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► **To cite this version:**

Cécile Nobile, Julia Denier, David Houben. Linking biochar properties to biomass of basil, lettuce and pansy cultivated in growing media. *Scientia Horticulturae*, 2020, 261, pp.109001. 10.1016/j.scienta.2019.109001 . hal-02427204

**HAL Id: hal-02427204**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02427204>**

Submitted on 3 Jan 2020

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# 1 Linking biochar properties to biomass of basil, lettuce and 2 pansy cultivated in growing media

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## 8 Abstract

9 The use of biochar as an additive for growing media for the production of potted plants requires a  
10 sound knowledge of how its properties impact plant biomass production. This study aims at linking  
11 physical and chemical properties of biochar with horticultural crop biomass. For this purpose, we  
12 incorporated six different biochars into growing medium and grew basil (*Ocimum basilicum* L.),  
13 lettuce (*Lactuca sativa* L. var. *crispa*) and pansy (*Viola wittrockiana* Gams.) for one month in  
14 greenhouse conditions. We found that physical and chemical properties of biochars had a  
15 significant impact on plant growth. Biochars with low density and high porosity promoted the  
16 biomass of basil and lettuce. While nutrient concentration in biochars had no impact on plant  
17 growth, lettuce and pansy biomasses decreased with increasing biochar pH and basil biomass  
18 decreased with increasing biochar electrical conductivity. By identifying which biochar properties  
19 influence plant biomass, our study allows selection of the biochars which are the best suited for  
20 incorporation into growing media.

21 **Keywords:** compost; sustainability; peat; pot experiment; waste management

22  
23  
24

## 25 1. Introduction

26 Over the last decade, biochar has attracted increasing attention for addressing environmental  
27 and agronomical issues. Owing to its beneficial properties, such as rich carbon (C) content, generally  
28 high cation exchange capacity (CEC) and large surface area, biochar has been extensively used to  
29 improve soil fertility, remediate soil and treat wastewater (Ahmad *et al.*, 2014; Biederman and  
30 Harpole, 2013; Houben *et al.*, 2017; Pourret and Houben, 2018).

31 More recently, biochar has also been considered as an appropriate additive or even a substitute for  
32 conventional growing media (Banitalebi *et al.*, 2019). Growing media are soilless substrates that  
33 provide plants with nutrients, air and water, and physical support (Kaudal *et al.*, 2016). Important  
34 properties for the use of materials for growing media include pH and electrical conductivity (EC)  
35 because too high or too low pH and/or high EC can mitigate plant growth and quality (Bunt, 1988).  
36 According to Abad (2001), an “ideal substrate” should have a pH ranging from 5.3 to 6.5 and EC ≤  
37 0.5 dS m<sup>-1</sup>. Plant growth also depends highly on physical properties of the growing medium,  
38 especially porosity and density, which is related to their effects on available water content  
39 (Bilderback *et al.*, 2005). Another important parameter for the production of potted plants is the  
40 stability of the growing medium as it is generally desired that physical and chemical properties  
41 remain stable over the crop growth period (Dalias *et al.*, 2018).

42 Growing media are commonly made from peat and aggregates (perlite and vermiculite) but the  
43 negative impact on the environment and the high cost of their production warrant the use of  
44 alternative products (Barrett *et al.*, 2016). For a few years, it has been suggested that addition of  
45 biochar to growing media could reduce the use of these eco-unfriendly materials while improving  
46 their properties such as nutrient availability, water retention, alkalinity and biological activity

47 (Lévesque *et al.*, 2018; Nemati *et al.*, 2015). However, the benefit of incorporating biochar into  
48 growing media is still controversial because, although several studies reported a positive effect on  
49 plant growth (Graber *et al.*, 2010; Méndez *et al.*, 2015; Tian *et al.*, 2012), others showed no or even  
50 a negative effect (Steiner and Harttung, 2014; Vaughn *et al.*, 2013). These discrepancies might be  
51 explained by the wide variety of biochars used by researchers. Feedstock and pyrolysis conditions  
52 drive biochar properties, which can in turn mediate their effects on plant growth (Li *et al.*, 2019).

53 In order to select and design biochars which are the best suited for incorporation into growing  
54 media, it is essential to identify which physical and chemical properties of the biochars play the  
55 major roles on plant growth. The objective of the present study was therefore: (i) to determine the  
56 response of horticultural crop biomass grown in growing media to the presence of contrasted  
57 biochars and (ii) to identify the physical and chemical properties of the biochars responsible for their  
58 effects on plant biomass.

## 59 **2. Materials and Methods**

### 60 *2.1. Biochars*

61

62 Commercial grade biochars were obtained from VTGreen (Allier, France) using an industrial  
63 pyrolysis reactor (Biogreen® Technology, ETIA, Oise, France). The principle employing continuous  
64 thermal treatment without oxygen with a set residence time of 10 min. Feedstocks available in large  
65 quantities in France, ensuring a high supply and having a low initial value, were selected for biochar  
66 production: coffee residues, resulting from coffee liqueur extraction and provided by Compomar  
67 (Essone, France); wood granules (<8 mm) from resinous trees provided by a wood storage center  
68 (LCE, Maine-et-Loire, France); maize cobs cultivated, dried and crushed by Agrivalor (Alsace, France);  
69 rapeseed straws cultivated, dried and crushed by Agriopale (Pas-de-Calais, France); and green  
70 wastes compost rejects composed of poplar and conifers branches and provided by Fertilvert (Seine-

71 Maritime, France). The temperature of pyrolysis was 550°C for wood granules (hereafter referred  
72 as Wood BC), 450°C for maize cobs and green compost rejects (hereafter referred as Maize BC and  
73 Compost BC, respectively), 650°C for rapeseed straws (hereafter referred as Rapeseed BC) and  
74 450°C and 650°C for coffee residues (hereafter referred as Coffee450 BC and Coffee650 BC,  
75 respectively). The different pyrolysis temperatures were selected to obtain biochars with  
76 contrasting chemical and physical properties.

77 Biochars were analyzed for pH (AFNOR, 2012a), EC (AFNOR, 2012b), CEC (AFNOR, 1999),  
78 density, porosity (AFNOR, 2012c), organic C content (AFNOR, 2011), total nitrogen (N) content  
79 (AFNOR, 2002a)), C:N ratio, ash content at 815°C (ISO, 2016), phosphorus (P), potassium (K), calcium  
80 (Ca) and magnesium (Mg) contents (AFNOR, 2002b).

81

## 82 *2.2. Growing medium-biochar mixtures*

83 Each biochar was incorporated at 10 % (v/v) into a growing medium made of 60% of sphagnum  
84 blond peat (Gamm Vert, France), 15% of green waste compost (Fertivert, Seine-Maritime, France),  
85 10% of composted manure and grape pomace (BioFumur®, Terre et Nature, France), and 5% of 0-4  
86 mm build sand (Cantillana, Gamm Vert, France).

87

## 88 *2.3. Greenhouse pot experiment*

89 Horticultural plants largely cultivated in growing media and belonging to different families, thus  
90 having potential different responses to biochar addition were tested: basil, lettuce, and pansy. Basil,  
91 lettuce and pansy seeds were individually sown in 80 mL pots filled with commercial seed substrate  
92 (Gamm Vert, France), kept under controlled greenhouse conditions (temperature 24/16°C;  
93 day/night, 16 h photoperiod) and watered by adding demineralized water two times a week. Three-  
94 week old seedlings of basil and lettuce, and four-week old seedlings of pansy were then transplanted  
95 separately in the six biochar-enriched media. Basil seedlings were transplanted in 0.5 L pots  
96 containing 80 g dry weight (DW) equivalent of medium, while lettuce and pansy were transplanted

97 in 1.6 L pots containing 180 g DW equivalent of medium. The trials were conducted under the same  
98 controlled greenhouse conditions in four replicates. Throughout the experiment, the moisture  
99 content of each growing medium was kept at 80% water holding capacity (WHC) by adding  
100 demineralized water and weighing the pots four times a week. After one month, aboveground parts  
101 of plants were harvested, dried at 60°C for 48 h and weighed.

102

#### 103 *2.4. Statistical analyses*

104 Data analysis was performed using Rstudio (Version 0.99.903). Correlations between physical  
105 and chemical biochar properties and biomass of basil, lettuce or pansy were analyzed using the  
106 Pearson correlation coefficient. The significance of the medium effect on basil, lettuce and pansy  
107 biomass was tested by one-way ANOVA and Tukey's HSD test was used to identify the differences  
108 between media. All tests of significance were conducted at  $P < 0.05$ .

109

### 110 **3. Results**

#### 111 *3.1. Biochar properties*

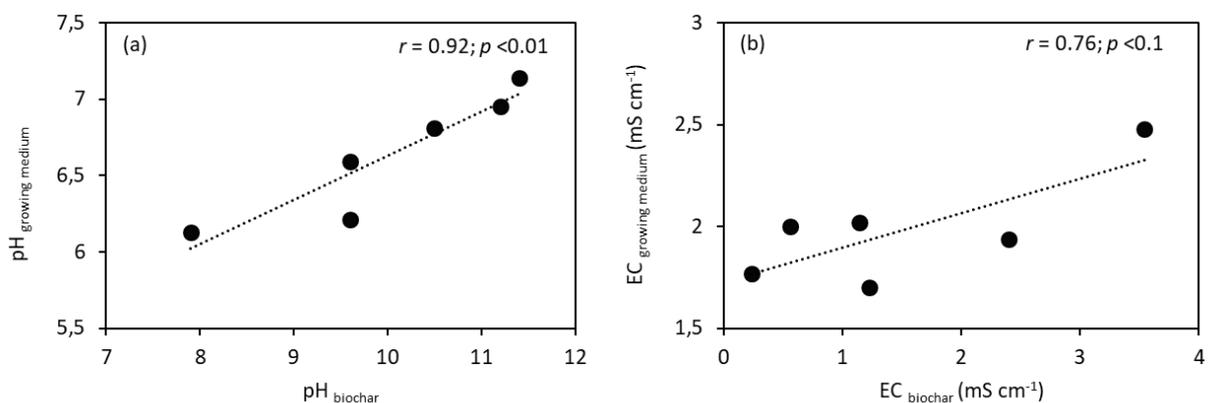
112 The six biochars tested in this study showed contrasting physical and chemical properties (Table  
113 1). Although all the biochars were alkaline, their pH ranged from 7.90 (Wood BC) to 11.40 (Compost  
114 BC). The pH of growing media after biochar application was positively correlated to biochar pH (Fig.  
115 1a). The EC was the lowest for the two coffee-derived biochars and the highest for Compost BC. A  
116 weak positive correlation between growing media EC and biochar EC was found (Fig. 1b). This  
117 relationship was, however, mainly driven by the biochar, with the highest biochar EC value (Compost  
118 BC) increasing markedly the growing medium EC. The CEC differed greatly among the biochars,  
119 ranging from 2.90  $\text{cmol}_c \text{ kg}^{-1}$  (Rapeseed BC) to 32.4  $\text{cmol}_c \text{ kg}^{-1}$  (Coffee650 BC). Rapeseed BC had the  
120 highest porosity and the lowest density, while Wood BC and Compost BC had the lowest porosity  
121 and the highest density. Organic carbon (C) content was high for all the biochars, ranging from

122 31.55% (Compost BC) to 48.75% (Wood BC). Total nitrogen (N) content was lower than 1%, except  
 123 for the two coffee biochars with 4.21% (Coffee450 BC) and 3.92% (Coffee650 BC). Consequently the  
 124 C:N ratio was the lowest for the coffee biochars and the highest for Wood BC. Biochars showed also  
 125 very different concentrations in nutrients. Irrespective of the nutrient, Wood BC and Rapeseed BC  
 126 had low and high nutrient concentrations, respectively. The highest concentration of K was recorded  
 127 for Coffee650 BC and Compost BC exhibited the higher concentration of Mg.

128 **Table 1.** Biochar properties

		Wood BC	Rapeseed BC	Maize BC	Compost BC	Coffee450 BC	Coffee650 BC
pH		7.90	11.20	9.60	11.40	9.60	10.50
EC	dS m <sup>-1</sup>	2.40	1.22	1.14	3.54	0.23	0.56
CEC	cmol <sub>c</sub> kg <sup>-1</sup>	12.30	2.90	27.30	8.50	15.20	32.40
Porosity	%	87.30	95.90	88.50	86.30	93.00	92.60
Density	g L <sup>-1</sup>	281.00	73.00	171.00	291.00	110.00	108.00
Organic C	%	48.75	35.30	45.35	31.55	42.65	46.00
Total N	%	0.18	0.81	0.68	0.84	4.21	3.92
C:N		270.83	43.58	66.69	37.56	10.13	11.73
Ash 815°C	%	2.10	16.80	7.00	26.30	4.20	6.20
P	mg kg <sup>-1</sup>	611	3753	1353	3709	2662	2357
K	mg kg <sup>-1</sup>	2739	18179	16519	17847	11538	18926
Ca	mg kg <sup>-1</sup>	1787	66172	2358	34015	2001	1072
Mg	mg kg <sup>-1</sup>	482	4161	1025	5066	2171	1267

129



130

131 **Figure 1.** Relationships between biochar pH and growing medium pH (a) and biochar electrical conductivity  
 132 (EC) and growing medium EC (b).

133

### 134 3.2. Basil

135 The nature of biochar incorporated into the medium significantly impacted the biomass of basil (Fig.  
136 2a). Basil grown in media containing Coffee450 BC ( $2.2 \pm 0.16$  g) or Rapeseed BC ( $2.1 \pm 0.12$  g) had  
137 significantly greater biomass than those grown in media containing other biochars. The four other  
138 biochars induced similar basil biomasses, with a minimum obtained with the compost BC ( $1.0 \pm 0.24$   
139 g). Correlations between basil biomass and biochars physical and chemical properties showed that  
140 biomass was significantly and positively correlated with the porosity of the biochars ( $r = 0.65$ ), and  
141 significantly and negatively correlated with the EC ( $r = -0.45$ ), the CEC ( $r = -0.44$ ) and the bulk density  
142 ( $r = -0.54$ ) of the biochars (Table 2).

143

### 144 3.3. Lettuce

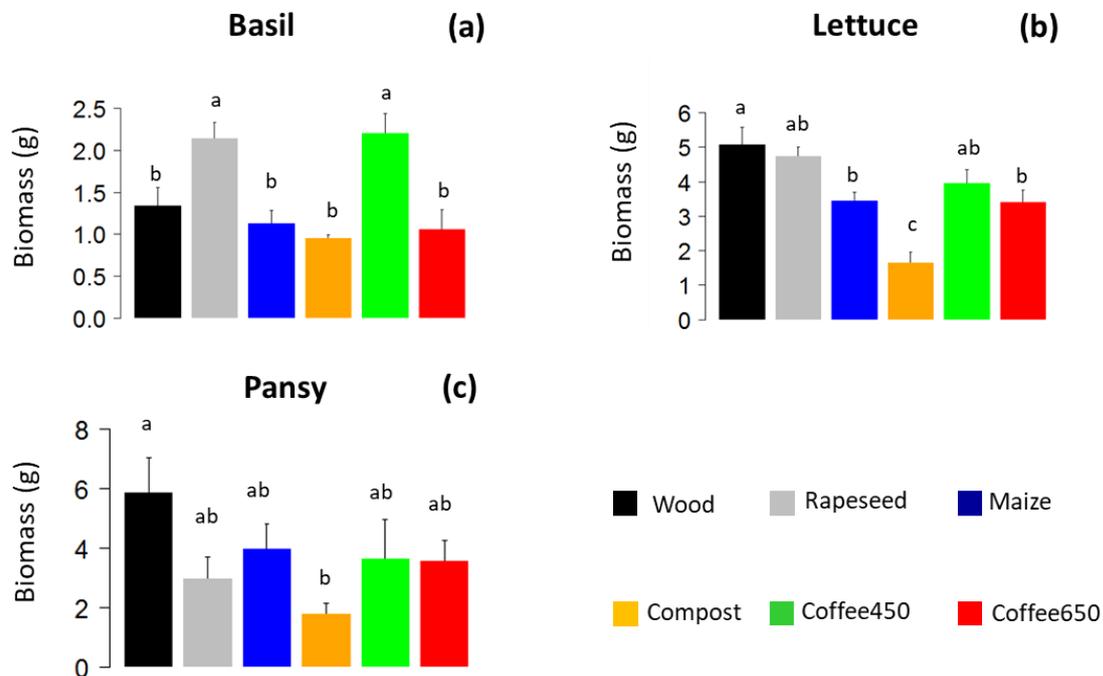
145 Biochars leading to the highest lettuce biomasses were Wood BC ( $5.1 \pm 0.51$  g), Rapeseed BC  
146 ( $4.8 \pm 0.48$  g), and Coffee450 BC ( $4.0 \pm 0.38$  g) (Fig. 2b). The lowest lettuce biomass was obtained  
147 with Compost BC ( $1.7 \pm 0.24$  g), and was significantly lower than with all other biochars. Biomass  
148 was significantly and positively correlated with the porosity ( $r = 0.49$ ) of the biochars and  
149 significantly and negatively correlated with the pH ( $r = -0.44$ ) and the ash content ( $r = -0.51$ ) (Table  
150 2).

151

### 152 3.4. Pansy

153 The highest pansy biomass was obtained with Wood BC ( $5.9 \pm 1.16$  g), but was significantly  
154 higher than the biomass obtained with Compost BC ( $1.8 \pm 0.36$  g) only (Fig. 2c). Biomass was  
155 significantly and positively correlated with the organic C ( $r = 0.55$ ) content and the C:N ratio ( $r = 0.5$ )

156 of the biochars, and significantly and negatively correlated with pH ( $r = -0.59$ ), P content ( $r = -0.57$ ),  
 157 and ash content ( $r = -0.53$ ) (Table 2).  
 158



159 **Figure 2.** Average biomass of basil (a), lettuce (b) and pansy (c) in the presence of biochar. Data are  
 160 presented as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation. Columns with same letter do not differ significantly at the 5% level  
 161 according to the Tukey's multiple comparison test.  
 162  
 163

164 **Table 2.** Pearson's correlation coefficients between basil, lettuce and pansy biomass and physical  
 165 and chemical properties of biochars. Correlation coefficients are significant at  $p < 0.05$ ; ns means  
 166 non-significant.

	Basil	Lettuce	Pansy
pH	ns	-0.44	-0.59
EC	-0.45	ns	ns
CEC	-0.44	ns	ns
Porosity	0.65	0.49	ns
Density	-0.54	ns	ns
Organic C	ns	ns	0.55
Total N	ns	ns	ns
C:N	ns	ns	0.5
Ash 815°C	ns	-0.51	-0.53
P	ns	ns	-0.57
K	ns	ns	ns
Ca	ns	ns	ns

Mg                      ns                      ns                      ns

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167  
168  
169

170 **4. Discussion**

171            The six biochars used in this study comprised a wide array of physical and chemical properties.  
172 Overall, properties of the present biochars compared well with the values reported by other  
173 researchers for similar feedstock materials and pyrolysis conditions (Houben *et al.*, 2014; Sun *et al.*,  
174 2014; Zhao *et al.*, 2013) and followed similar trends, e.g. ash content of wood-derived biochars was  
175 lower than that of non-wood-derived biochars (Mukome *et al.*, 2013). Our data highlight the role of  
176 pyrolysis temperature on biochar properties since, for instance, Coffee biochar produced at 650°C  
177 had a higher pH than Coffee biochar produced at 450°C, which is consistent with the literature and  
178 can be explained by the concomitant increase in ash content (Table 1) and decrease in acidic  
179 functional groups (Enders *et al.*, 2012). Similarly to pH, EC of biochars was affected by pyrolysis  
180 temperature (EC of Coffee650 BC is 2.4 times higher than EC of Coffee450 BC), which was due to the  
181 release of soluble salts from organic compounds during pyrolysis (Banitalebi *et al.*, 2019). However,  
182 our data also evidenced the role played by feedstock materials since, for instance, Wood BC had a  
183 much lower pH than Maize BC, Compost BC and Coffee450 BC. Like pH, feedstock materials played  
184 also a significant role on biochar EC since, for instance, biochars produced at the same temperature  
185 displayed a wide range of EC. Consistently with the literature (Li *et al.*, 2019), final properties of  
186 biochar resulted thus from the combined effect of their different feedstock materials and pyrolysis  
187 conditions.

188

189            As expected, the incorporation of the six dissimilar biochars into growing media yielded  
190 dissimilar plant biomass responses. Increasing porosity usually improves water and air exchanges in  
191 the growing media. As shown by Liu *et al.* (2017), the impact of biochar on soil water retention is  
192 strongly dependent on its porosity. Consistently with Roehrdanz *et al.* (2019), our results indicated

193 that incorporating biochar with low density and high porosity led to higher biomass production for  
194 basil and lettuce, respectively, which is most likely related to their beneficial effects on water  
195 availability. This is in line with Méndez *et al.* (2015) showing that biomasses of lettuce grown on pea-  
196 based growing media amended with biochar were positively related to the improvement of  
197 hydrophysical growing media properties.

198

199 In the present study, lettuce and pansy biomasses were significantly negatively correlated with  
200 biochar pH, which reflects the high sensitivity of these crops to elevated pH, as already reported by  
201 previous studies (Kuehny and Morales, 1998; Logan and Lindsay, 1996; Roosta, 2011). By increasing  
202 pH of growing media, alkaline amendments such as biochar can decrease nutrient availability,  
203 mainly for P, Fe and Mn, resulting in lower yield (Belda *et al.*, 2013). It must be noted that the  
204 negative correlations between lettuce and pansy biomasses and ash content most likely result from  
205 the strong relationship between ash content and basicity of biochars (Mukome *et al.*, 2013).

206

207 High EC reflects high levels of soluble salts that, through decreasing osmotic potential, may limit  
208 the availability of water to plants, thereby limiting germination and plant growth (Nieto *et al.*, 2016).  
209 Previous studies have evidenced that biochar might impair the growth of plants due to osmotic  
210 stress induced by high biochar EC (Rajkovich *et al.*, 2012; Revell *et al.*, 2012). In the present study,  
211 the significant negative correlation between basil biomass and biochar EC suggests that the growth  
212 of this crop was negatively impacted by the incorporation of biochar with high EC. These results are  
213 in line with other researchers reporting a decreasing basil biomass, as well as lower transpiration  
214 and chlorophyll content, with increasing levels of salinity (Bekhradi *et al.*, 2015). Oppositely, the lack  
215 of significant correlation between EC and biomass of lettuce and pansy might indicate a lower EC  
216 sensitivity, as shown for instance by van Iersel (1999) for pansy.

217

218           Since addition of biochar with high organic C content and elevated C:N ratio usually improves  
219 substrate stability because it decreases its decomposition, the positive correlation between pansy  
220 biomass and these two biochar properties might be due to a higher growing media stability, a  
221 parameter which was previously found to strongly affect the growth of pansy (Burnett *et al.*, 2016;  
222 Purman and Gouin, 1992). However, this should be further investigated by, among others,  
223 characterizing the changes of properties of growing media over time.

224

225           Finally, except for the unexpected negative correlation between pansy biomass and P  
226 concentration in biochar, crop biomasses were not correlated with nutrient concentrations of  
227 biochar. This suggests that the effects of biochar incorporation into growing media on plant growth  
228 do not primarily rely on their nutrient composition but rather on other properties, including their  
229 pH, EC, porosity and density. It must, however, be noted that the present study only focused on the  
230 relationship between biochar properties and plant biomass. Further study on other physiological  
231 traits should be carried out because they could be more sensitive to changes in biochar properties  
232 than plant biomass. For instance, since pansy flowering is dependent on nutrient availability in the  
233 substrate (Zawadzińska and Janicka, 2007), it is important to determine whether nutrient  
234 concentration in biochar impacts flowering abundance and time. In addition, since the aim of this  
235 study was to examine how the biochar properties mediated the plant response, we did not consider  
236 the influence of the initial properties of the growing medium in which we incorporated each of the  
237 six biochars. Because biochar properties may be themselves mediated by the surrounding  
238 environment, e.g. soil properties (Hardy *et al.*, 2016), biological activity (Houben and Sonnet, 2015;  
239 Lehmann *et al.*, 2011), the next challenge will be to elucidate how the composition of the growing  
240 medium drives the plant response to biochar application. In a more general context, it will be  
241 essential that, besides having the properties suitable for plant production as identified in this study  
242 and others (Nemati *et al.*, 2015; Singh *et al.*, 2010), biochars selected for plant production meet  
243 quality standards (Meyer *et al.*, 2017).

244

245 **5. Conclusions**

246 Our results have confirmed that the efficacy of biochar incorporation into growing media to  
247 improve plant biomass is not only dependent on the properties of the biochar itself but also on the  
248 crop species. However, general patterns can be drawn. First, increasing biochar pH and EC had  
249 generally a detrimental effect on plant biomass while biochars with low density and/or high porosity  
250 were beneficial for plant growth. Second, irrespective of the plant species, nutrient concentrations  
251 were not related to plant biomass. By linking physical and chemical properties of biochar with plant  
252 biomass, this study provides insights to engineer and better select biochar for incorporation into  
253 growing media for potted plants production.

254

255

256 **Acknowledgments:** This research was funded by Bpifrance and the Région Hauts-de-France (FUI  
257 Biochar 2021). All the members of the “FUI Biochar 2021” project are gratefully acknowledged for  
258 their useful comments on this paper. We thank ETIA, VTGreen and Agriculteurs Composteurs de  
259 France for providing biochars and growing media.

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