



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**POTASSIUM REQUIREMENT OF MATURE
OIL PALM ON COASTAL SOILS**

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By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
LIST OF PLATES	xv
ABSTRACT	xvi
ABSTRAK	xx
 CHAPTER	
I	
INTRODUCTION	1
The Oil Palm	1
II	
LITERATURE REVIEW	6
Oil Palm Yield Potential	6
Potassium Nutrition in Oil Palm	8
Sources of Potassium and Forms of Soil Potassium	15
Potassium Fixation and Release	19
Dynamics of Potassium in Soil	23
Functions of Potassium in Palm Metabolism	25
III	
RESPONSES OF MATURE OIL PALM TO FERTILIZER APPLICATION	27
Introduction	27
Experiment No. 1	28
Location of Experiment	28
Objective	28
Materials and Methods	29
Treatments	29
Plot Size and Recording	30
Results and Discussion	37
Nitrogen Status in Relation to NPK Fertilizer	37
Application	
Phosphorus Status in Relation to NPK Fertilizer	38
Application	
Potassium Status in Relation to NPK Fertilizer	41
Application	
Magnesium Status in Relation to NPK Fertilizer	43
Application	
Calcium Status in Relation to NPK Fertilizer	45
Application	



	Soil Nutrient Status	47
	Fresh Fruit Bunch Production in Relation to NPK	52
	Fertilizer Application	
	Conclusion	55
IV	RESPONSES OF MATURE OIL PALM TO POTASSIUM FERTILIZER APPLICATION	56
	Introduction	56
	Experiment No. 2	57
	Experiment No. 2(a)	57
	Experiment No. 2(b)	57
	Materials and Method	58
	Experiment No. 2(a) - Treatments	58
	Experiment No. 2(b) - Treatments	66
	Results and Discussion	68
	Experiment No. 2(a)	68
	Experiment No. 2(b)	100
	Conclusion	126
V	OIL PALM ROOT DISTRIBUTION AND POTASSIUM MOVEMENT IN SOILS	128
	Introduction	128
	Experiment No. 3	128
	Experiment No. 3(a)	129
	Experiment No. 3(b)	129
	Experiment No. 3(c) and Experiment No. 3(d)	130
	Materials and Method	130
	Experiment No. 3(a)	130
	Experiment No. 3(b)	134
	Experiment No. 3(c) and Experiment No. 3(d)	134
	Results and Discussion	138
	Experiment No. 3(a)	138
	Experiment No. 3(b)	142
	Experiment No. 3(c)	143
	Experiment No. 3(d)	144
	Conclusion	146
VI	POTASSIUM RESERVE IN OIL PALM TRUNK	148
	Introduction	148
	Experiment No. 4	149
	Objective	149
	Materials and Method	149
	Treatments	149
	Results and Discussion	152
	Trunk Nutrient Analysis	152
	Total Dry Matter	154
	Total Nutrient Contents	156
	Conclusion	157



VII	POTASSIUM STATUS IN UNFERTILIZED OIL PALM	158
	Introduction	158
	Experiment No. 5	158
	Objectives	159
	Materials and Method	159
	Treatments	159
	Results and Discussion	160
	Palm Growth	160
	Potassium Status	163
	Nitrogen Status	165
	Phosphorus Status	167
	Magnesium Status	169
	Calcium Status	169
	Pinnae Nutrient Status	172
	Bunch Production	173
	Conclusion	175
VIII	CATIONIC BALANCE IN MATURE OIL PALM IN RELATION TO POTASSIUM MANURING	177
	Introduction	177
	Experiment No. 6	178
	Objectives	178
	Materials and Method	179
	Treatments	179
	Transformation of Data	179
	Results and Discussion	179
	Total Bases of Fertilized Oil Palm	179
	Total Bases of Unfertilized Oil Palm	192
	Conclusion	200
IX	GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	202
	REFERENCES	205
	APPENDICES	
	Appendix 1: Method of Plant Analysis.....	214
	Appendix 2: Chemical Laboratory Methods of Plant Analysis	215
	Appendix 3: Method of Soil Analysis	230
	Appendix 4: Chemical Laboratory Methods of Soil Analysis	231
	Appendix 5: Method of Water Analysis	245
	Appendix 6: Details of Trunk Measurement of 10-Year Old Oil Palm	247
	Appendix 7: Calculation of Total Electrolyte (Cation) Concentration	251
	VITA	255



LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1 Approximate Record Yields of Some Oil Crops	6
2.2 Response of Oil Palm to N and K Fertilizers	8
2.3 FFB Yield and Nutrient Uptake of Mature Palms	11
2.4 K Content in Palms	12
2.5 K Concentration and Stomatal Resistance	12
2.6 K Concentration and Vascular Wilt Incidence	13
2.7 Exchangeable K in Some Malaysian Soils	18
2.8 Potassium in Soil	19
3.1 Experiment No. 1 - Fertilizer Application	30
3.2 Experiment No. 1 - Treatment Plots	30
3.3 Experiment No. 1 - Nitrogen Status in Pinnae	39
3.4 Experiment No. 1 - Phosphorus Status in Pinnae	40
3.5 Experiment No. 1 - Potassium Status in Pinnae	42
3.6 Experiment No. 1 - Magnesium Status in Pinnae	44
3.7 Experiment No. 1 - Calcium Status in Pinnae	46
3.8 Experiment No. 1 - Soil Analysis at 0-15 cm Depth	49
After Four Years of Treatment Application	
3.9 Experiment No. 1 - Soil Analysis at 15-45 cm Depth	50
After Four Years of Treatment Application	
3.10 Experiment No. 1 - Soil Analysis at 45-75 cm Depth	51
After Four Years of Treatment Application	



3.11	Experiment No. 1 - Fresh Fruit Bunch Yield	53
3.12	FFB Production in Relation to Potassium Status	54
	in the Pinnae with Phosphorus Application	
4.1	Fertilizer Application Treatment of Experiment 2(a).....	60
4.2	Experiment No. 2(a) - Annual Fertilizer Application Programme	60
4.3	Fertilizer Application Treatments of Experiment No. 2(b)	67
4.4	Experiment No. 2(b) - Annual Fertilizer Application Programme	67
4.5	Experiment No. 2(a) - Frond Length	72
4.6	Experiment No. 2(a) - Frond Weight	72
4.7	Experiment No. 2(a) - Leaf Area	73
4.8	Experiment No. 2(a) - Petiole Cross-Section	73
4.9	Experiment No. 2(a) - Trunk Height	74
4.10	Experiment No. 2(a) - Ash Status in Pinnae	75
4.11	Experiment No. 2(a) - Nitrogen Status in Pinnae	75
4.12	Experiment No. 2(a) - Phosphorus Status in Pinnae	76
4.13	Experiment No. 2(a) - Potassium Status in Pinnae	76
4.14	Experiment No. 2(a) - Magnesium Status in Pinnae	77
4.15	Experiment No. 2(a) - Calcium Status in Pinnae	77
4.16	Experiment No. 2(a) - Chlorine Status in Pinnae	78
4.17	Experiment No. 2(a) - Sodium Status in Pinnae	78
4.18	Experiment No. 2(a) - Ash Status in Rachis	79
4.19	Experiment No. 2(a) - Nitrogen Status in Rachis	79
4.20	Experiment No. 2(a) - Phosphorus Status in Rachis	80



4.21	Experiment No. 2(a) - Potassium Status in Rachis	80
4.22	Experiment No. 2(a) - Magnesium Status in Rachis	81
4.23	Experiment No. 2(a) - Calcium Status in Rachis	81
4.24	Experiment No. 2(a) - Chlorine Status in Rachis	82
4.25	Experiment No. 2(a) - Sodium Status in Rachis	82
4.26	Experiment No. 2(a) - Ash Status in Petiole	85
4.27	Experiment No. 2(a) - Nitrogen Status in Petiole	85
4.28	Experiment No. 2(a) - Phosphorus Status in Petiole	86
4.29	Experiment No. 2(a) - Potassium Status in Petiole	86
4.30	Experiment No. 2(a) - Magnesium Status in Petiole	87
4.31	Experiment No. 2(a) - Calcium Status in Petiole	87
4.32	Experiment No. 2(a) - Chlorine Status in Petiole	88
4.33	Experiment No. 2(a) - Sodium Status in Petiole	88
4.34	Experiment No. 2(a) - Soil Analysis at 0-15 cm Depth After Four Years of Treatment Application	92
4.35	Experiment No. 2(a) - Soil Analysis at 15-30 cm Depth After Four Years of Treatment Application	93
4.36	Experiment No. 2(a) - Soil Analysis at 30-45 cm Depth After Four Years of Treatment Application	94
4.37	Cations in Soil Profile	95
4.38	Cation Levels in Water	96
4.39	Experiment No. 2(a) - FFB Production	98
4.40	Experiment No. 2(a) - Bunch Production	98
4.41	Experiment No. 2(a) - Bunch Weight	99
4.42	Experiment No. 2(a) - Inflorescence Production	99



4.43	Experiment 2(b) - Frond Length	100
4.44	Experiment 2(b) - Frond Weight	101
4.45	Experiment 2(b) - Leaf Area	101
4.46	Experiment 2(b) - Petiole Cross-Section	102
4.47	Experiment 2(b) - Trunk Height	102
4.48	Experiment No. 2(b) - Ash Status in Pinnae	104
4.49	Experiment No. 2(b) - Nitrogen Status in Pinnae	105
4.50	Experiment No. 2(b) - Phosphorus Status in Pinnae	105
4.51	Experiment No. 2(b) - Potassium Status in Pinnae	106
4.52	Experiment No. 2(b) - Magnesium Status in Pinnae	106
4.53	Experiment No. 2(b) - Calcium Status in Pinnae	107
4.54	Experiment No. 2(b) - Chlorine Status in Pinnae	107
4.55	Experiment No. 2(b) - Sodium Status in Pinnae	108
4.56	Experiment No. 2(b) - Ash Status in Rachis	110
4.57	Experiment No. 2(b) - Nitrogen Status in Rachis	110
4.58	Experiment No. 2(b) - Phosphorus Status in Rachis	111
4.59	Experiment No. 2(b) - Potassium Status in Rachis	111
4.60	Experiment No. 2(b) - Magnesium Status in Rachis	112
4.61	Experiment No. 2(b) - Calcium Status in Rachis	112
4.62	Experiment No. 2(b) - Chlorine Status in Rachis	113
4.63	Experiment No. 2(b) - Sodium Status in Rachis	113
4.64	Experiment No. 2(b) - Ash Status in Petiole	116
4.65	Experiment No. 2(b) - Nitrogen Status in Petiole	116



4.66	Experiment No. 2(b) - Phosphorus Status in Petiole	117
4.67	Experiment No. 2(b) - Potassium Status in Petiole	117
4.68	Experiment No. 2(b) - Magnesium Status in Petiole	118
4.69	Experiment No. 2(b) - Calcium Status in Petiole	118
4.70	Experiment No. 2(b) - Chlorine Status in Petiole	119
4.71	Experiment No. 2(b) - Sodium Status in Petiole	119
4.72	Experiment No. 2(b) - Soil Analysis After Four Years of Treatment Application in the Oil Palm Circle	121
4.73	Experiment No. 2(b) - Soil Analysis After Four Years of Treatment Application in the Oil Palm Avenue	122
4.74	Experiment No. 2(b) - FFB Production	124
4.75	Experiment No. 2(b) - Bunch Production	125
4.76	Experiment No. 2(b) - Bunch Weight	125
4.77	Experiment No. 2(b) - Inflorescence Production	126
5.1	Rb-86 Count in Oil Palm Roots at Various Distances from Rb-86 Application Point	142
5.2	Rb-86 Count in Leaf of Oil Palm Seedlings	145
5.3	K-42 Count in Leaf of Oil Palm Seedlings	146
6.1	Fertilizer Application	150
6.2	Trunk Nutrient Analysis of 10-Year Old Oil Palm	153
6.3	Total Analysis Content in Palm Trunk of 10-Year Oil Palm	155
7.1	Mean Nutrient Status in Pinnae	173
7.2	Bunch Production of Fertilized and Unfertilized Palms	174
8.1	Experiment No. 1 - Cations and Total Bases in Pinnae	180
8.2	Experiment No. 2(a) Cations and Total Bases in Pinnae	182



8.3	Experiment No. 2(b) Cations and Total Bases in Pinnae	183
8.4	Average Levels of Total Bases	184
8.5	Distribution of Individual Cation in Pinnae	184
8.6	Experiment No. 2(a) Cations and Total Bases in Rachis	187
8.7	Experiment No. 2(a) Cations and Total Bases in Petiole	188
8.8	Distribution of Individual Cation in Frond Parts	189
8.9	Mean Sodium Ion Levels	189
8.10	Sodium Ion Levels in Relation to Potassium	191
	Fertilizer Application of Experiment No. 2(a)	
8.11	Sodium Ion Levels in Relation to Potassium	191
	Fertilizer Application of Experiment No. 2(b)	
8.12	Distribution of Cations in Frond Parts of Unfertilized	196
	Oil Palm	
8.13	Distribution of Cations in the Pinnae Unfertilized	196
	and Fertilized Oil Palm	



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
2.1 Nutrient Uptake of Oil Palm	9
2.2 Interrelationship of Various Forms of Soil - K	17
2.3 The Dynamic Equilibrium of Soil Potassium	20
3.1 Phyllotaxis of Oil Palm Fronds	33
3.2 Pinnae Sample for Analysis	34
4.1 Experiment No. 2(a) - Layout of Experiment	61
4.2 Vegetative Measurement of Oil Palm Frond	62
4.3 Oil Palm Trunk	64
5.1 P-32 Application at Site 1	131
5.2 P-32 Application at Site 2	132
5.3 P-32 Application at Site 3	133
5.4 Rb-86 Application Points in Oil Palm Trunk	135
5.5 Location of Root Sampling Points for Rb-86 Count	136
5.6 Oil Palm Seedlings Grown in Soil Columns	137
5.7 P-32 Count of Oil Palm Pinnae at Site 1	139
5.8 P-32 Count of Oil Palm Pinnae at Site 2	140
5.9 P-32 Count of Oil Palm Pinnae at Site 3	141
6.1 Sections of Oil Palm Trunk	151
7.1 Growth Comparison of Fertilized and Unfertilized Palms on Coastal Soils	162



7.2	Comparison of Potassium Status in Fertilized164 and Unfertilized Palms on Coastal Soils	164
7.3	Comparison of Nitrogen Status in Fertilized166 and Unfertilized Palms on Coastal Soils	166
7.4	Comparison of Phosphorus Status in Fertilized168 and Unfertilized Palms on Coastal Soils	168
7.5	Comparison of Magnesium Status in Fertilized170 and Unfertilized Palms on Coastal Soils	170
7.6	Comparison of Calcium Status in Fertilized 171 and Unfertilized Palms on Coastal Soils	171
8.1	Cations and Total Bases in Oil Palm Pinnae 186	186
8.2	Cations and Total Bases in Oil Palm Frond 186 Parts of Trial 2(a)	186
8.3	Cations and Total Bases in Pinnae of Fertilized 193 and Unfertilized Oil Palm	193
8.4	Cations and Total Bases in Rachis of Fertilized 193 and Unfertilized Oil Palm	193
8.5	Cations and Total Bases in Petiole of Fertilized 195 and Unfertilized Oil Palm	195
8.6	Cations and Total Bases of Unfertilized Oil Palm 195	195



LIST OF PLATES

Plate	Page
3.1 Identification of Frond 17 on Oil Palm Crown	32
7.1 30-Year Old Fertilized and Unfertilized Oil Palm	161



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May, 1999

Chairperson : Associate Professor Zaharah Abdul Rahman, Ph.D.

Faculty : Agriculture

Oil palm grown in the coastal marine clay soils are very productive with fresh fruit bunches (FFB) yield ranging between 28-40 tonnes per hectare. The high yield is attributable to high yielding planting materials, good agronomic practices and sound fertilizer application programme. Of the three factors, fertilizer application is considered to be the most influencing factor in maintaining high yield. In oil palm nutrition, the main nutrients which are important for vegetative growth and production are nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and magnesium. However, the responses of oil palm to potassium fertilizer application on coastal marine clay soils are low and varied between and within the soil series. There is no clear answer to this phenomenon and thus this study was undertaken to provide explanation on the potassium requirements of oil palm planted on coastal marine clay soils.



In this study a series of trials were conducted. In the experiment studying the responses of mature oil palm to NPK fertilizer application, the results showed that application of NPK fertilizers significantly increased their respective nutrient levels in the pinnae, but the magnesium levels were not affected. On fresh fruit bunch (FFB) production, phosphorus and nitrogen fertilizer application recorded positive significant responses. On the other hand, potassium fertilizer application showed no relationship at all with FFB production.

In the experiment studying the responses of oil palm to potassium fertilizer application, the results of experiments indicated that potassium fertilizer application had significantly increased the potassium levels in the rachis and petiole and to a small degree in the pinnae, but this did not result in a corresponding increase in vegetative growth and crop production. Trunk analysis also showed high potassium content with increasing rate of potassium fertilizer application. The high potassium levels in the vegetative parts as a result of potassium fertilizer application were excess uptake because such high levels of potassium did not result in improved crop production. Such excess uptake was considered as luxury consumption.

In the experiment studying root distribution, it was confirmed that there was extensive root system of oil palm planted on coastal clay soils. Thus isolation trenches and guard rows were put in place right from the commencement of the experiments to prevent poaching of nutrients by oil palm roots from one treatment to another. Experiments using Rb-86 and K-42 isotopes also provided information



indicating movement of potassium in the soil column. But the precautionary measures taken in the experiment layout had alleviated of the concern of drain water with potassium flowing from the potassium fertilized treatments to the unfertilized areas.

In the experiment studying the nutrient status of palms which were unfertilized for fifteen years, the results showed that the levels of potassium in pinnae, petiole, rachis and trunk were comparable to the regularly fertilized palms. However, the levels of nitrogen and phosphorus were very low with poor vegetative growth and unproductive. Thus oil palm when left unfertilized with nitrogen and phosphorus for an extended period would suffer badly in term of vegetative growth and production levels.

In view of the fact that the levels of potassium in the unproductive and unfertilized palms were comparable to palms receiving regular fertilizer application with good cropping levels, it is evident that bunch production was not entirely dependent on potassium inputs. Potassium would be required in a minimum quantity that was adequate for the basic biochemical functions of the palms. Adequate availability of nitrogen and phosphorus would thus seem to be more important for the production of bunches in the presence of just sufficient quantity of potassium for essential physiological processes. The biophysical functions of maintaining turgor pressure of the cell were complemented by other cations because of the fact that other cations such as magnesium and calcium were taken up in higher concentration in the palms planted on coastal soils. Their uptake in the palms was dependent on



the availability of the respective cations in the soil. In situation when one cation was taken up in higher concentration, the other cations uptake would be lowered and vice-versa. As such, the total bases in the palms as indicated in the pinnae would remain consistent irrespective of which cations were taken more than the others. Such phenomenon is termed as complementary cationic relationship for the purpose of ensuring balanced cation levels in the oil palm system.

From the results of this study, it is clear that the potassium requirements of oil palm planted on marine coastal clay soils could be met by the soil reserve and potassium fertilizer application would not have any positive impact on FFB yield. The potassium taken up from the soil reserves was sufficient to support the oil palm potassium needs for the biochemical and partly the biophysical functions and thus, no further potassium fertilizer application was required for satisfactory growth and crop production.



Abstrak disertasi yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**KEPERLUAN KALIUM BAGI POKOK SAWIT
MATANG DI TANAH-TANAH LANAR LAUT**

Oleh

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Mei, 1999

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Kelapa sawit yang ditanam di tanah dataran pantai sememangnya mengeluarkan hasil buah tandan segar (BTS) yang tinggi dan dianggarkan dalam lingkungan 28-40 metrik tan sehektar. Pengeluaran BTS yang tinggi ini disebabkan oleh kegunaan benih yang berpotensi tinggi, amalan agronomi yang baik dan pembajaan yang sempurna. Daripada ketiga faktor ini, pembajaan dianggap paling berpengaruh untuk menentukan kelapa sawit terus mengeluarkan hasil yang tinggi. Dalam aspek pembajaan, nutrien yang utama diperlukan untuk pertumbuhan dan pengeluaran hasil kelapa sawit ialah nitrogen, fosforus, kalium dan magnesium. Walau bagaimanapun, kesan pembajaan kalium terhadap kelapa sawit di tanah-tanah lanar laut adalah rendah dan tidak menentu. Tidak ada penjelasan yang kukuh untuk menghuraikan keadaan sedemikian dan dengan itu kajian ini dijalankan untuk memberi penjelasan lanjut mengenai keperluan kalium bagi kelapa sawit yang ditanam di tanah-tanah lanar laut.



Dalam kajian ini beberapa siri eksperimen dijalankan. Dalam eksperimen mengkaji kesan pembajaan NPK kepada kelapa sawit matang, keputusannya menunjukkan bahawa pembajaan NPK telah meningkatkan tahap nutrien-nutrien ini di dalam daun, jentu pelepah dan gagang pelepah manakala tahap magnesium tidak terjejas. Pengeluaran BTS pula, dipengaruhi oleh nitrogen dan fosforus. Sebaliknya, kalium langsung tidak ada hubungan dengan pengeluaran BTS.

Dalam eksperimen mengkaji kesan pembajaan kalium kepada pokok sawit, keputusan kajian menunjukkan pembajaan kalium telah meningkatkan tahap kalium di dalam jentu pelepah dan gagang pelepah manakala pada daun ia menunjukkan peningkatan tetapi tidak terdapat peningkatan tumbesaran pokok dan hasil pengeluaran BTS. Analisis sampel batang pokok juga menunjukkan peningkatan tahap kalium ekoran pembajaan kalium. Tahap kalium yang tinggi di dalam bahagian vegetatif kelapa sawit ekoran pembajaan kalium adalah satu pengambilan nutrien secara berlebihan kerana tahap kalium yang tinggi ini tidak menghasilkan peningkatan pengeluaran BTS. Keadaan begini bolehlah ditafsirkan sebagai pengambilan yang berlebihan.

Analisis tanah yang dilakukan di dalam eksperimen-eksperimen ini telah mengesahkan kedapatan kalium yang tinggi di dalam tanah. Begitu juga dengan magnesium dan kalsium, dimana ianya dapat membekal kation-kation ini untuk diambil oleh kelapa sawit dengan cukupnya.

Dalam eksperimen mengkaji taburan akar pokok sawit, didapati taburan sistem akar memang begitu meluas bagi kelapa sawit yang ditanam di tanah-tanah lanar laut. Jadi, parit pengasingan dan barisan pokok-pokok penghalang telah disediakan sejak eksperimen dijalankan untuk menghindarkan kesan 'poaching' ke atas nutrien oleh akar kelapa sawit diantara rawatan. Eksperimen menggunakan isotop Rb-86 dan K-42 juga telah memberi maklumat yang menunjukkan pergerakan kalium di dalam tanah. Tetapi dengan langkah-langkah tertentu pada tapak kajian telah mengeneipkan kebimbangan mengenai air parit yang mengandungi kalium mengalir dari rawatan yang dibaja dengan kalium ke kawasan tanpa pembajaan kalium.

Dalam eksperimen mengkaji status nutrien di dalam pokok sawit yang telah tidak dibaja selama lima belas tahun, hasil kajian menunjukkan tahap kalium di dalam daun, jentu pelepah, gagang pelepah dan batang adalah sama seperti kelapa sawit yang sentiasa menerima pembajaan. Walau bagaimanapun, tahap nitrogen dan fosforus adalah terlalu rendah dengan keadaan tumbesaran yang juga rendah serta tidak produktif. Ini jelas memperlihatkan bahawa kelapa sawit yang tidak dibaja dengan nitrogen dan fosforus dalam jangka masa yang lama akan terencat teruk dari segi tumbesaran dan pengeluaran buah.

Memandangkan tahap kalium di dalam kelapa sawit yang tidak produktif setelah tidak dibaja bersamaan dengan tahap kelapa sawit yang selalu menerima pembajaan dan mengeluarkan hasil yang baik, jelas menunjukkan bahawa pengeluaran buah tidak bergantung sepenuhnya kepada pemberian kalium. Kalium hanya diperlukan pada kuantiti yang minimum untuk fungsi asas biokimia kelapa

sawit. Kedapatan nitrogen dan fosforus yang mencukupi dirasakan lebih penting untuk pengeluaran buah dengan kalium hanya cukup untuk proses-proses fisiologi utama. Fungsi biofizika kalium untuk mempertahankan tekanan 'turgor' di dalam sel-sel didapati telah dibantu oleh kation-kation lain memandangkan kation seperti magnesium dan kalsium telah diambil pada tahap yang lebih tinggi oleh kelapa sawit yang ditanam di tanah dataran pantai. Pengambilan kation ini adalah bergantung kepada kedapatan kation-kation ini di dalam tanah. Dalam keadaan di mana satu kation diambil lebih, pengambilan kation lain akan menurun dan sebaliknya. Dengan itu, jumlah kation bes di dalam kelapa sawit akan sentiasa terpelihara ditahap yang sama tidak kira kation yang mana diambil lebih. Fenomena ini dipanggil 'complementary cationic relationship' untuk tujuan menentukan tahap kation yang seimbang di dalam sistem kelapa sawit.

Hasil kajian ini dengan jelas menunjukkan bahawa keperluan kalium kelapa sawit yang ditanam di tanah-tanah lanar laut boleh dipenuhi oleh kalium yang terdapat di dalam tanah dan pemberian baja kalium tidak mendatangkan kesan positif terhadap pengeluaran buah. Pengambilan kalium dari tanah sudah cukup untuk menampung keperluan kalium bagi fungsi biokimia dan sebahagian dari fungsi biofizika pokok sawit dan dengan itu pembajaan kalium tambahan tidak diperlukan untuk tumbesaran pokok dan pengeluaran buah.



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Oil Palm

The oil palm, *Elaeis guineensis* Jacq. is grown commercially in South East Asia, Africa, Equatorial America and the South Pacific. *E. guineensis* is a native of Africa based on the descriptions by early botanists and on the finding of fossil pollen very similar to oil palm pollen in Nigeria (Zeven, 1965). *E. guineensis* occurs naturally throughout the tropical rainforest belt of West Africa and it was observed that the natural habitat of the species is in swamps and along river banks which are too wet for the dicotyledonous trees of the rainforest (Zeven, 1967).

The first introduction into South East Asia was made in 1848 when oil palm was planted in the Bogor Botanical Garden, Indonesia. Oil palm was planted on estate basis in 1911 in Tanah Itam Ulu, Deli, North Sumatra. It was introduced to Malaysia in 1911 and 1912 where some materials of Deli origin from Sumatra were planted in Rantau Panjang, Selangor. These palms were in full bearing in 1917 and seedlings from these plantings were planted on a slightly bigger scale in Tennamaran Estate, Selangor around the same year. The oil palm planting started

