

Heat Stress in Crops: Challenges and Management Strategies

Lakshmi S.

Assistant Professor, Department of Crop Physiology, Adhiparasakthi Horticultural College, G.B. Nagar, Kalavai 632506, Tamil Nadu, India.

Corresponding Author: lakshmisubramaniyanl@gmail.com

Introduction

Agriculture is highly dependent on environmental conditions, particularly temperature. In recent years, global warming and climate change have caused a steady increase in average temperatures across many agricultural regions. Heat stress has emerged as one of the most serious challenges affecting crop productivity, food security, and farmer livelihoods. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the frequency, intensity, and duration of heat waves are expected to increase in the coming decades (IPCC, 2023).

Heat stress occurs when temperatures rise above the optimum range required for normal plant growth and development. High temperatures affect various physiological, biochemical, and molecular processes in crops, leading to reduced productivity and poor crop quality. Since temperature directly influences photosynthesis, respiration, water relations, and reproductive development, understanding the effects of heat stress is essential for developing sustainable agricultural systems under changing climatic conditions.

What is Heat Stress?

Heat stress refers to the adverse effects experienced by plants when temperatures exceed their tolerance limits for a sufficient duration to cause irreversible damage. Every crop has an optimum temperature range for growth. When environmental temperatures rise beyond this range, normal physiological processes become disrupted (Hasanuzzaman et al., 2023).

For example:

- Rice performs best between 25–35°C.
- Wheat prefers temperatures between 15–25°C during grain filling.
- Maize grows optimally around 25–30°C.

Temperatures above these limits can significantly reduce crop performance and yield.

How Heat Stress Affects Crop Physiology

Reduction in Photosynthesis

Photosynthesis is one of the most heat-sensitive physiological processes in plants. High temperatures damage chloroplast structures and reduce chlorophyll content. The activity of important enzymes involved in carbon fixation,

particularly RuBisCO, declines under heat stress, resulting in lower photosynthetic efficiency (Dusenge et al., 2023). In addition, excessive heat increases photorespiration, a process that consumes energy without producing carbohydrates. As a result, plants produce less food, reducing growth and yield.

Increased Respiration

Respiration increases rapidly under high temperatures. Although respiration is necessary for energy production, excessive respiration consumes carbohydrates that would otherwise be used for growth and grain formation. This imbalance between photosynthesis and respiration leads to reduced biomass accumulation (Ainsworth & Long, 2022).

Damage to Cell Membranes

High temperatures destabilize cell membranes and increase membrane permeability. Leakage of cellular contents can occur, leading to tissue injury and impaired physiological functions. Membrane stability is often considered an important indicator of heat tolerance in crops (Farooq et al., 2023).

Water Loss and Dehydration

Heat stress increases transpiration rates and accelerates water loss from plant tissues. Under prolonged heat exposure, plants experience dehydration, reduced leaf water potential, and loss of cell turgidity. These conditions negatively affect growth and metabolic activities (Gupta et al., 2022).

Effects of Heat Stress on Plant Growth

Seed Germination

High soil temperatures can reduce seed germination and seedling establishment. Heat stress during early growth stages often leads to poor crop stands and uneven plant populations.

Vegetative Growth

Heat stress reduces leaf expansion, stem elongation, and root development. Smaller leaves intercept less sunlight, reducing photosynthetic capacity and dry matter production (Hasanuzzaman et al., 2023).

Reproductive Development

The reproductive stage is considered the most heat-sensitive phase in crop growth.

High temperatures can:

- Reduce pollen viability.
- Impair fertilization.
- Increase flower abortion.
- Reduce grain filling.
- Cause fruit drop.

These effects directly contribute to yield losses in major crops such as rice, wheat, maize, tomato, and soybean (Jagadish et al., 2023).

Heat Stress and Crop Yield

Yield reduction occurs because heat stress affects both source and sink activities in plants. The source refers to leaves that produce carbohydrates through photosynthesis, while the sink includes developing grains, fruits, and storage organs that utilize these carbohydrates. Heat stress reduces photosynthate production and limits translocation to reproductive structures, resulting in lower grain weight and yield (Reynolds et al., 2022). Studies indicate that each 1°C increase in global temperature may significantly reduce the yields of major cereals, posing a serious threat to food security (IPCC, 2023).

Heat Stress in Major Crops

Rice

Rice is highly sensitive to high temperatures during flowering. Heat stress can increase spikelet sterility and reduce grain filling, leading to major yield losses. Night-time temperature increases are particularly harmful because they enhance respiration and reduce carbohydrate accumulation (Jagadish et al., 2023).

Wheat

Wheat experiences severe yield reductions when exposed to high temperatures during grain development. Heat stress shortens the grain-filling period, resulting in smaller and lighter grains (Reynolds et al., 2022).

Maize

In maize, heat stress during tasseling and silking reduces pollination efficiency and kernel formation. Combined heat and drought stress often causes substantial productivity losses (Lobell et al., 2023).

Horticultural Crops

Vegetable and fruit crops are also highly vulnerable. Excessive temperatures can reduce flowering, fruit set, fruit quality, and shelf life. Crops such as tomato, chilli, and brinjal frequently show reduced productivity under heat stress conditions (Rouphael & Colla, 2023).

Physiological Mechanisms of Heat Tolerance

Plants possess several adaptive mechanisms that help them survive high-temperature stress.

Production of Heat Shock Proteins

Heat shock proteins (HSPs) protect cellular proteins from denaturation and help maintain normal metabolic functions during heat stress. These proteins act as molecular chaperones and are considered important components of plant defense systems (Bita & Gerats, 2022).

Antioxidant Defense System

Heat stress generates reactive oxygen species (ROS), which damage cellular structures. Plants activate antioxidant enzymes such as superoxide dismutase, catalase, and peroxidase to neutralize these harmful molecules and reduce oxidative damage (Hasanuzzaman et al., 2023).

Osmotic Adjustment

Accumulation of compatible solutes such as proline, glycine betaine, and soluble sugars helps maintain cell hydration and protects cellular membranes under heat stress conditions (Farooq et al., 2023).

Enhanced Root Growth

Some crops develop deeper root systems that improve water uptake and help maintain plant water status during periods of high temperature and soil moisture deficit.

Management Strategies for Heat Stress

Development of Heat-Tolerant Varieties

Plant breeders are developing crop varieties with improved heat tolerance using conventional breeding, molecular breeding, and gene-editing techniques. Heat-tolerant varieties are increasingly becoming important components of climate-smart agriculture (Ali et al., 2024).

Adjustment of Sowing Time

Changing planting dates can help crops avoid critical reproductive stages during peak temperature periods. Proper sowing schedules allow crops to escape severe heat stress.

Efficient Irrigation Management

Adequate irrigation reduces canopy temperature and minimizes heat damage. Drip irrigation and precision irrigation systems improve water-use efficiency while protecting crops from heat-induced moisture stress (Gupta et al., 2022).

Mulching

Mulches reduce soil temperature, conserve moisture, and improve the root-zone environment. Organic mulches

such as crop residues and straw are widely used in heat-prone agricultural regions.

Nutrient Management

Balanced fertilization improves crop vigor and stress tolerance. Potassium plays an important role in regulating stomatal activity, water relations, and enzyme activation under heat stress.

Use of Biostimulants

Biostimulants and beneficial microorganisms help improve plant resilience by enhancing physiological and biochemical defense mechanisms. Recent studies have shown promising results in reducing heat stress damage through microbial inoculants and plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (Rouphael & Colla, 2023).

Climate-Smart Approaches for Future Agriculture

As climate change continues to intensify, modern agricultural systems must adopt innovative approaches to manage heat stress. Some promising technologies include:

- Precision agriculture.
- Sensor-based crop monitoring.
- Artificial intelligence for stress prediction.
- Remote sensing for early stress detection.
- Gene-editing technologies such as CRISPR.
- Climate-resilient crop breeding.

These approaches can improve adaptation and support sustainable crop production under future climatic conditions.

Conclusion

Heat stress has become a major challenge to global agriculture due to rising temperatures and increasing climate variability. High temperatures adversely affect photosynthesis, respiration, water relations, reproductive development, and overall crop productivity. Major crops such as rice, wheat, maize, and horticultural crops are particularly vulnerable during critical growth stages. Fortunately, plants possess several physiological defense mechanisms that help them tolerate heat stress. The adoption of heat-tolerant varieties, efficient irrigation practices, balanced nutrition, mulching, and climate-smart technologies can significantly reduce heat-related yield losses. Future agricultural sustainability will depend on integrating crop physiology, advanced breeding techniques, and modern

management practices to build resilient farming systems capable of withstanding rising global temperatures.

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