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Soil reinforcement by the root system of six dominant species on eroded mountainous marly slopes (Southern Alps, France)

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Title: Soil reinforcement by the roots of six dominant species on eroded mountainous marly slopes (Southern Alps, France)

Article Type: Research Paper

Keywords: marls; root area ratio; root tensile strength; root system; erosion; soil reinforcement

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Abstract: In marly catchments of the French Southern Alps, the development of plant root systems is essential to increase slope stability and mitigate soil erosion, prevalent in this area. In a context of land restoration, it is important to be able to evaluate plant efficiency for soil reinforcement. This paper presents the results of investigations carried out on six dominant species from marly gullies. It aims to compare the additional soil cohesion they provide at the early stages of their development. The six following species were collected: two tree species, *Pinus nigra* and *Quercus pubescens*, two shrubby species, *Genista cinerea* and *Thymus serpyllum*, and two herbaceous species, *Achnatherum calamagrostis* and *Aphyllantes monspeliensis*. For each of them, we measured root tensile strength and root area ratio in order to calculate the potential root reinforcement and to compare species suitability to prevent shallow mass movements. Results showed significant differences between species. The herbaceous species *Aphyllantes monspeliensis* and the shrubby species *Genista cinerea* provided the highest increase in soil shear strength while the tree species, *Pinus nigra* and *Quercus pubescens* were the least efficient. These results, along with the knowledge on vegetation dynamics and species response to erosive constraint, allow us to better evaluate land vulnerability to erosion and the efficiency of restoration actions in eroded marly lands.

COMMENTS FROM EDITORS AND REVIEWERS:

All the minor remarks have been included in the new revised manuscript.

Research highlights:

- Juvenile plant species increase soil cohesion by root reinforcement.
- Root reinforcement depends on species and root system type.
- Grasses and shrubs provide higher increase in soil shear strength than young trees.

1 **Soil reinforcement by the roots of six dominant species on eroded mountainous marly**
2 **slopes (Southern Alps, France)**

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26 12 **Abstract**

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41 early stages of their development. The six following species were collected: two tree species,
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43 *Pinus nigra* and *Quercus pubescens*, two shrubby species, *Genista cinerea* and *Thymus*
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45 *serpyllum*, and two herbaceous species, *Achnatherum calamagrostis* and *Aphyllantes*
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47 *monspeliensis*. For each of them, we measured root tensile strength and root area ratio in
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51 prevent shallow mass movements. Results showed significant differences between species.
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1 The herbaceous species *Aphyllantes monspeliensis* and the shrubby species *Genista cinerea*
2 provided the highest increase in soil shear strength while the tree species, *Pinus nigra* and
3 *Quercus pubescens* were the least efficient. These results, along with the knowledge on
4 vegetation dynamics and species response to erosive constraint, allow us to better evaluate
5 land vulnerability to erosion and the efficiency of restoration actions in eroded marly lands.

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8 **Keywords:** marls, root area ratio, root tensile strength, root system, erosion, soil
9 reinforcement

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 **Introduction**

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34 15 Soil erosion by water is a hazard that affects both natural and cultivated lands all over the
35 world and causes considerable soil losses. In the French Southern Alps, marly lands are
36 16 subjected to severe erosion, leading to high soil erosion rates (e.g. 1.5 cm.yr⁻¹ in Descroix,
37 17 1994; 3.5 cm.yr⁻¹ in Lecompte et al., 1998), considerable soil losses (100 tons.ha⁻¹.yr⁻¹
38 18 reported in Mathys et al., 2003) and highly unstable soils. These lands are subjected to intense
39 19 gullyng, ending in the formation of badlands (Poesen et al., 2003). On gully walls, the
40 20 bedrock is overlain by a very loose regolith layer, composed of disintegrated marl particles,
41 21 which can be transported down the slopes during intensive rainfall events and which lead to
42 22 increased gullyng. These shallow mass movements, described by Oostwoud Wijdenes and
43 23 Ergenzinger (1998) as miniature debris flows, consist of a mixture of coarse marl fragments
44 24 within a silty matrix, moving down slope as slides, gravity and fluid driven flows. Shallow
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1 landslides are a widespread erosional process in mountainous areas where conditioning
2 factors, such as steep slopes, high weathering rates due to severe climatic conditions or lack
3 of vegetation, often accumulate. Relatively similar soil slippage problems have been
4 described previously in other mountainous regions (e.g. Abe and Ziemer, 1991; Schmidt et
5 al., 2001; Schwarz et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the phenomenon we discuss here describes
6 surficial landslides (< 1 m deep) and will be referred to as miniature debris flows (MDF)
7 hereafter.

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9 On slopes prone to instability, it is widely recognized that vegetation can significantly reduce
10 erosion (Thornes, 1990; Morgan, 1995; Gray and Sotir, 1996). For the last 130 years, the
11 protective role of vegetation has been extensively studied and applied to mitigate soil erosion
12 through restoration operations on marly badlands using ecological engineering principles
13 (Mitsch and Jørgensen, 2003; Odum and Odum, 2003). In the French Southern Alps, at the
14 end of the 19th century, huge surface areas underwent massive afforestation, primarily with
15 Austrian Black pine (*Pinus nigra* Arn. subsp. *Nigra*), which is now a dominant species in the
16 local flora (Vallauri et al., 2002). Recently, local scale actions, consisting of bioengineering
17 works installed in the gullies, have been used successfully for water erosion control (Rey,
18 2009). After restoration operations, spontaneous vegetation growing on these marly slopes is
19 mainly composed of juvenile individuals of trees, shrubs and grasses (Rey et al., 2005).
20 However, locally, this vegetation can remain limited. Managing degraded lands and
21 evaluating their vulnerability to soil slippage thus implies combining knowledge on species
22 dynamics (Rey et al., 2005; Burylo et al., 2007) and species biomechanical characteristics
23 such as resistance to erosive forces (Burylo et al., 2009) and potential for preventing soil
24 slippage. Until now, few investigations have been carried out on marly soils stability (e.g.
25 Mickovski and van Beek, 2009), or on the effects of grasses and young shrubs for improving

1 slope stability (e.g. Operstein and Frydman, 2000; Mattia et al., 2005; De Baets et al., 2008).

2 As a consequence, further investigations on the effect of plant roots in preventing shallow
3 mass movements, especially at the early stages of development, where plants offer the lowest
4 protection and where soil should be the most vulnerable, are of major interest.

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6 Plants can substantially improve slope stability and prevent soil slippage in two ways, through
7 hydrological mechanisms lowering pore water pressure (Greenway, 1987; Gyssels et al.,
8 2005) and through mechanical reinforcement of soil by roots (Waldron, 1977; Ziemer, 1981;
9 Nilaweera and Nutalaya, 1999). However, in temperate regions, it is believed that root
10 reinforcement contributes much more to shallow soils stability than hydrological factors
11 (Gray and Sotir, 1996; Stokes et al., 2009). Plant roots provide additional cohesion to the soil
12 and root-permeated soils are thus much stronger than soils alone to withstand soil erosion
13 processes such as mass movements (e.g. Ziemer, 1981; Operstein and Frydman, 2000;
14 Mickovski and van Beek, 2009). The extent to which roots reinforce the soil depends on
15 several variables (Loades et al., 2009; Stokes et al., 2009) including root system morphology,
16 such as root biomass, root number, root diameter or rooting depth (Wu et al., 1979), root
17 system architecture (Stokes et al., 1996; Dupuy et al., 2005; Mickovski et al., 2007; Reubens
18 et al., 2007), and root system mechanical properties such as root tensile strength (Wu et al.,
19 1979; Operstein and Frydman, 2000) and pullout resistance (Nilaweera and Nutalaya, 1999;
20 Norris, 2005).

21
22 During the past thirty years, many authors made an attempt to connect root system
23 characteristics to erosion processes and slope stability. Given the complexity of root-soil
24 interactions, modelling and quantifying root reinforcement has remained challenging. In the
25 late seventies, pioneering modelling contribution was provided by Wu et al. (1979) and

1 Waldron and Dakessian (1977). Their perpendicular model is based on the Coulomb equation

2 (1) extended to root-permeated soil by introducing increased shear strength due to roots (2).

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$$\mathbf{S} = \mathbf{C} + \sigma_{\mathbf{N}} \cdot \tan \phi \quad (1)$$

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$$\mathbf{S} = \mathbf{C} + \Delta\mathbf{S} + \sigma_{\mathbf{N}} \cdot \tan \phi \quad (2)$$

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14 where S is soil shear strength, C is soil cohesion, $\sigma_{\mathbf{N}}$ the stress normal to shear plane, ϕ the
15 angle of internal friction and $\Delta\mathbf{S}$ the increase in soil shear strength due to the presence of
16 roots. In this model, the evaluation of $\Delta\mathbf{S}$ (in kPa) simply depends on root tensile strength ($T_{\mathbf{R}}$
17 in MPa) and on the cross-sectional area of roots in the shear plane (RAR):

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$$\Delta\mathbf{S} = \mathbf{K} \cdot T_{\mathbf{R}} \cdot \mathbf{RAR} = 1.2 T_{\mathbf{R}} \cdot \mathbf{RAR} \quad (3)$$

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1 et al., 2009). Greenwood (2006) developed the computer program SLIP4EX which calculates
2 the slope factor of safety using different methods of analysis and which includes both the
3 mechanical and hydrological changes due to vegetation. Although the Wu and Waldron
4 model is not the most accurate and realistic one, it remains one of the most widespread model
5 for preliminary root reinforcement assessment. Because it is simpler and requires less input
6 data than the above-mentioned models, it was used in the present study to rank species
7 according to their soil stabilization potential and to compare species suitability for soil
8 protection against shallow mass movements (e.g. Bischetti et al., 2005; Mattia et al., 2005;
9 Tosi, 2007; De Baets et al., 2008; De Baets et al., 2009).

11 The aim of this paper is to evaluate and compare the suitability for preventing MDF of six
12 dominant species at the juvenile stage, growing on marly slopes. Juvenile individuals of each
13 species were collected on site and we measured root tensile strength and root system
14 distribution with depth. Their contribution to slope stability was calculated using Wu's
15 reinforcement model and their suitability for erosion control was assessed.

19 **Materials and methods**

21 *Study site*

23 The study site is located in the Saignon catchment, situated in North-East of Sisteron (Alpes-
24 de-Haute-Provence department, France), a 400-ha gully catchment on marls (Figure 1). The
25 climate on the test site is mountainous sub-Mediterranean, characterised by summer droughts

1 (on average 168 mm from June to August) interspersed with intense storms. The mean annual
2 rainfall is 787 mm and the mean annual temperature is 10.2°C with 4-5 cold months (Rey,
3 2002). The sampling area is South-West oriented, its altitude is about 800 m and mean slope
4 of gully sides is 33° (Rey, 2002).

5 The local vegetation is dominated by *Pinus nigra* Arn. *ssp. nigra* introduced at the beginning
6 of the last century for erosion control purposes. The other dominant tree species are *Acer*
7 *opalus* Mill., *Quercus pubescens* Wild., and *Robinia pseudoacacia* L. also introduced in the
8 19th century. The shrubby layer mainly consists of a mixture of *Ononis fruticosa* L. and
9 *Genista cinerea* Vill., and the grass layer of *Achnatherum calamagrostis* L. (Vallauri, 1997).

11 *Soil*

13 The soils in the study area are derived from Jurassic black marls (Callovian and Bathonian).
14 Weathering of black marls results in extended gullied areas called badlands. The soils on
15 gully slopes consist of superimposed layers with different structure and compaction
16 (Maquaire et al., 2002):

- 17 - 0 to 50-100 mm depth: loose detrital cover sensitive to erosion made of structureless
18 marl fragments and colluvial materials
- 19 - 50-100 to 450 mm depth: regolith of marls consisting of marl fragments whose
20 compaction increases with depth (Oostwoud Wijdenes and Ergenzinger, 1998)
- 21 - > 450 mm depth: the bedrock, compact, structured and cohesive.

22 The detrital and regolith layers are partially removed by erosion processes, including shallow
23 mass movements, causing further decompression of the underlying bedrock.

24 On marly sites similar to the sampling area, Maquaire et al. (2003) measured relatively low
25 carbonate content (from 20 to 35%) which explains the susceptibility of the soil to weathering

1 processes. Moreover, shear tests performed on weathered material showed that effective
2 cohesion ranged from 6 to 12 kPa (Antoine et al., 1995; Maquaire et al., 2003).

4 *Species studied*

6 Six species, among the most dominant in the local vegetation, were chosen for the present
7 study: *Pinus nigra* Arn. *ssp. nigra*, *Quercus pubescens* Wild., *Genista cinerea* Vill., *Thymus*
8 *serpyllum* L., *Achnatherum calamagrostis* L. and *Aphyllantes monspeliensis* L. P. Beauv..
9 These species represent three different vegetation growth forms: tree, shrubby and herbaceous
10 plants. In the Saignon catchment, *P. nigra* and *Q. pubescens* are tree species commonly found
11 at all the stages of their development, including the juvenile stage. At this stage, these two
12 species show a fast growing and deeply penetrating taproot system with thin lateral roots.
13 *G. cinerea* is a widespread shrub in the area. It develops a deep tap root with long lateral roots
14 which generate a large root system both in depth and in width. *T. serpyllum* presents a
15 shallower root system with a relatively short tap root and longer lateral roots (see Burylo *et*
16 *al.*, 2009 for more details on root system description of woody species). *A. calamagrostis* and
17 *A. monspeliensis* are two herbaceous species. *A. calamagrostis* is a perennial grass while
18 *A. monspeliensis* is a perennial dicotyledonous plant. However, both show a graminoid shape,
19 with tillers packed into tussocks and a heart root system where many fibrous roots develop
20 from the plant base (Rameau, 1993). In the study area, the two species can be found as
21 isolated tussock, with a diameter ranging from 15 to 30 cm.

23 *Species sampling*

1 Between 5 and 10 individuals of each plant species were sampled from the marly slopes in the
2 study area. Isolated juvenile plants, with no neighbours within a 300 mm radius, were selected
3 to limit plant-plant interactions which can dramatically affect root system development and
4 makes sampling easier. As plant age could not be determined accurately, small plants were
5 chosen within each species. Threshold values of 20 mm and 100 mm in basal diameter were
6 selected for woody and herbaceous species respectively, and for all species, plants less than
7 300 mm high were sampled. *P. nigra* and *Q. pubescens* seedlings of similar shapes and
8 surrounding environments were collected from the same area. For the two shrubby and two
9 herbaceous species, age determination was difficult, therefore individuals were chosen by
10 their height and diameter. Because of the lack of soil cohesion at our study site, we could not
11 use the traditional ‘trench wall’ method described by Böhm (1979). Therefore, each plant was
12 carefully excavated by hand to keep the root system intact, up to a depth of 60 mm depending
13 of the species. Photos of the different steps of the excavation process were taken for further
14 measurements as well as lateral spreading of the root system. Plants were then put in plastic
15 bags and transported to a cold room (5°C) until laboratory measurements that took place
16 during the following week.

18 *Root distribution and root area ratio measurements*

19
20 During the week after the harvest, roots were cleaned from the remaining soil particles with a
21 hand water jet so that we could measure root characteristics. For each plant, root area ratio
22 (RAR) was estimated following the method described by Mattia et al. (2005). Using photos of
23 the plant root system, the spatial distribution of roots was recreated in the laboratory and the
24 diameter of all the roots was measured every 50 mm up to the maximum rooting depth of the
25 plant. For each depth level, the roots were then divided into diameter classes of 0.25 mm.

1 Finally, RAR was calculated every 50 mm as the ratio of root surface area (A_R in mm^2
2 calculated from root diameters) to the surface area of the root-permeated soil (A in mm^2). A
3 was calculated from the measurements of maximum lateral spreading of the root system.
4 Hence, A differs for each plant sample but we used the same value for all RAR calculations
5 within a plant.

7 *Root tensile strength measurements*

8
9 After the RAR measurements, all roots were cut off and conserved in a 15% alcoholic
10 solution following Bischetti et al. (2005). Root tensile strength (T_R) tests were performed with
11 a device built by the Institute of Agricultural Hydraulics of the University of Milan (Italy) and
12 previously used in similar studies (Bischetti et al., 2005; Mattia et al, 2005). Before testing,
13 roots were inspected and damaged roots were removed from the study. Root samples of
14 approximately 200 mm were selected for testing and root diameter was measured at three
15 points along root length. For woody species, root bark, when observed, was conserved for the
16 tests. The two root ends were fixed to the clamps of the machine, of which one can move at a
17 constant speed of $10 \text{ mm} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$ to apply a tensile force to the root. A load cell continuously
18 registered the force applied to the root and we measured T_R (MPa) as:

$$19 \quad T_R = \frac{F_{\max}}{\pi \left(\frac{D}{2}\right)^2} \quad (4)$$

20
21
22
23 where F_{\max} is the maximum tensile force (N) registered before breaking and D is the average
24 diameter (mm) of the root being tested. For each species, at least 15 roots with diameters
25 ranging from 0.15 to 5 mm were tested.

1

2

3 *Comparison of species suitability for soil reinforcement*

4

5 To evaluate the potential increase in soil shear strength due to roots (ΔS given in
6 equation (3)), the static perpendicular model described by Wu et al. (1979) was used.

7 In order to account for root diameters variability, equation (3) has to be written as follows,
8 taking into account T_R and RAR for different diameter classes:

9

$$\Delta S = 1.2 \sum_{i=1}^N T_{Ri} \cdot A_{Ri} / A \quad (5)$$

10

11 where T_{Ri} (in MPa) and A_{Ri} (in mm²) are T_R and A_R values for diameter class i , and N is the
12 number of classes.

13 ΔS was thus calculated for each plant sample and used to compare species efficiency for soil
14 reinforcement.

15

16
17 *Data analysis and statistics*

18

19 According to many authors (Norris et al., 2008), T_R decreases with increasing root diameter
20 following a simple power law equation of the form:

21

$$T_R = \alpha \cdot D^{-\beta} \quad (6)$$

22

23 where α and β are empirical values depending on species. The power relationship between T_R
24 and root diameter was tested and an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with root diameter as

1 a covariate, was performed to test for significant differences between species and growth
2 forms (Tukey HSD procedure). T_R values were log-transformed before analysis to meet the
3 assumption of normal distribution.

4 RAR and ΔS differences between species were investigated with Kruskal-Wallis
5 nonparametric test as sample number is low and data are not normally distributed. All the
6 analyses were carried out with STATISTICA (version 7.1 for Windows, Statsoft 1984).

10 **Results**

12 *Root distribution and root area ratio*

14 All species showed similar root distribution, with a decreasing number of roots with depth
15 (Table 1) and the largest part of root system biomass being observed in the upper 200 mm of
16 soil.

17 Root distribution within diameter classes is highly variable between species and growth
18 forms. For grasses, which present a fibrous root system, the majority of the roots consisted of
19 roots smaller than 1 mm in diameter and no roots larger than 2 mm were observed. Root
20 systems of tree species comprised very few roots, representing root morphology at the
21 juvenile stage, made of a vigorous tap root and few laterals. Shrubby species showed a third
22 morphological type, with about half a dozen coarse roots (diameter > 1 mm) and many fine
23 roots (diameter < 1 mm).

24 RAR significantly decreases with depth as revealed by the Kruskal-Wallis test (Table 2).

25 RAR distribution with depth also revealed differences between species regarding rooting

1 depth and RAR values (Fig. 2). RAR for *G. cinerea* ranges from 0.053 % at the soil surface to
2 0 % at 600 mm soil depth, while RAR for *P. nigra* reaches 0.015 % at the soil surface and 0%
3 at a depth of 400 mm.

4 Nevertheless, there were large standard errors in RAR measurements and the Kruskal-Wallis
5 test showed that RAR values were not significantly different either between species or
6 between growth forms (Table 3).

8 *Root tensile strength*

10 The results of the tensile strength tests are given in Figure 3. As expected, there was a
11 decrease of T_R with increasing root diameter following the power relationship given by Eq. 7.
12 Values of α , β and of the statistical significance of the relationships are given in Table 4. This
13 relationship was observed for all species except for *G. cinerea* for which no correlation
14 between T_R and diameter could be observed.

15 The results of the ANCOVA showed that root tensile strength differed significantly between
16 species (D: $F=28.8$, $p<0.0001$; T_R : $F=14.3$, $p<0.0001$) and between growth forms (D: $F=18.5$,
17 $p<0.0001$; T_R : $F=17.8$, $p<0.0001$ – Table 5). The roots of the tree species (*P. nigra* and
18 *Q. pubescens*) were less resistant to tension than the shrubby and herbaceous species. The
19 shrub *G. cinerea* and the two herbaceous species (*A. calamagrostis* and *A. monspeliensis*) had
20 the strongest roots. However, T_R values of the two latter species decreased quickly with
21 increasing root diameter (high values of the decay coefficient β) and were similar to the other
22 species above diameters of 1 mm. The shrub *T. serpyllum* had intermediate values of root
23 strength.

25 *Root reinforcement*

1
2 By applying Eq. 6 to the data, we calculated ΔS , the increase of soil cohesion induced by
3 plants roots. T_R values were re-calculated for each root diameter class (0.25 mm step) using
4 the parameters of the power relationship given in Table 4. As for *G. cinerea* the strength-
5 diameter relationship was not clear, ΔS was calculated from mean values of T_R . The results
6 (Fig. 4) showed that the shrub *G. cinerea* and the herbaceous species *A. monspeliensis* could
7 provide the highest increase in soil cohesion. Calculated ΔS values exceeded 5 kPa in the first
8 200 mm of soil and were significantly higher for these two species (see Table 3 for the results
9 of the Kruskal-Wallis test). As for root tensile strength, the tree species *P. nigra* and
10 *Q. pubescens* were the least efficient for soil reinforcement with ΔS values ranging between
11 0.5 and 1 kPa in the upper soil layers. Root reinforcement decreased quickly with increasing
12 soil depth for all species, and below 300 mm, ΔS values were not significantly different
13 between species (Table 3).

16 Discussion

18 Root area ratio measurements showed a high variability within species which resulted in high
19 standard errors and no significant differences between species, as revealed by the Kruskal-
20 Wallis test (Table 3). This variability can be explained by several reasons, first and foremost,
21 environmental heterogeneity. Many environmental factors have a strong influence on root
22 architecture (Coutts et al., 1999). Soil properties, such as soil bulk density (Goodman and
23 Ennos, 1999), soil moisture and fertility (Fitter & Stickland, 1991; Taub and Goldberg, 1996;
24 Hodge, 2004), or natural obstacle like stones or stumps (Quine et al., 1991), can dramatically
25 affect root system development. Plant-plant interactions, especially competition, also modify

1 root growth (e.g. Craine, 2006). Root system development also depends on the genetic
2 variability of the species. On the other hand, variability in RAR may be due to sampling and
3 errors in measurements in the laboratory. Moreover, when measuring RAR, it was sometimes
4 difficult to replace the root system in the original position it had in the field.
5 Nevertheless, species showed more differences in root number distribution within diameter
6 classes reflecting differences in root system types (Table 1): tap-like root system with a
7 vigorous main root, tap-like root system with many laterals and coronal root system (Fig. 5).
8 The values of RAR measured in the present study, with root cross-sectional areas representing
9 less than 0.05% of the reference areas of soil, were in the same order of those reported by De
10 Baets et al. (2008), who studied comparable species. Other authors found higher RAR values
11 (e.g. Abernethy and Rutherford, 2001; Bischetti et al., 2005) but plant development and
12 methods of measurements were different.
13
14 Tensile strength tests confirmed that there exists a power relationship between T_R and root
15 diameter. This well-known relationship (e.g. Bischetti et al., 2005; Mattia et al., 2005; Norris
16 et al., 2005) reveals that thin roots are more resistant to tensile stresses than thick roots.
17 However, this relationship has not been observed for *G. cinerea*. As for root architecture
18 variability, many factors can influence root tensile strength, among which soil properties, root
19 age, root bark or root structure (Genet et al., 2005). In our study, as individuals of *G. cinerea*
20 were sampled from the same site, a few meters apart from each other, soil and environmental
21 characteristics may not be the cause of the lacking T_R -root relationship for *G. cinerea*.
22 Variations in root age would more likely explain this result, as well as the low number of tests
23 and the range of diameters tested for each species (0.3 to 3 mm), which may not have been
24 sufficient enough. Microscopy observations on root cross sections or cellulose content
25 measurements would help discussing on this result.

1 The values of α (scale factor) and β (decay coefficient) generally fall in the range of values
2 already found in previous studies. Several grasses have been characterized by low scale
3 factors and decay coefficients higher than 1 (Mattia et al., 2005; De Baets et al., 2008). For
4 shrubby species, values of α and β ranging from 4.4 to 91.2 and from -0.52 to -1.75
5 respectively, have been reported (Operstein and Frydman, 2000; Bischetti et al., 2005; Mattia
6 et al., 2005; De Baets et al., 2008). De Baets et al. (2008) studied two shrubby species
7 (*Rosmarinus officinalis* and *Thymus zygis*) belonging to the same plant family as *T serpyllum*
8 (Lamiaceae) and found α and β values very similar to ours (12.9 and 19.3 for α and -0.77 and
9 -0.73 for β). For tree species, decay coefficients found in literature (Bischetti et al., 2005;
10 Genet et al., 2005) ranged from -0.52 to -1.11 but higher scale factors were reported (from
11 18.4 to 60.15) compared to our measurements (12.41 and 17.37). The analysis of covariance
12 revealed that the roots of shrubs and herbaceous species were the most resistant to tensile
13 stresses. De Baets et al. (2008) studied the root tensile strength of 25 Mediterranean species,
14 mostly shrubs and herbs, and found no significant strength differences between the two
15 growth forms. Generally speaking, species which have the strongest roots are those with high
16 values of α and low values of β . This observation might be attributed to differences in root
17 structure between species. Genet et al. (2005) showed that cellulose concentration influenced
18 root strength properties, higher cellulose concentrations resulting in stronger roots. Moreover,
19 lignin concentrations also strongly determine root tensile strength. Hathaway and Penny
20 (1975) demonstrated that Young's modulus decreased with increasing lignin/cellulose ratio.
21 Therefore, it can be assumed that roots of tree species are weaker in tension than fibrous roots
22 because of higher lignin content in fibrous root systems.

23
24 The values of root reinforcement calculated with assumed parameters in Wu's model
25 generally ranged between 0 and 10 kPa in the upper 20 cm of soil and fell under 5 kPa in the

1 deeper soil layers. These values are in the same order of magnitude of the values reported in
2 Mattia et al. (2005), but lower than the ones reported by De Baets et al. (2008). Again, the
3 analysis showed that herbaceous and shrubby species provide more soil reinforcement than
4 tree species. For example, at 10 cm depth, the additional cohesion provided by the roots of
5 *A. monspeliensis* and *G. cinerea* is respectively 14 and 15 times greater than that of *P. nigra*
6 and respectively 6.5 and 7 times greater than that of *Q. pubescens*. De Baets et al. (2007)
7 follow this idea as they found that the increase in soil cohesion due to roots was significantly
8 higher for soils permeated with fibrous roots of grasses than for soils permeated with tap-like
9 root systems.

10 Nevertheless, the results of the present study must be analyzed with caution. Values were
11 calculated with a perpendicular static model designed on the basis of assumptions leading to
12 important simplifications of the process. An important assumption is that all roots are
13 mobilized in tension when the soil shears, and reach their maximum tensile strength at the
14 same time before breaking. Such models give potential maximum root reinforcement and
15 overestimate the additional soil cohesion provided by roots (Operstein and Frydman, 2000;
16 Pollen and Simon, 2005; Mickovski et al., 2009). Thus, the values of soil reinforcement
17 calculated in the present work must be regarded as relative values allowing species
18 comparison according to their efficiency for soil stabilization and not as absolute values.

19
20 The results of the present study suggest that shrubs and herbaceous species, in particular
21 *G. cinerea* and *A. monspeliensis*, are the most efficient for soil reinforcement. These growth
22 forms have either fibrous root systems with many fine roots resistant to tension
23 (*A. monspeliensis*) or tap-like root systems with a mixture of woody coarse roots and many
24 fine and strong roots (*G. cinerea* – Fig. 4). Both species have a significant protective effect

1 against MDF, reinforcing the soil to a depth corresponding to the plant rooting depth (up to
2 550 mm on individuals tested).

3
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5
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7 4 Combined with the knowledge on vegetation dynamics and ecological site properties, these
8
9
10 5 results can help in evaluation the vulnerability of degraded lands to erosion or the efficiency
11
12 6 of restoration actions. Previous studies have demonstrated that after environmental
13
14 7 disturbance or land restoration, herbaceous species first recolonize the substrate (Cammeraat
15
16
17 8 et al., 2005; Burylo et al., 2007). Then, vegetation cover evolves and the proportions of
18
19 9 shrubby and tree species slowly increase. In particular, in marly gullies of the French
20
21
22 10 Southern Alps, *A. monspeliensis* and *A. calamagrostis* represent an important part of the
23
24 11 colonizing vegetation (Rey et al., 2005). Therefore, vegetation that colonizes marly lands
25
26 12 soon after restoration could quickly and efficiently stabilize shallow soil layers, thereby
27
28
29 13 increasing the effects of restoration works. Then, the growth of tree seedlings, shown to be
30
31
32 14 less efficient in the first years of development than herbaceous species and shrubby species,
33
34 15 could fix the upper layers of soil to the bed rock by penetrating into the underlying bedrock
35
36 16 (Styczen and Morgan, 1995). Moreover, tree roots can penetrate into bedrock discontinuities
37
38
39 17 and act as restraint piles firmly anchoring the root-permeated soil to the bedrock (Fig. 6).

40
41 18 Evaluating the suitability of species for erosion control should also include knowledge on
42
43
44 19 species resistance to different erosion processes (De Baets et al., 2009). Erosive constraints
45
46 20 can be seen as environmental filters that determine which species from the regional pool can
47
48
49 21 persist (Keddy, 1992), and thus actually prevent shallow mass movements. Burylo et al.
50
51 22 (2009) studied the resistance to uprooting of 12 species growing in eroded marly lands,
52
53 23 among which *P. nigra*, *Q. pubescens*, *G. cinerea* and *T. serpyllum*. These four species showed
54
55
56 24 contrasting anchorage strengths. *G. cinerea* was found to be one of the most resistant while

1 *P. nigra* was among the least resistant species. *T. serpyllum* and *Q. pubescens* had
2 intermediate anchorage strengths.

3 Therefore, global species suitability to prevent MDF can be specified by taking into account
4 species resistance to uprooting. *P. nigra*, used for massive afforestation at the beginning of
5 the last century, proved not to be the most efficient species for root reinforcement of soils. On
6 the other hand, *G. cinerea* would be very interesting both for sustainable land colonization,
7 due to its high resistance to uprooting, and for soil stabilization. *T. serpyllum* and
8 *Q. pubescens*, respectively post-pioneer and late succession species, would have an
9 intermediate efficiency to prevent soil slippage. These two latter species could be interesting
10 when erosion is already partially controlled, for example to restore soil structure. The
11 anchorage strength of *A. monspeliensis* and *A. calamagrostis* has not yet been evaluated, but
12 uprooting tests on Vetiver grass showed that this graminaceous species possessed the root
13 strength to withstand torrential runoff (Mickovski et al., 2005). In addition, the grass
14 *A. calamagrostis*, known for its rusticity, its important expansion by vegetation reproduction,
15 and which is currently used in land restoration (Barrouillet, 1982), is suggested to be very
16 resistant as well.

19 **Conclusion**

20
21 Measurements of RAR and root tensile strength were conducted on six species growing on
22 eroded marly lands to evaluate root reinforcement of soil using Wu's perpendicular model and
23 to compare species efficiency to prevent MDF. The results presented here expand the
24 knowledge on the biomechanical characteristics of grasses and woody species growing on
25 mountainous marly lands. Results confirmed that thin roots can resist higher tensile stresses

1 than thicker roots, although roots with larger diameters need higher tensile forces to break.
2 Furthermore, this study concluded that grasses and shrubs provided higher increase in soil
3 shear strength in the topsoil than tree species in the early stages of their development.
4 Combined with the knowledge on vegetation dynamics, ecological site properties and species
5 resistance to erosion, these results can help in evaluating land vulnerability to erosion and the
6 efficiency of restoration actions in eroded marly lands.

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Table 2[Click here to download Table: Table 2.doc](#)

Table 2: Results of the Kruskal-Wallis test (test statistic H and probability value p) for root area ratio (RAR) differences with depth within each species. RAR significantly decreases with depth for all investigated species.

	<i>Pinus nigra</i>	<i>Quercus pubescens</i>	<i>Genista cinerea</i>	<i>Thymus serpyllum</i>	<i>Achnatherum calamagrostis</i>	<i>Aphyllantes monspeliensis</i>
H	25.5	31.05	25.7	6.72	22.3	27.2
p	<0.000	<0.000	0.007	0.034	0.004	<0.000

Table 3[Click here to download Table: Table 3.doc](#)

Table 3: Results of the Kruskal-Wallis test (test statistic H and probability value p) for root area ratio (RAR) and root reinforcement (ΔS) differences between the six species studied (*P. nigra*, *Q. pubescens*, *G. cinerea*, *T. serpyllum*, *A. calamagrostis* and *A. monspeliensis*) and between growth forms (trees, shrubs and grasses).

Depth (m)	0.05	0.10	0.15	0.20	0.25	0.30	0.35	0.40	
RAR									
Species									
H	5.81	7.31	1.92	8.88	8.31	5.31	6.40	2.40	
p	0.32	0.19	0.86	0.064	0.08	0.25	0.17	0.66	
Growth form									
H	2.65	2.12	0.34	3.43	0.99	3.51	4.90	2.29	
p	0.26	0.34	0.84	0.18	0.61	0.17	0.08	0.32	
ΔS									
Species									
H	20.49	20.14	17.89	18.42	14.93	10.28	8.24	7.2	
p	0.001	0.001	0.003	0.001	0.004	0.035	0.08	0.125	
Growth forms									
H	17.30	14.30	12.86	15.64	12.85	9.44	7.21	6.82	
p	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.008	0.027	0.033	

Table 4[Click here to download Table: Table 4.doc](#)

Table 4: Parameters of the power law relationship between root tensile strength and root diameter. Significance levels: ns nonsignificant, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$, *** $p < 0.0001$. N is the number of valid tests.

Species	N	α	β	R ²	p
<i>Pinus nigra</i>	25	12.41	0.69	0.50	***
<i>Quercus pubescens</i>	14	17.37	0.63	0.73	***
<i>Genista cinerea</i>	35	-	-	-	ns
<i>Thymus serpyllum</i>	23	14.67	0.76	0.58	***
<i>Aphyllantes monspeliensis</i>	30	16.57	1.02	0.75	***
<i>Achnatherum calamagrostis</i>	31	17.59	1.22	0.86	***

Table 5[Click here to download Table: Table 5.doc](#)

Table 5: Root tensile strength differences between species and growth form (ANCOVA, Tukey HSD test, $\alpha=0.05$). Growth forms are tree (T), shrubs (S) and grasses (G). Letters indicate significant differences between species (column 2) and between growth forms (column 4)

Species	Significant differences				Growth form	Significant differences	
<i>Pinus nigra</i>	A				T	A	
<i>Quercus pubescens</i>	A	B					
<i>Genista cinerea</i>				D	S		B
<i>Thymus serpyllum</i>		B	C				
<i>Achnatherum calamagrostis</i>			C	D	H		B
<i>Aphyllantes monspeliensis</i>				D			

Figure 1: Localization map of the experimental site.

Figure 2: Root area ratio (RAR) distribution with depth for the six species studied.

Figure 3: Relationship between root tensile strength (T_R , MPa) and root diameter (D , mm) for the six species studied. Points represent the measured values of T_R and curves represent the predicted T_R from the parameters α and β given in Table 4.

Figure 4: Soil reinforcement (Calculated ΔS in kPa) provided by the roots of the six species studied. Points represent the mean values of calculated ΔS at each depth.

Figure 5: Schematic representation of the three types of root systems studied. (A) Tap-like root system of juvenile trees (*P. nigra* and *Q. pubescens*) with a vigorous central vertical root and few fine laterals, (B) Tap-like root system of shrubby species (*G. cinerea* and *T. serpyllum*) with an identifiable larger central root and many thinner laterals and (C) heart root system of graminoid-shaped herbaceous species (*A. calamagrostis* and *A. monspeliensis*) with many fibrous roots.

Figure 6: Schematic representation of the combined effect of trees, shrubs and herbaceous species for shallow slope stabilization at the early stages of plant development.

Figure 1



Figure 2

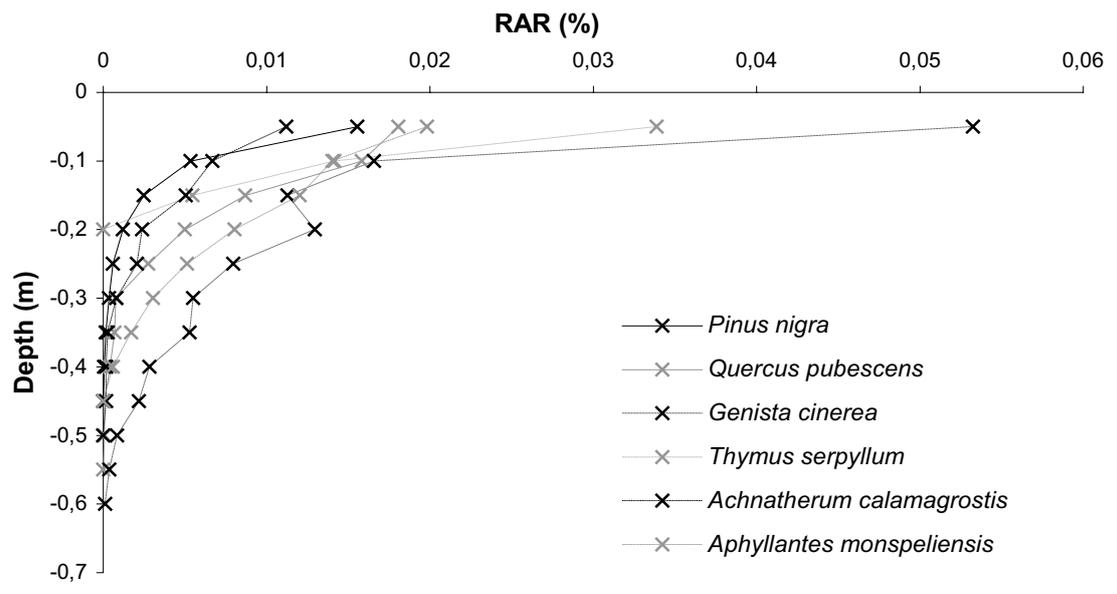


Figure 3

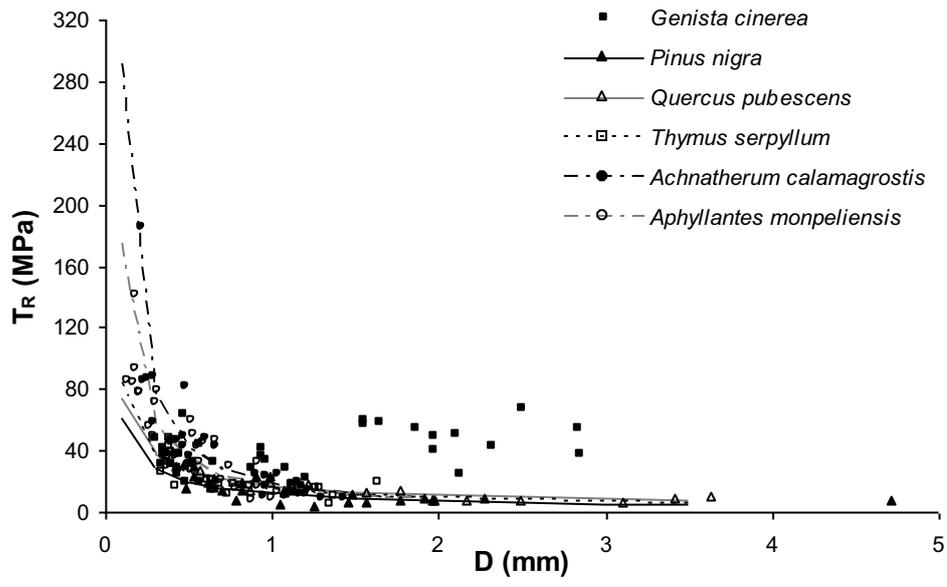


Figure 4

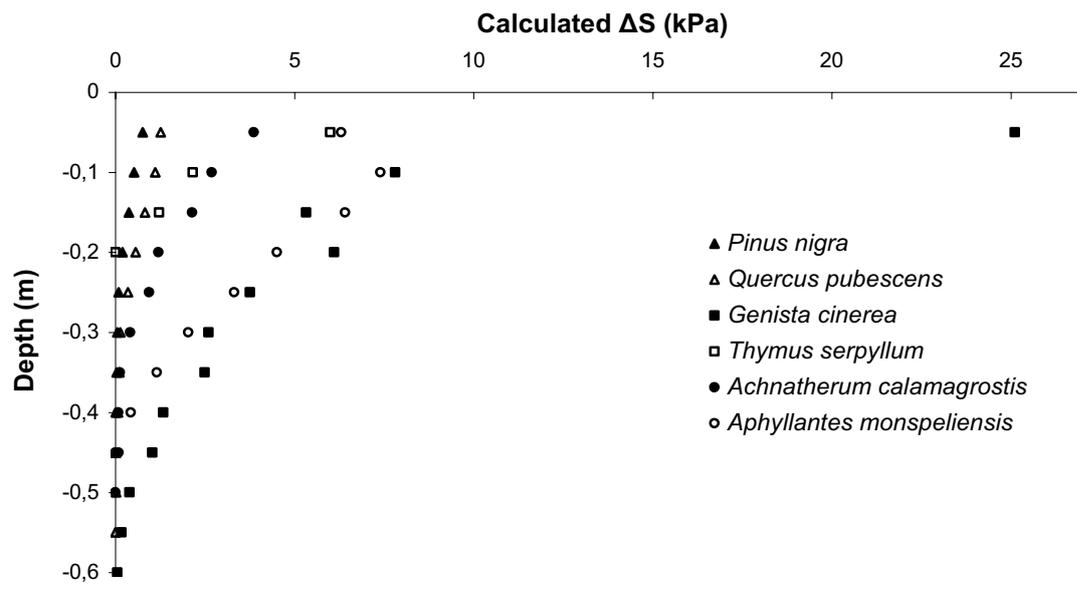


Figure 5

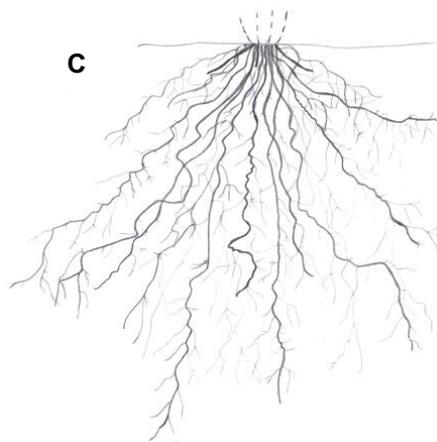
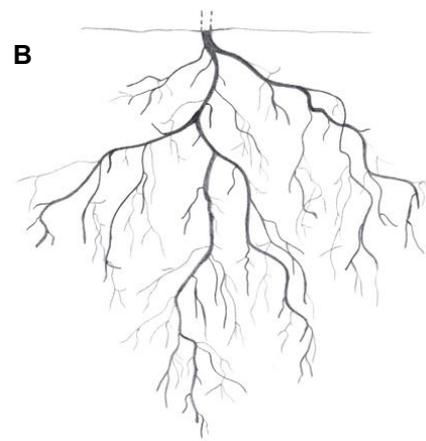
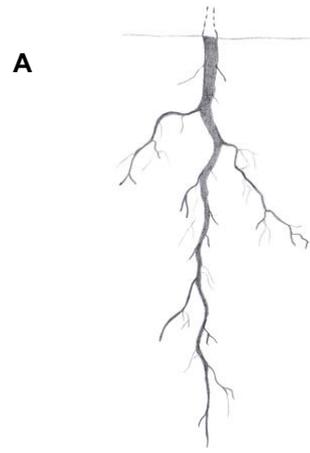


Figure 6

