Improved fallows: an alternative for rapid restoration of degraded soils

A traditional agricultural practice used by a large proportion of farmers consists of leaving soils fallowing or 'resting' when they have lost their productive potential due to inadequate soil management.

Soil fertility recovery usually requires long fallow periods (> 5 years) allowing sufficient regeneration of native vegetation or natural fallow.

Since good agricultural land is limited the increasing population pressure on land has created the need to reduce the period under natural fallow or increase fertilizer use.

When economic limitations exist to acquire inorganic fertilizers an option to natural fallow, developed by CIAT's SOL project (Spanish acronym for Supermarket of Options for Hillsides), is the use of improved fallows with plants capable of regenerating soil fertility more quickly than native vegetation.

Improved fallows can include fast growing shrubby legumes capable of fixing atmospheric nitrogen, and also other plants that are able to accumulate nutrients in their biomass.

Species frequently used as improved fallows include: Sesbania sesban, Tephrosia vogelii, Giricidia sepium and Flemingia macrophylla.

The double purpose of improved fallows is that besides recuperating degraded soils in less than 3 years, they can also give other economic benefits to farmers such as fuel-wood, bio-insecticides, fodder, etc.

Planted fallows usually need weeding only at the beginning to facilitate their establishment. The contribution of organic matter to the soil is limited to litter fall and root death. However, some improved fallow species can be managed as slash/mulch systems.
Species frequently used as slash/mulch improved fallows include: *Tithonia diversifolia*, *Calliandra calothyrsus*, *Indigofera constricta* and *Cratylia argentea*.

The nutrient content of improved fallow biomass is crucial when considering the species potential for recuperation of degraded soils. Nitrogen content is an important chemical characteristic used to define the potential of fallow prunings and other organic materials as nutrient inputs to soil.

### Potential species of improved fallow plants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
<th>Decomposition and nutrient release rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sesbania sesban</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigofera constricta</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tithonia diversifolia</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glincidia sepium</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tephrosia vogelii</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cratylia argentea</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calliandra calothyrsus</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flemingia macrophylla</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Slow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Tithonia* biomass also has relatively high levels of phosphorus (P), potassium (K), calcium (Ca) and magnesium (Mg), which has resulted in its wide use as bio-fertilizer in Africa and Asia.

The rule of thumb is that organic additions with N content higher than 2.5% will present net N release and thus can be used as N source. On the other hand, organic additions with N values less than 2.5% should be mixed with fertilizers in order to be used as N sources, or simply be used as mulches for the erosion control and moisture retention. Nevertheless, other chemical characteristics of fallow prunings, such as high contents of polyphenols and/or lignin, tend to reduce their rate of decomposition and nutrient release.

Difficult access to fertilizers requires strategies to minimize nutrient losses and maximize the residual effect of applied nutrients not used by the crops. A better understanding of the interaction between fallow prunings and fertilizers could provide valuable information about options that could promote efficient nutrient management.

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