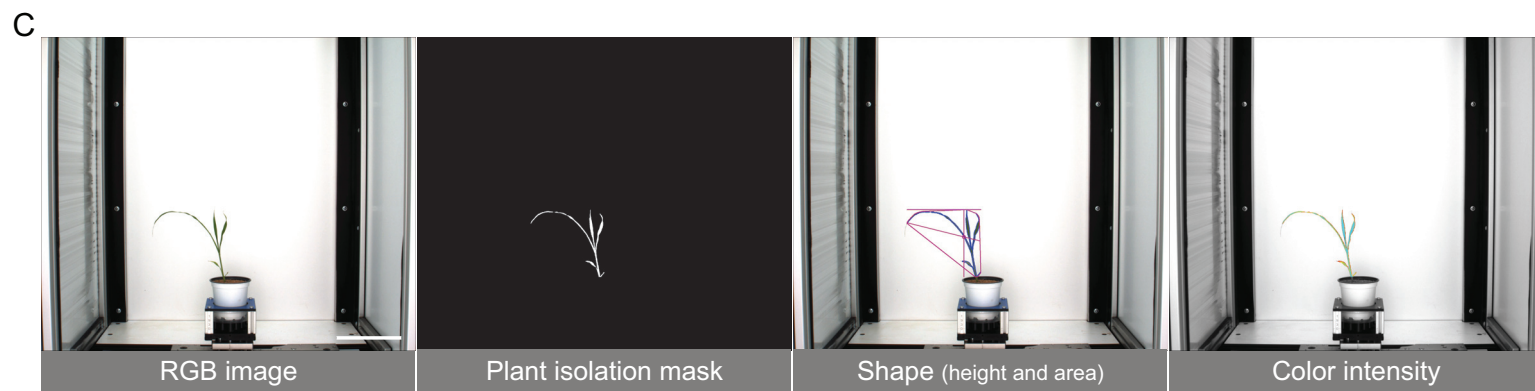
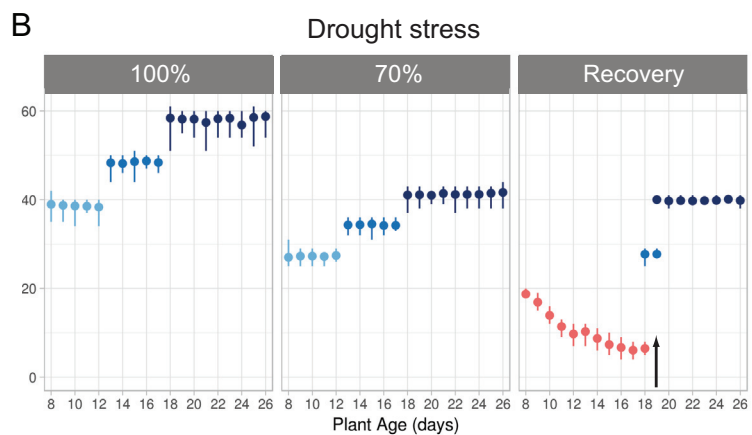
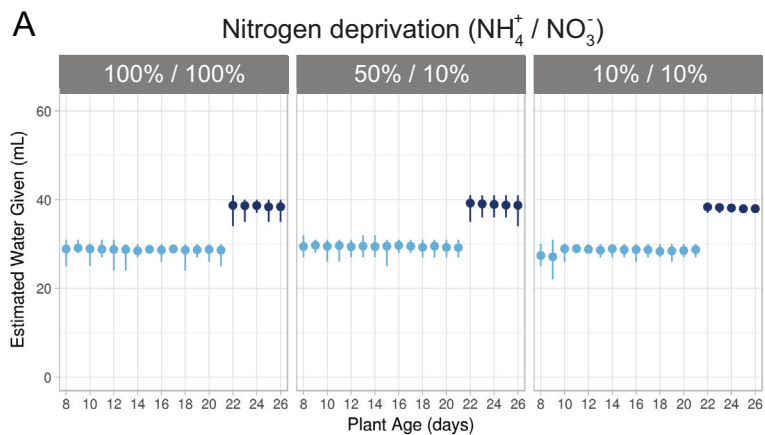
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# **Supplemental raw data files:**

sorg\_nitrogen\_all\_shapes.csv

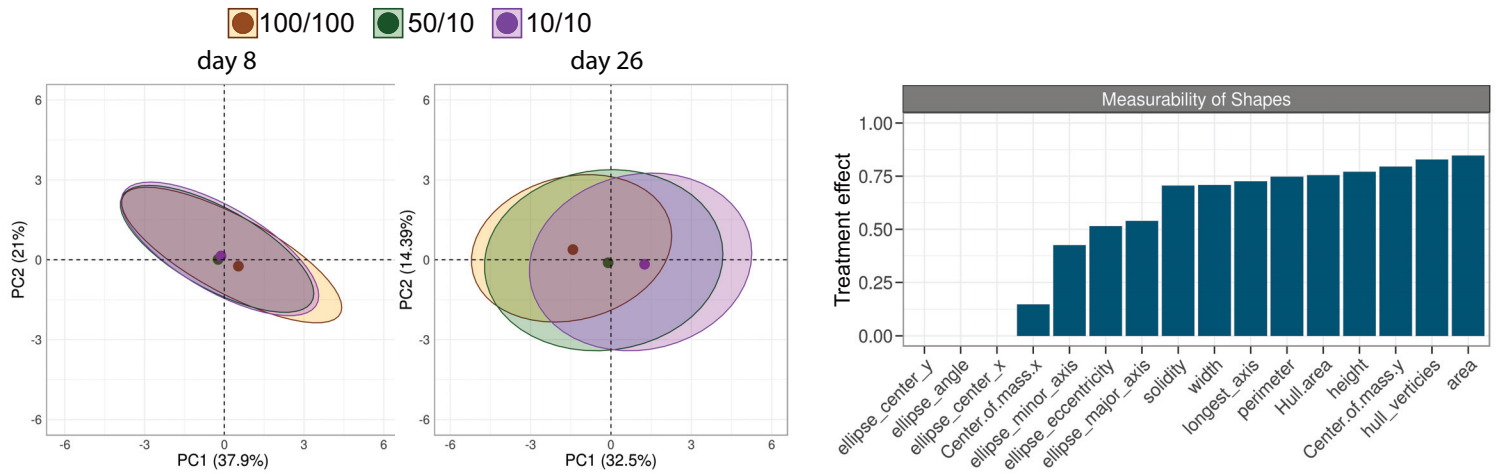


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866 sorg\_drought\_all\_shapes.csv  
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868 lonomics\_RawData\_Nitrogen.csv  
869 lonomics\_RawData\_Drought.csv  
870  
871



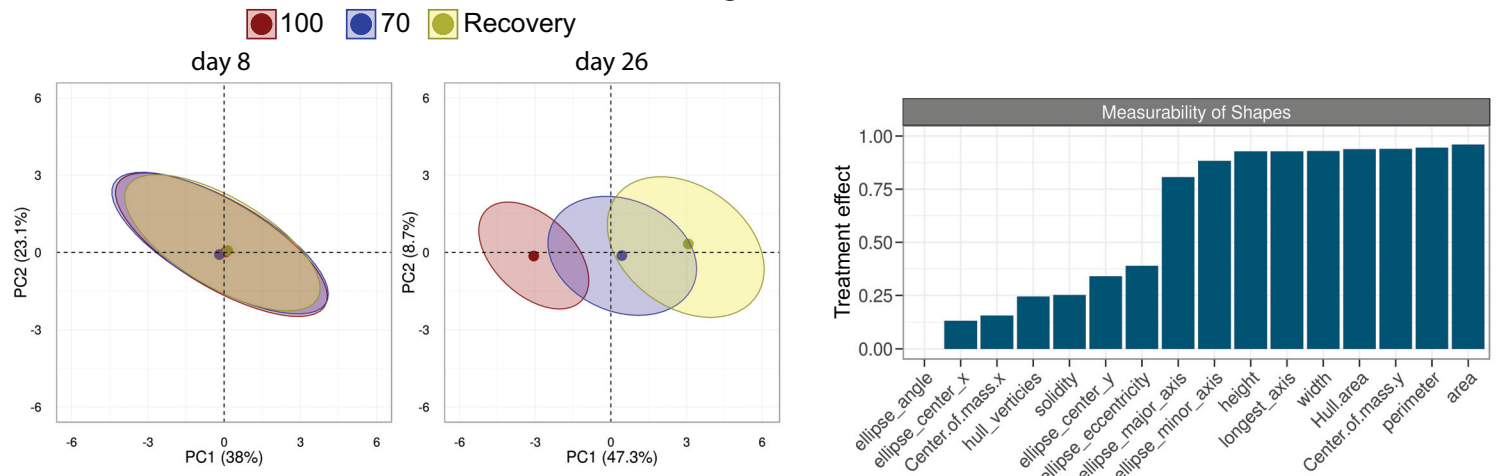
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## Nitrogen deprivation

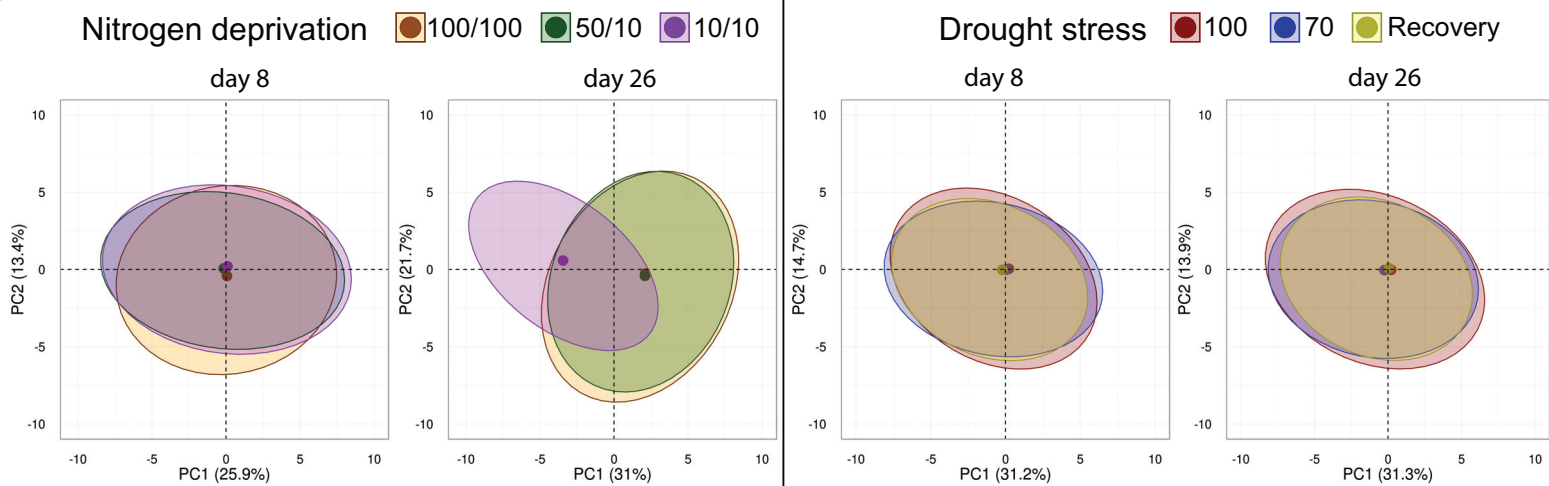


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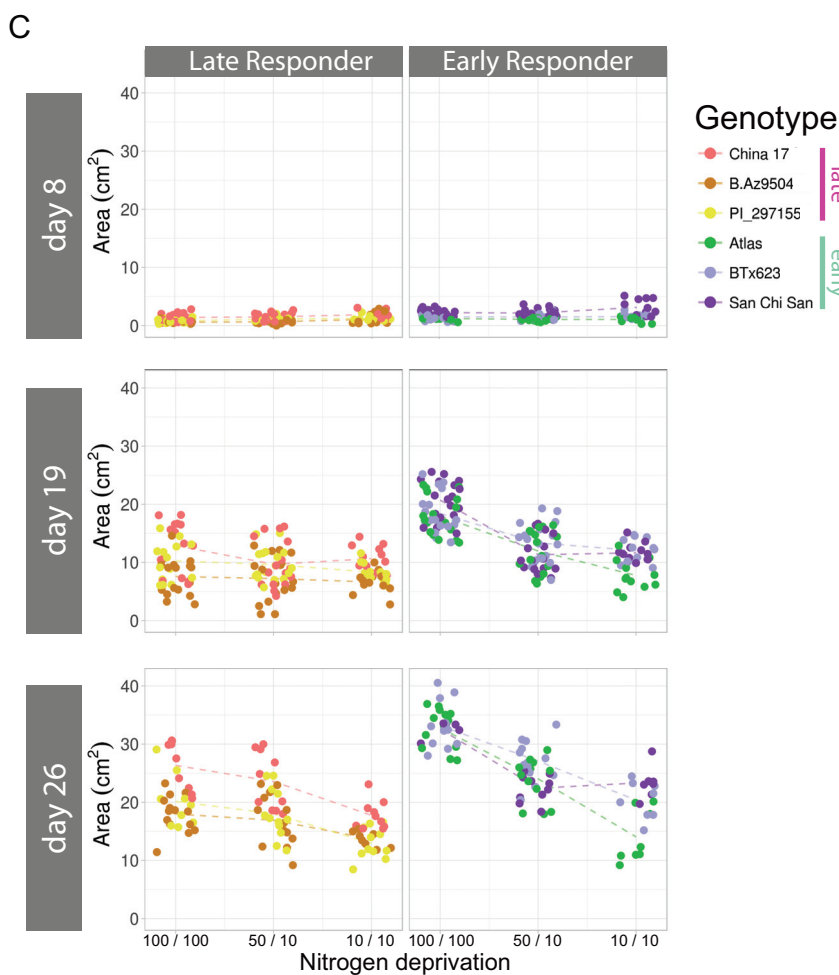
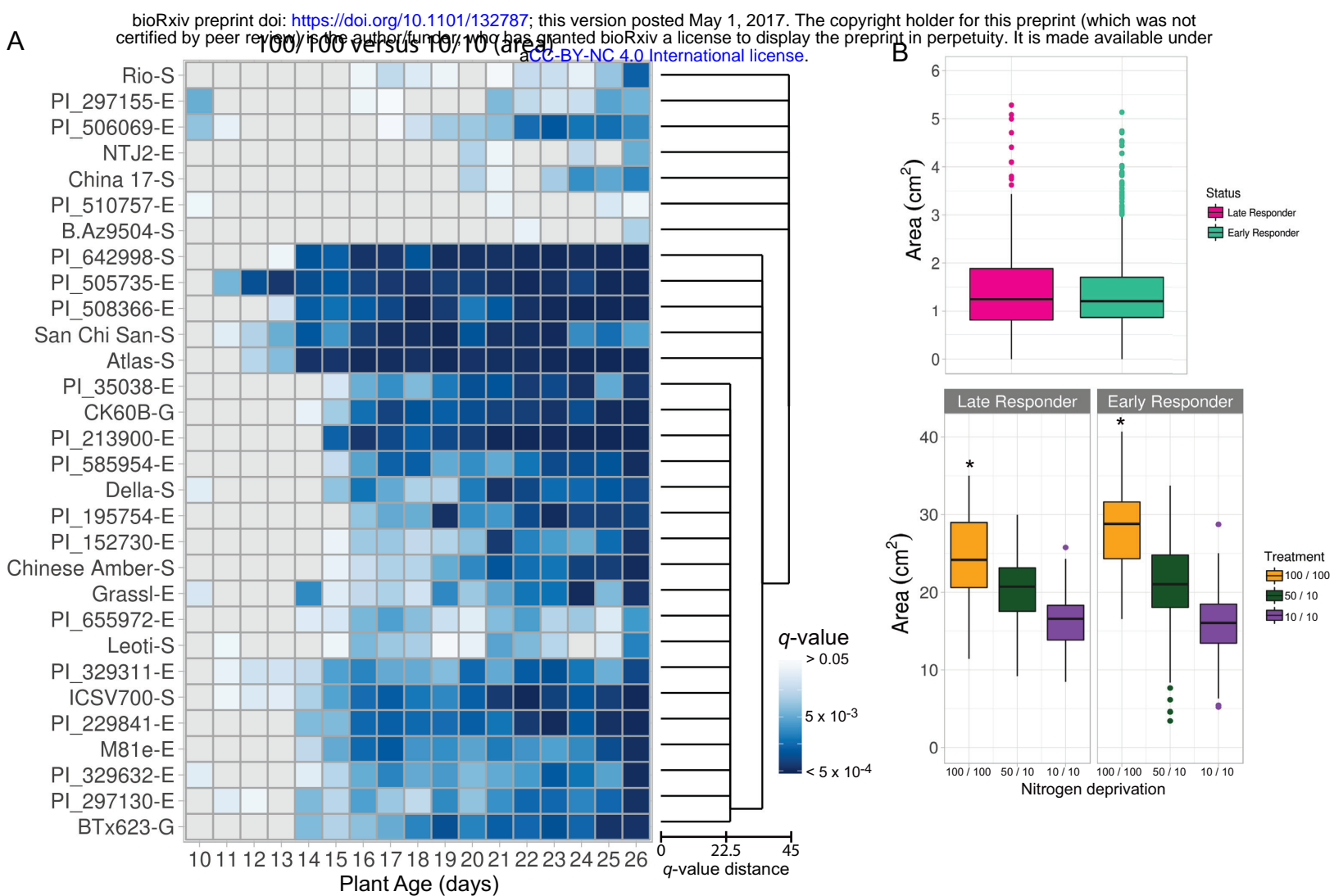
## Drought stress



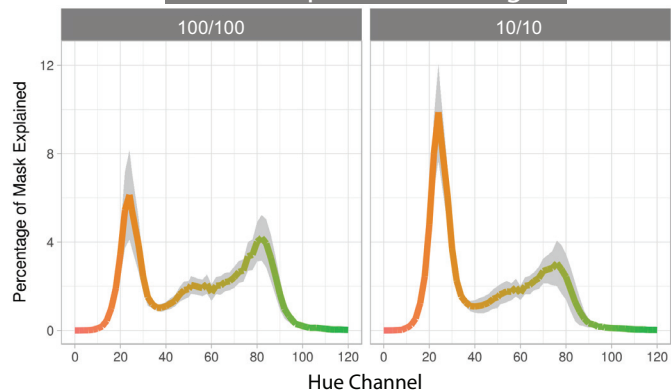
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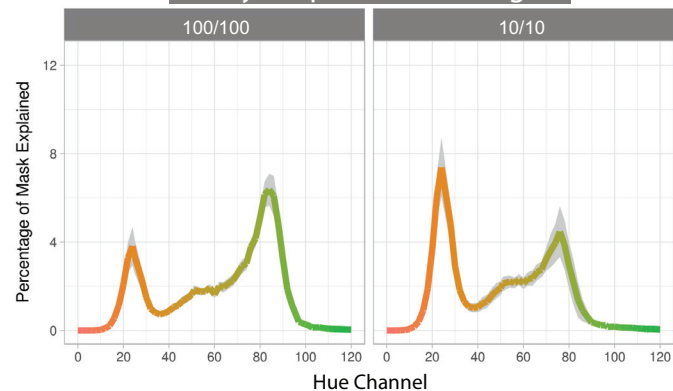




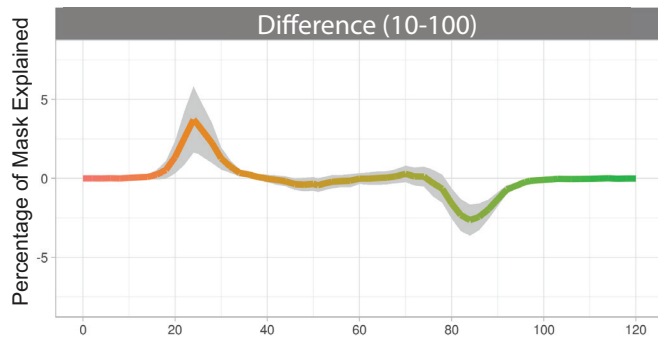
Late Responders (average)



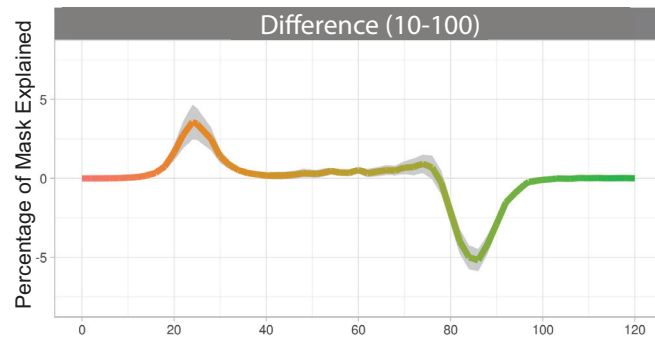
Early Responders (average)



Difference (10-100)



Difference (10-100)



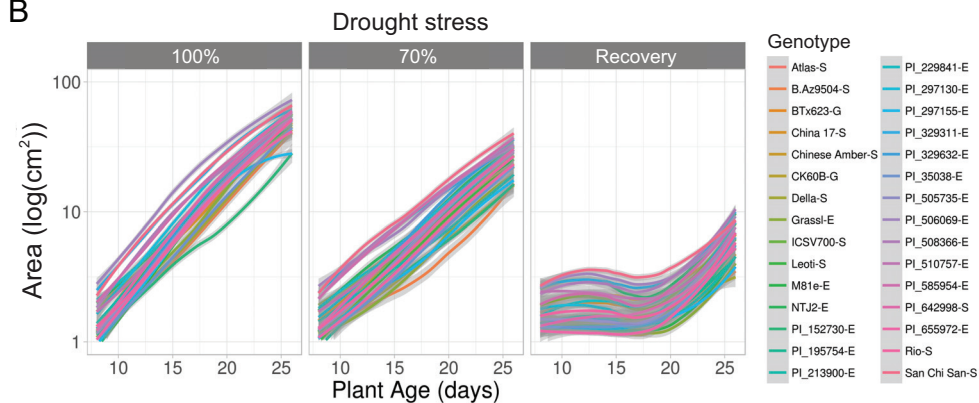
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Genotype				Type			
Source	Chisq	DF	p-value	Source	Chisq	DF	p-value
Water	15042	2	<0.0001	Water	5004	2	<0.0001
Genotype	229.6	29	<0.0001	Genotype	6.502	2	0.03874
Water x Genotype	42.72	29	0.0483	Water x Type	1.608	2	0.44756
Water x Time	8860	2	<0.0001	Water x Time	3278	2	<0.0001
Genotype x Time	152.5	29	<0.0001	Type x Time	5.684	2	0.05831
Water x Genotype x Time	39.51	29	<b>0.0923</b>	Water x Type x Time	2.071	2	0.35502

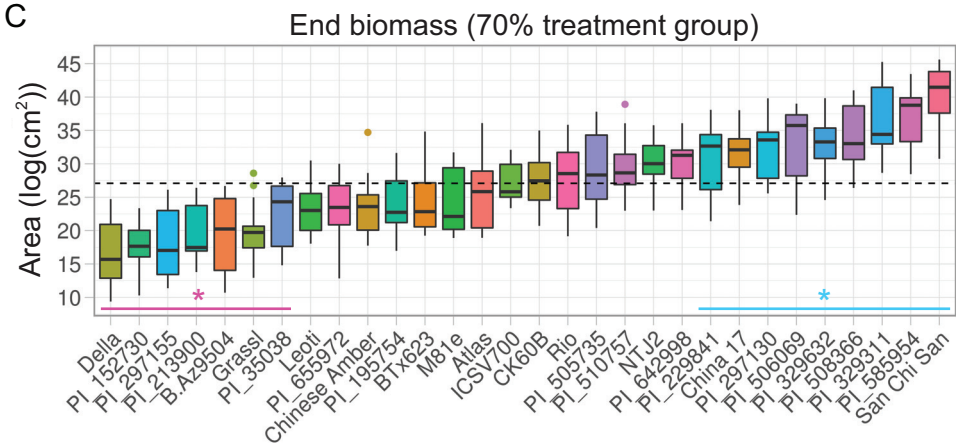
  

Photoperiod				Race			
Source	Chisq	DF	p-value	Source	Chisq	DF	p-value
Water	10918	2	<0.0001	Water	7387	2	<0.0001
Photoperiod	9.966	1	0.0016	Race	87.8	9	<0.0001
Water x Photoperiod	2.191	1	0.1388	Water x Race	7.626	9	0.5722
Water x Time	7133	2	<0.0001	Water x Time	4296	2	<0.0001
Photoperiod x Time	6.879	1	0.0087	Race x Time	56.44	9	<0.0001
Water x Photoperiod x Time	0.165	1	0.6849	Water x Race x Time	9.93	9	0.3562

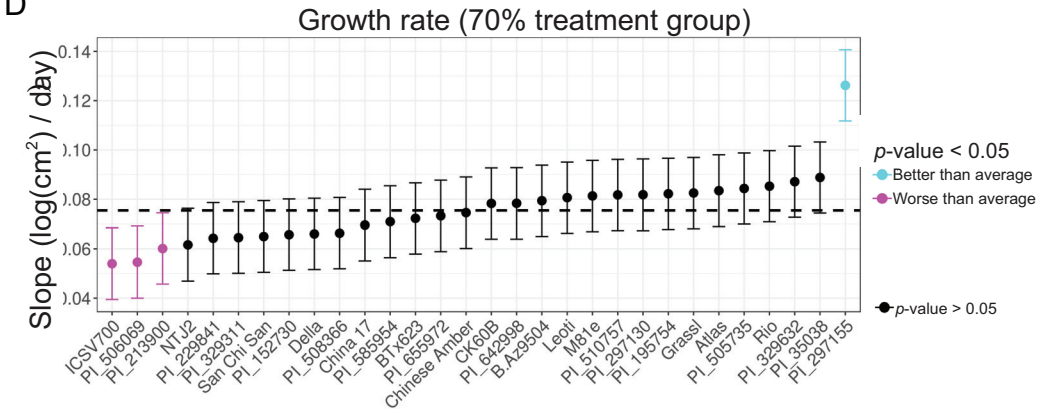
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C



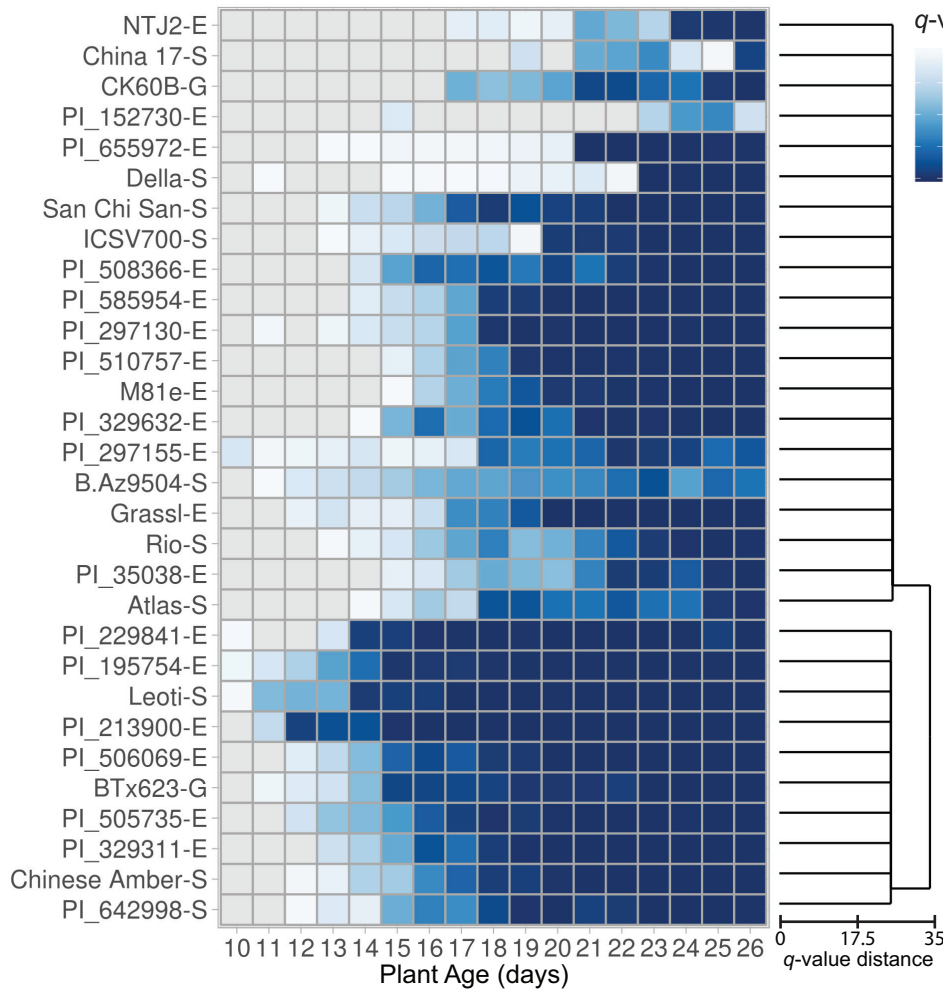
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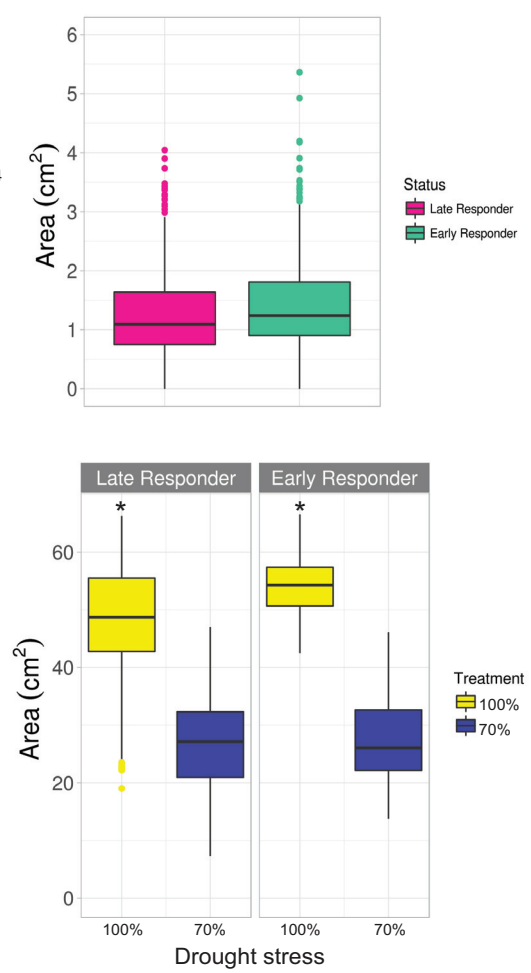


A

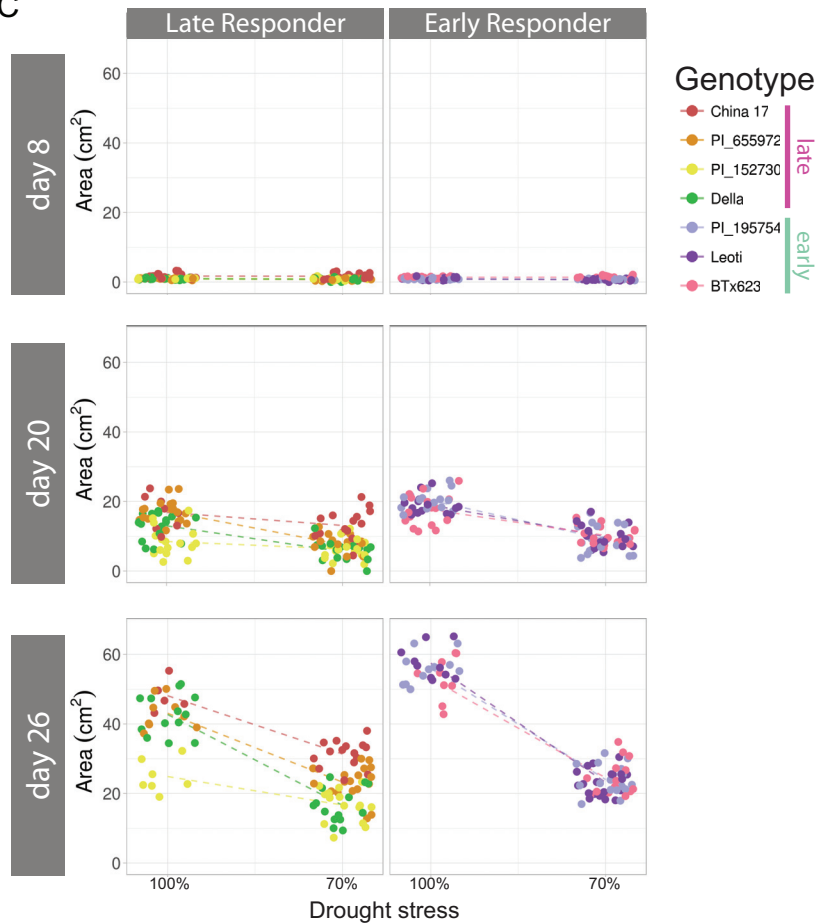
100% versus 70% (log area)



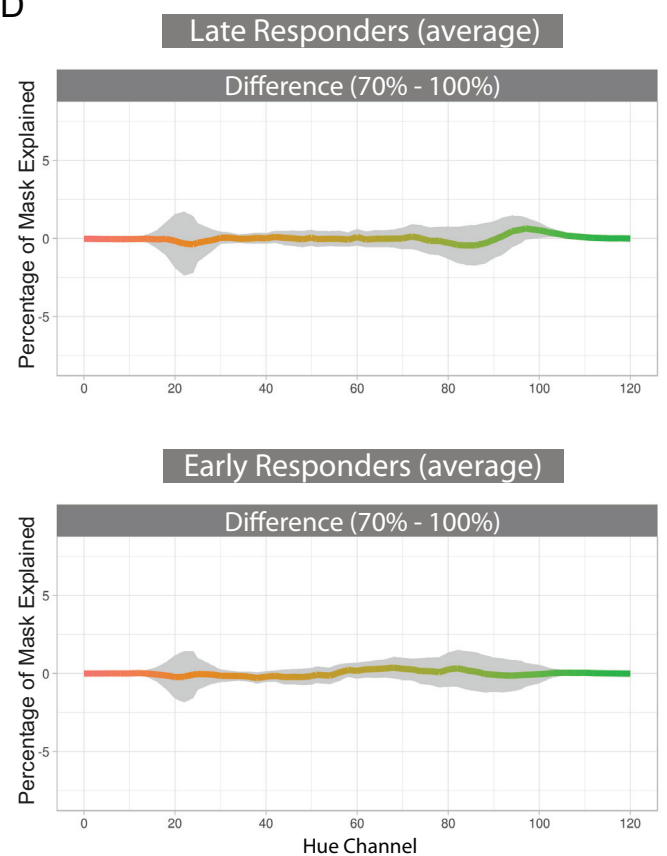
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C

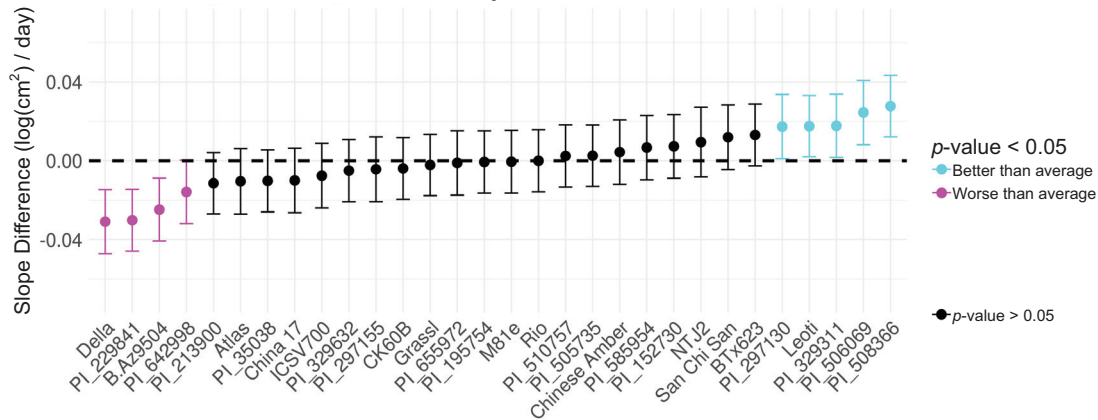


D

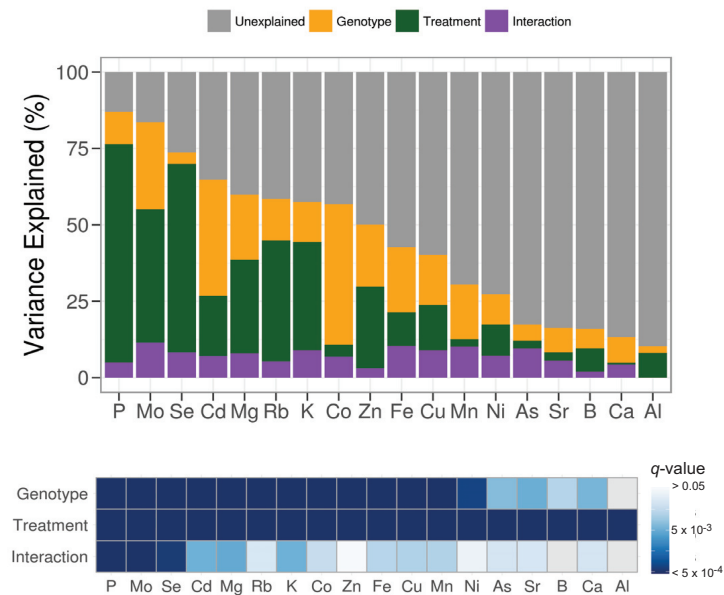




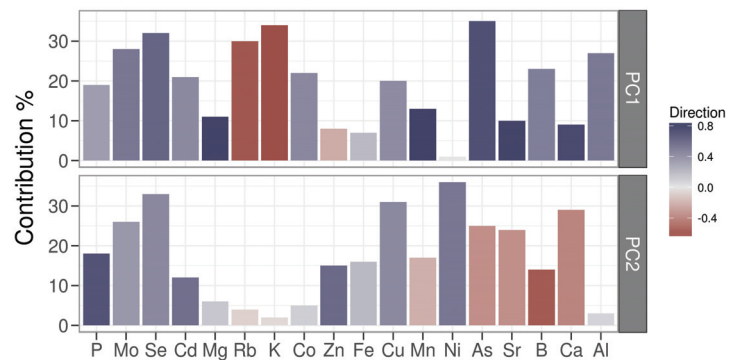
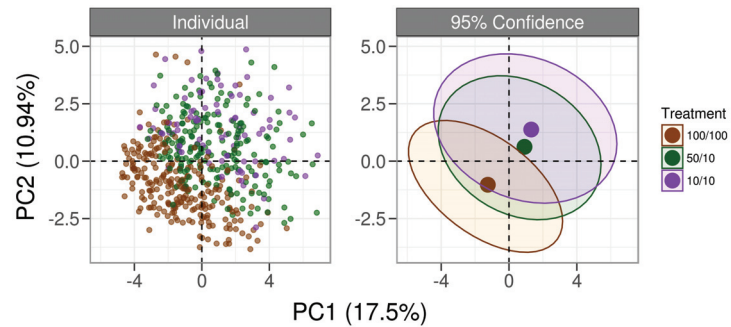
## Recovery vs 70%



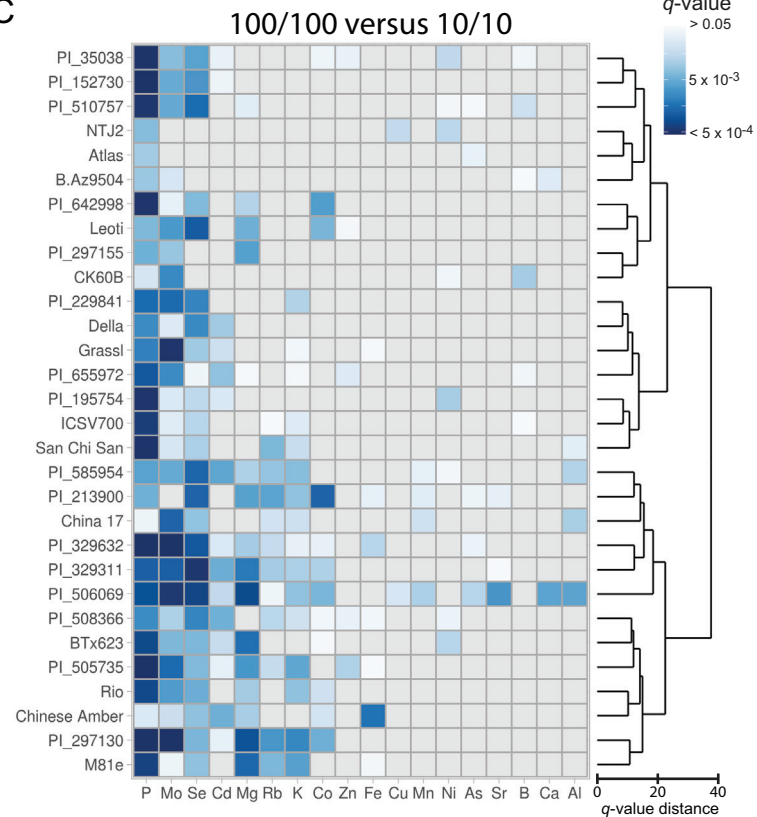
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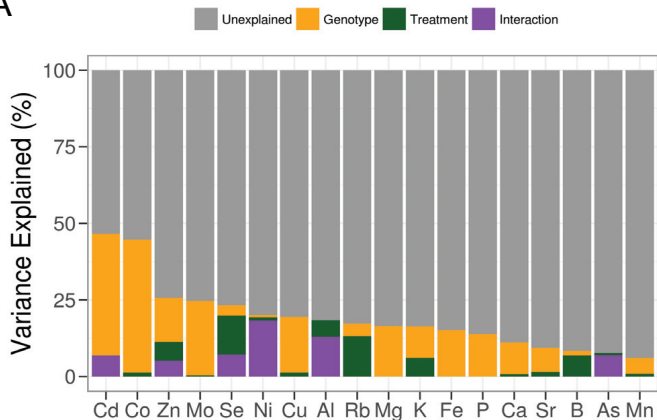
B



C



A



B

