

Use of potassium to increase irrigated rice production

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late father

Mohammed A. Bhiah

To my mother, wife and my children

&

To whom I miss

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Abstract

Rice (*Oryza sativa*.L) is the main staple food in Iraq, but productivity is low compared to other major rice-producing countries. The most popular rice cultivar (Amber33) has a lodging problem. Lodging of rice in Iraq reduces production by 25 – 30% and may be related to the agronomic practice since the 1960s of supplying high nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) nutrition in the absence of applied potassium (K). There are concerns that soil K depletion is leading to K deficiency. In addition, the inherently high salinity in many Iraqi rice-growing regions, is a further problem which can affect both yields and quality.

This study investigated the effect of K application on rice growth and yield parameters and lodging incidence under high N status and flooded conditions in a Black Vertosol and clay loam soil during the years 2009 – 2011. Experiments were undertaken in glasshouses at the University of New England, and at farms in Iraq which have experienced problems with rice lodging, to investigate the effect of K fertilisation on rice growth using six rice cultivars. These cultivars (namely IR52713, IR45427, Amber13, Amber33, Koshihikari and Basmati370) are known to have different susceptibilities to lodging. The selected cultivars, Amber13 and Amber33 (standard and long culm) were most susceptible to lodging.

Pot experiments were undertaken on a Black Vertosol (pH= 6.8; $EC_{(1:5)} = 0.7 - 0.8$ dS/m; $K = 0.22$ cmol_c/kg) to examine the effects of K on lodging, tillering, plant height, shoot and root dry matter production, stem diameter, stem strength, tissue K content and K uptake. Pots were laid in a complete randomized design (CRD) with four replicates. The treatments consist of control (no K addition) and 200 mg K/kg, with a combination of N, P and sulphur (S), 300 mg N/kg, 50 mg P/kg and 20 mg S/kg respectively. Plant

measurements were taken at either panicle initiation or just prior to grain filling before being harvested.

The results showed that lodging can be reduced following K application in standard rice varieties (i.e. Amber13) similar to those grown in Iraq. Also, application of K significantly ($P < 0.05$) increased tiller number (40 – 140%), plant height (< 30%), shoot (120 – 140%) and root (80 – 300%) dry matter production and stem diameter (30 – 80%) in all cultivars, although differences between cultivars were observed. Furthermore, applied K significantly ($P < 0.05$) increased stem strength, tissue K content and K uptake. Lodging occurred primarily from the base, due to poor root growth in the absence of K. Potassium application successfully overcame lodging incidence in some selected cultivars like Amber13.

Field experiments were conducted at different locations in Iraq (Najaf, Al Diwaniyah and Ash Shamiyah) to examine the effects of K on plant growth and yield parameters. Experiments were carried out on clay loam soils ($pH = 7.6 - 8.12$; $EC_{(1:5)} = 4.3 - 11.5$ dS/m; $K = 0.3$ cmol_c/kg), and were set up using randomised complete block design (RCBD) with three replicates. The treatments consist of control (no K addition) and 200 kg K/ha, with a combination of N, P and S, 200 kg N/ha, 50 kg P/ha and 20 kg S/ha respectively. Plant measurements were taken at harvest.

Results from the experiments at Najaf and Al Diwaniyah in Iraq showed that the application of K significantly ($P < 0.05$) increased K concentration in soil, plant tissues (leaf and stem) and K uptake by grain and stem. At Najaf, K significantly increased the number of panicle per m², 1000 grain-weight, grain yield (26%) and straw yield (28 – 36%) in Amber33 and IR52713 cultivars, while there was no effect of K on plant height, number of filled grain, panicle length and harvest index (HI). At Al Diwaniyah, K

application significantly increased grain and straw yields by 281 – 76% and 14 – 65%, respectively as well as HI. At Ash Shamiyah (single replicate), K increased grain and straw yields by 92 % and 34%, respectively and further evidence was provided that K application could overcome rice lodging in the field. The addition of K increased rice yield as a consequence of the physiological role of K, particularly with respect to plant water relations.

A glasshouse experiment was conducted to examine the interaction of K application with contrasting salinity (0.8 and ~7 dS/m) on mineral nutrient status of rice and on plant mortality. There were four K fertiliser treatments, applied with a basal combination of N, P and S: 0 mg K/kg, 200 mg K/kg upfront, 200 mg K/kg as a split dose (50, 75 and 75 mg K/kg at transplanting, 40 and 65 days after transplanting (DAT), respectively) and 400 mg K/kg upfront. A basal dose of N, P and S was applied and pots were set up in CRD with three replicates. Soil and plant measurements were taken during the vegetative stage.

Rice growth decreased and mortality increased by 37 – 60% with increasing salinity. However, K application improved plant growth, increased soil solution K activity ratio (AR^K) and potentially overcame an antagonistic effect between Na^+ and K^+ uptake resulting in decreased plant tissue Na^+/K^+ ratio.

Another glasshouse experiment was conducted as a pot trial to examine the effect of K on rice growth parameters such as plant height, tillering and shoot and root dry matter production, under saline conditions (3 – 4 dS/m). There were two levels of K, applied with a basal combination of N, P and S: 0 and 200 mg K/kg. The 200 kg K/ha was applied as two equal 100 mg/kg applications upfront and 30 DAT. Pots were set up in CRD with three replicates. Plant measurements were taken during the vegetative stage. The result showed that increasing K rate (200 mg K/kg) significantly ($P < 0.05$) increased plant

height (10 – 23%, tillering (20 – 69%), shoot (12 – 70%) and root (3 – 109%) dry matter production. These experiments demonstrated that K application had a vital role in mitigation of the adverse effects of salt stress on the growth rate of rice.

To investigate the response of rice roots to K application, an experiment was conducted under glasshouse conditions and laid out according to CRD with eight replicates. Potassium was applied at the rates of 0, 100 and 200 mg/kg soil with half at planting and half as a surface application 30 days after transplanting (DAT), with a basal supply of N, P and S. Root measurements were taken at harvest. All root parameters were positively affected by K application. Potassium significantly ($P < 0.05$) increased root dry weight (39 – 84%), total root length (60 – 256%), root surface area (56 – 156%), root volume (68 – 251%), root diameter (< 34%) and root distribution (80 – 298%) in the top 5 cm of soil of the studied cultivars. Therefore the application of K improved all aspects of root system development resulting in increased uptake of water and nutrients as well as providing the plant with improved anchorage.

To conclude, the research reported in this thesis provides evidence that K application will increase rice production under specific flooded and saline conditions, overcome the incidence of lodging in pot and field grown rice, and suggests that split application of K may be a strategy worth investigating in the field should appropriate technology be available.

Table of contents

Declaration	i
Dedication	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Abstract.....	v
Table of contents	ix
List of Tables	xiii
List of figures.....	xv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Introduction	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	5
2.1 Introduction	5
2.2 Rice	5
2.3 Potassium	7
2.3.1 Potassium function in plants	8
2.3.2 Potassium concentration in plant tissue	8
2.3.3 Sources of potassium in soil	9
2.3.4 Factors affecting potassium availability in soil	9
2.3.5 Diffuse double layer.....	13
2.3.6 Cation exchange capacity	13
2.3.7 Quantity/ Intensity (Q/I) relationships	14
2.3.8 Factors affecting potassium fixation in soils	15
2.3.9 Potassium interaction with other nutrients.....	16
2.3.10 Critical level of potassium in rice	19
2.3.11 Rice response to potassium fertilisation	20
2.3.12 Potassium and quality of rice seeds	24
2.3.13 Potassium deficiency symptoms in rice.....	25
2.3.14 Factors Affecting Potassium Deficiency	25
2.3.15 Plant Potassium Uptake	26
2.3.16 Potassium removal by rice.....	28
2.4 Effect of application methods on rice production	28
2.5 Lodging and potassium	30
2.6 Effects of salinity on rice	33
2.7 Carbohydrate production and yield.....	34
2.8 Summary	35

CHAPTER 3: POTASSIUM AND RICE UNDER HIGH N CONDITIONS IN GLASSHOUSE37

3.1	Introduction.....	37
3.2	Materials and methods.....	39
3.2.1	Experimental design.....	39
3.2.2	Tissue K content.....	41
3.2.3	Stem diameter and stem strength.....	42
3.2.4	Plant height.....	42
3.2.5	Potassium availability and uptake.....	43
3.2.6	Statistical analysis.....	43
3.3	Results.....	43
3.3.1	Visual K deficiency symptoms.....	43
3.3.2	Experiment 1 (winter).....	45
3.4	Experiment 2 (summer).....	54
3.4.1	Results.....	54
3.5	Discussion.....	64
3.6	Conclusion.....	72

CHAPTER 4: POTASSIUM AND RICE UNDER HIGH SALINE CONDITIONS74

4.1	Introduction.....	74
4.1.1	The impact of salinity on cation concentrations and rice growth.....	74
4.1.2	Potassium activity ratio.....	74
4.2	Methods.....	75
4.2.1	Fertiliser applications.....	77
4.2.2	Soil electrical conductivity.....	77
4.2.3	Potassium activity ratio.....	78
4.2.4	Extracted Soil Solution.....	78
4.2.5	Calculation of cumulative mortality.....	80
4.2.6	Statistical analysis.....	80
4.3	Results.....	80
4.3.1	Soil EC and pH under flooded conditions.....	80
4.3.2	Effects of K addition on cation concentrations.....	81
4.3.3	Potassium activity ratio (AR^K).....	84
4.3.4	Mortality.....	85
4.3.5	Salinity symptoms on rice.....	86
4.4	Discussion.....	87
4.4.1	Soil solution EC and pH.....	87
4.4.2	Soil solution cation composition.....	88
4.4.3	Plant mortality.....	89
4.5	Conclusion.....	90
4.6	The effect of K on K uptake and rice yields under saline conditions.....	90
4.7	Material and Methods.....	91
4.7.1	Soil and rice seeds.....	91
4.7.2	Fertiliser applications.....	91
4.7.3	Measurements of Plant.....	92

4.7.4	Experiment design	92
4.7.5	Statistical analysis.....	92
4.8	Results.....	93
4.8.1	Cation concentration for rice	93
4.8.2	Cation uptake for rice	95
4.8.3	Plant height	97
4.8.4	Tiller number	98
4.8.5	Shoot and root dry weight.....	99
4.9	Discussion	101
4.10	Conclusion.....	103
CHAPTER 5: POTASSIUM AND RICE ROOT GROWTH		105
5.1	Introduction.....	105
5.2	Method	105
5.2.1	Soil	105
5.2.2	Experiment design	106
5.2.3	Seeds source and germination.....	106
5.2.4	Fertiliser management.....	107
5.2.5	Water management	108
5.2.6	Root system measurements.....	108
5.2.7	Statistical analysis.....	110
5.3	Results	110
5.3.1	Agronomic characters of rice shoots	110
5.3.2	Root morphological parameters.....	112
5.4	Discussion	125
5.4.1	Agronomic characters	125
5.4.2	Root parameters	125
5.5	Conclusion.....	130
CHAPTER 6: POTASSIUM AND RICE WITH HIGH N UNDER FIELD CONDITIONS		131
6.1	Introduction.....	131
6.2	Objective of the study	132
6.3	Methods.....	132
6.3.1	Study sites	132
6.3.2	Seeds source and germination.....	133
6.3.3	Experiment design	134
6.3.4	Fertiliser application	135
6.3.5	Weed control.....	135
6.3.6	Sampling	135
6.4	The variation in temperature (°C) during the experimental season in Najaf and Al Diwanayah.	137
6.5	Results.....	138
6.5.1	Effect of K application on K concentration in soils.....	138
6.5.2	Effect of K application on K concentration in grain and straw.	139

6.5.3	Effect of K application on K uptake by grain and straw	141
6.5.4	Plant height (Najaf only).....	142
6.5.5	Grain yield and yield components: Najaf and Al Diwaniyah locations	142
6.5.6	Ash Shamiyah location	147
6.6	Discussion	148
6.7	Conclusions	152
CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY AND FURTHER STUDIES		153
7.1	Summary and further studies	153
7.1.1	Summary	153
7.1.2	Further studies.....	157
7.2	Conclusions and recommendations.....	159
7.2.1	Conclusion	159
7.2.2	Recommendation	159
REFERENCES.....		161
APPENDICES.....		180

List of Tables

Table 2.1 Potassium critical level in youngest fully expanded leaf or flag leaf of rice plants (Hill et al. 1998).	20
Table 2.2 Potassium content of modern rice cultivars (n=1300) (Dobermann and Fairhurst 2000).....	20
Table 2.3 Effect of different levels of K on yield of rice under flooded field conditions.	23
Table 2.4 Fertiliser K recommendations.	24
Table 3.1 Selected soil chemical properties of a Black Vertosol from Oakwood, NSW.	40
Table 3.2 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on K concentration (%) in leaves, stem and root of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors of the means.	53
Table 3.3 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on K conc. (%) in leaves of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors of the means.	62
Table 4.1 Change in electrical conductivity (EC) and pH of the soil solution following application of 200 mg/kg of K to a Black Vertosol soil growing Amber33 rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) during the first 46 days of growth under saline and non-saline conditions. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard errors of the means.....	81
Table 4.2 Effects of salinity 0.8 – ~3.0 dS/m, application strategy of 200 mg/kg of K and sampling time on (a) Ca^{2+} , (b) Mg^{2+} , (c) K^+ and (d) Na^+ concentrations in soil solution under rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i> cv Amber33) growing in a Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard errors of the means.....	82
Table 4.3 Solution potassium (K) activity and ratio of Na:K in early season soil solution of a Vertosol growing rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i> cv Amber33) in the absence (Control) and presence of 200 mg/kg of K. Values are the mean of 3 replicates \pm standard errors of the means.	84
Table 5.1 Effects of K application at rates of 0, 100 and 200 kg/ha on root fresh weight (g) of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard errors of the means.....	112
Table 5.2 Effect of K application at rates of 0, 100 and 200 kg/ha on the percentage of roots in different soil depths of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard errors of the means.	113
Table 5.3 Effect of K application on root/shoot dry weight ratios of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 8 replicates with \pm standard errors of the means.....	114

Table 5.4 Effect of K application at 100kg/ha on root length density (cm root/cm ³ soil) in two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with ± standard errors of the means.....	124
Table 5.5 Effect of K application at rate of 100kg/ha on roots diameter (mm) of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with ± standard errors of the means of the means.	125
Table 6.1 Selected soil physical and chemical properties of soils, Iraq.	138
Table 6.2 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on K concentration and ECEC (cmol _c /kg) in soils of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with ± standard errors of the means, Najaf and Al Diwaniyah.	139
Table 6.3 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on K concentration (%) shoot (leaves plus stems) of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with ± standard errors of the means, Najaf and Al Diwaniyah.	140
Table 6.4 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on K uptake (kg/ha) of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with ± standard errors of the means, Najaf and Al Diwaniyah.....	141

List of figures

Figure 2.1 Interrelationships of various forms of soil K.	10
Figure 3.1 Potassium-deficiency symptoms on leaves of Amber33 cultivar grown for 71 DAT in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol.	44
Figure 3.2 Effect of potassium application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on root production of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 91 DAT in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol in 2009.	44
Figure 3.3 Effect of potassium application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on root production of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 91 DAT in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol in 2010.	45
Figure 3.4 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on lodging of Amber13 grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol.	45
Figure 3.5 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on tillering of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 70 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	46
Figure 3.6 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on plant height (cm) of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 70 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	47
Figure 3.7 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on shoot dry weight (g/pot) of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard error indicated by bars.	48
Figure 3.8 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on root dry weight (g/pot) of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	49
Figure 3.9 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on thick stem diameters (mm) of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 70 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	50
Figure 3.10 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on thin stem diameters (mm) of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 70 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	50
Figure 3.11 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on lower stem strength of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard error indicated by bars.	52

Figure 3.12 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on upper stem strength of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard error indicated by bars.....	52
Figure 3.13 Potassium uptake ratio (plant K/applied K) of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars in winter experiment grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	54
Figure 3.14 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on tiller production of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 70 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.....	55
Figure 3.15 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on plant height (cm) of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 70 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.....	56
Figure 3.16 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on shoot dry weight (g/pot) of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with standard errors indicated by bars.....	57
Figure 3.17 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on root dry weight (g/pot) of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	58
Figure 3.18 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on thick stem diameter (mm) of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 70 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	59
Figure 3.19 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on thin stem diameter of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 70 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.....	59
Figure 3.20 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on stem strength down by weight (g) of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with standard errors indicated by bars.....	60
Figure 3.21 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on stem strength up by weight (g) of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	61
Figure 3.22 Plant K/soil K ratio (plant K/applied K) of six rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars in summer experiments, grown for 84 days in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 4 replicates with \pm standard error indicated by bars.....	63

Figure 4.1 Glasshouse experiment, located at UNE, Armidale, April, 2010.	77
Figure 4.2 Determinations of in situ soil solution EC (dS/m) of Vertosol.....	78
Figure 4.3 Hollow-fiber soil solution extractor.....	79
Figure 4.4 The change in soil solution K activity ratio during the first 7 weeks of growth of rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i> cv Amber33) following either initial application of 200 mg K/kg or a split application of K with 50 mg K/kg applied initially and a further 75 mg K/kg applied in the 4 th week of growth. Values are the mean of 3 replicates averaged over salinity levels \pm standard errors of the means.	85
Figure 4.5 Effect of salinity on seedling growth of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown in Vertosol with low available K. Mortality increased linearly up to Day 22 and the linear regression correlations are presented on the graph for each cultivar.....	86
Figure 4.6 Effect of soil salinity at ~3 dS/m on rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i> cv IR45427) grown for 40 days in a glasshouse.....	86
Figure 4.7 Effect of K application (No potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on Na ⁺ (a – b) and K ⁺ (c – d) concentrations in shoots and roots of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 41DAE in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates.....	94
Figure 4.8 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on Ca ²⁺ (a – b) and Mg ²⁺ (c – d) concentrations in shoots and roots of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 41DAE in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates.	95
Figure 4.9 Effect of K application (No potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on Na ⁺ (a – b) and K ⁺ (c – d) uptakes by shoots and roots of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 41DAE in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates.	96
Figure 4.10 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on Ca ²⁺ (a – b) and Mg ²⁺ (c – d) uptakes by shoots and roots of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 41DAE in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates.....	97
Figure 4.11 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on plant height (cm) of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 41DAE under salinity conditions in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard error indicated by bars.	98
Figure 4.12 Effect of K application (No potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on tillering of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 41DAE under salinity conditions in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard error indicated by bars.	99
Figure 4.13 Effect of K application (No potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on SDW (g) of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 41DAE under salinity conditions in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard error indicated by bars.	100

Figure 4.14 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 mg K/kg) on RDW (g) of three rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown for 41DAE under salinity conditions in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard error indicated by bars.	100
Figure 5.1 Glasshouse experiment, located at UNE, Armidale, 2010–2011.....	107
Figure 5.2 Effect of K application at rate of 100 kg/ha on roots system of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars IR45427 (a) and Amber33 (b) grown for 100 and 150 DAT, respectively in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol.	109
Figure 5.3 Effect of K application on plant height (a), tillering (b), panicle length (c), shoot dry weight and grain yield (e) of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars IR45427 and Amber33 grown in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 8 replicates with \pm standard error indicated by bars. Only shoot dry weight possessed significant interaction between cultivar and K rate.....	111
Figure 5.4 Effect of K application at 100kg/ha on root mass density (g root/cm ³ soil) in two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars IR45427 (a) and Amber33 (b) grown on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.....	115
Figure 5.5 Effect of K application on rooting depth of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars IR45427 (a) and Amber33 (b) grown in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates indicated by bars.	117
Figure 5.6 Effect of K application on root distribution (cm ³ root/cm ³ soil) of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars IR45427 (a) and Amber33 (b) grown on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	118
Figure 5.7 Effect of K application at rate of 100 kg/ha on root length of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars IR45427 (a) and Amber33 (b) grown in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.....	120
Figure 5.8 Effect of K application at rate of 100 kg/ha on root surface area of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars IR45427 (a) and Amber33 (b) grown in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.	121
Figure 5.9 Effect of K application at rate of 100 kg/ha on root volume of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars IR45427 (a) and Amber33 (b) grown in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with \pm standard errors indicated by bars.....	122
Figure 5.10 Effect of K application at rates of 0 (a) and 100 kg/ha (b) on the root system of Amber33 grown for 150 DAT, in a glasshouse on a K responsive Black Vertosol at depth of 0 – 5 cm.	123
Figure 6.1 Location of Najaf and Al Diwaniyah provinces	133
Figure 6.2 Rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) grown in nursery plots, Najaf, June 2010.....	134

Figure 6.3 The variation in temperature (°C) during 2010 season for (a) Najaf and (b) Al Diwaniyah.....	138
Figure 6.4 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on height of plant per m ² of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates, with ± standard error indicated by bars, Najaf.	142
Figure 6.5 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on grain yield (t/ha) of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates, with ± standard error indicated by bars, for (a) Najaf and (b) Al Diwaniyah.	143
Figure 6.6 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on straw yield (t/ha) of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates, with ± standard errors indicated by bars, for (a) Najaf and (b) Al Diwaniyah.	143
Figure 6.7 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on harvest index (%) of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with ± standard errors indicated by bars, (a) Najaf, and (b) Al Diwaniyah.	144
Figure 6.8 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on number of filled grain per panicle of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates, with ± standard error indicated by bars, Najaf.....	145
Figure 6.9 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on panicle length of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates with ± standard error indicated by bars, with standard error indicated by bars, Najaf.	145
Figure 6.10 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on number of panicles per m ² of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars grown on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates, with ± standard error indicated by bars, Najaf.....	146
Figure 6.11 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on weight of 1000 grains of two rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivars on a K responsive clay loam soil. Values are the mean of 3 replicates, with ± standard error indicated by bars, Najaf location.....	147
Figure 6.12 Effect of K application (no potassium vs 200 kg K/ha) on lodging of rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i>) cultivar Amber33 grown for 150 DAS, in a field on a K responsive clay loam soil, Ash Shamiyah location, Al Diwaniyah province, Iraq.	148