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How to cultivate azolla

Azolla is a floating water fern that has roots submerged in the water. Amusing to look at, this fodder plant has been gaining quite a lot of popularity and is quite in demand. It resembles the likes of duckweed or some type of mosses. Since Azolla is a very productive plant, let us see how they are cultivated in India.
1. Benefits/ Uses of Azolla
The Azolla plant has many benefits. Azolla cultivation can be of so much use to not only farmers, but consumers as well. Since the plant covers the surface of the water, it reduces the light penetration of the soil. This is good because it reduces the possibility of weed production. It helps aquatic weed from being formed whilst farming. Azolla plants uses its root system much to its advantage. It is known for fixing atmospheric nitrogen and carrying the process of photosynthesis. Like we said earlier, Azolla can be used as a fodder plant. Animals like pigs, cattle, chicken, ducks and many more consume this plant as fodder. It can be used for many vegetables and plantation crops. Another interesting use is that Azolla can be utilised as a biofertilizer for agricultural crops. It is a huge source of nutrition for soil. Azolla can be used as green manure. The azolla plant is able to purify water and is used as a medicine as well.
2. Factors Required For Growth
Photo by Carnat Joel, CC BY 2.0
Let us look at some growth factors and requirements for azolla farming in India. This refers to the pH levels required in order to have the ideal azolla plantation. Azollas are known to be able to survive within the pH ranges of 3.5 to about 10. These plants are not able to grow in acidic soils with pH levels below 3.5. So, within that limit or above should be fine. Azolla is a very tolerant plant. It is known to be able to tolerate various ranges when it comes to temperature. Some species of azolla are known to even survive in temperatures as low as -5oC which is quite impressive. Most species have the ideal temperature of 18-28. However, it can go higher for some rare species. Light affects the photosynthesis and regulates the nitrogenase activity in Azolla. Azolla plants are best known to grow under less sunlight instead of extreme sources. Under high sunlight intensities Azolla fronds turn brick red. In the case of low light intensities, these sources of light could cause the Azolla plant to suffer or die. The ideal photoperiod for azolla plants is about 20 hours. For the 20 hours photoperiod, 380E/m2/s of illumination should be fine. Just like the cultivation of any other plant, the azolla requires just a few mineral and nutrients for its growth. The nutrients required might be available to the plant in the water or it can be extracted from the soil if the water is shallow enough. Also, molybdenum and cobalt are important minerals to have. These are required for Anabaena and its nitrogen fixation. During the growth of azolla, one must be careful as to how the levels of nitrogen are maintained. This is because the levels of nitrogen play an important role in determining its nitrogen fixation rates and its growth. This is the most important nutrient for azolla production. A deficiency in phosphorus can be determined by the deep red color of the plant and the sudden lengthening of the roots.
Threshold Macronutrients for Azolla growth.
For Full Nitrogenase Activity.
Threshold Micronutrients for Azolla growth.
• P: 0.03 mmol l-1
• K: 0.4 mmol l-1
• Mg: 0.4 mmol l-1
• Ca: 0.5 mmol l-1
• P: 0.03 mmol l-1
• K: 0.6 mmol l-1
• Mg: 0.5 mmol l-1
• Ca: 0.5 mmol l-1
• Fe: 50 g/l-1
• Mn: 20g/l-1
• Mo: 0.3g/l-1
• B: 30g/l-1
3. Cultivation Process and Materials Required
Photo by Kevin Thiele, CC BY 2.0
As you may know, the azolla is an aquatic plant which means that it requires a shallow pond for its cultivation. We shall be discussing the process behind the cultivation of azolla plants. A lot of care and consideration must be put when it comes to growing azolla. Firstly, choosing a location for the azolla pond is crucial. This particular location must be perfect and must abide to all the factors required. For example, having a good source of water is important. Partial sunlight and enough shade should also be present at the place of cultivation. Make sure the bottom of the pond is free from any obstructions as well. When it comes to the size of the pond, it depends on how much of azolla you're looking to cultivate. Make sure to have the pond cleaned and levelled before beginning the growing process. Line up the edges of the pond with bricks. Lastly, make sure to place a net on top so as to prevent any unwanted things from falling into the pond. The cultivation of plants in India all have different methods. The same goes for the cultivation of the azolla plant. You can start by using a mixture of fertile soil, cow dung and water. Spread this mixture across the pond. Make sure this is executed well as it is the foundation step in the cultivating process. The water should be about 5-6 inches in depth. You can use azolla culture and spread it across as well. About 1kg of this should be enough for the average sized pond. Apart from this, do not forget to check the water for alkaline levels. For its maintenance after the briefing of cultivation, use 1 kg of cow dung and about 100 grams of super phosphate to the plant once every two weeks or so. After the foundation process, the azolla plant should be ready after two or three weeks. Plastic sieves are usually used to harvest the azolla and can be done daily when fully grown. Like we said earlier, azolla acts as fodder for many livestock. So, it can be fed either directly or mixed with other nutrients. However, make sure to clean the plant well before utilising. There you have it, the A to Z of azolla cultivation in India. Azolla is a freshwater water fern that lives in ponds, lakes, swamps, and streams in both tropical and sub-tropical conditions. For many centuries, azolla has been used in southern China and northern Vietnam as green manure for rice. Why use Azolla in rice? Azolla in association with blue-green alga anabaena can fix atmospheric Nitrogen (N) into ammonia which can be utilized by rice plant when it is incorporated into soil. Azolla contains from 2–5% N, 0.3–6.0% Potassium (K) (dry weight). How do you manage Azolla in rice? Multiplication Azolla multiples vegetatively (i.e., it does not produce seeds). Thus, live Azolla (inoculum) is maintained throughout the year by growing in small ponds or water filled ditches (e.g., areas of 4–5 m2 and depth of 0.5–1 m. You need around 250–500g (fresh weight) inoculum for such an area). Azolla grows best at a 25oC average daily temperature but dies at higher temperature. It can be utilized by rice in both wet and dry season. Azolla can be used in two ways: 1) as green manure incorporated before transplanting, and 2) as an intercrop incorporated after transplanting. In each case, about 500 kg (fresh weight) per ha is introduced into standing water in the rice field. Pre-transplanting incorporation Grow Azolla for about a month before incorporating at transplanting. Fertilize Azolla with 2.2 kg Phosphorus (P)/ha every 5 d, 4 kg K/ha every 10 d, and/or 500–1000 kg/ha farmyard manure every 5–10 d. If chemical fertilizers are unavailable, ash is substituted. Intercropped Azolla Introduce azolla into the rice field when permanent standing water is available. Intercropped azolla is usually not fertilized (but if super phosphate is available one application of 4.5 kg P/ha per crop is recommended). Under both systems, azolla can be incorporated several times during the crop cycle. Rate of growth Sixteen to twenty days after inoculation the field is covered with about 20 t of Azolla, which is then incorporated into soil. Normally, some Azolla is left after the first incorporation, which then continues to grow. Sometimes 3–4 crops of azolla are produced and incorporated in each crop of rice. This technology produces around 40 t (fresh weight) azolla/ha per rice crop equivalent to around 80 kg N/ha. It requires application of 0.5 t fresh azolla inoculum, 2–3 t farmyard manure, 20–30 kg P, and 20 kg K/ha. Limitations Azolla cannot withstand any drying – so standing water is always required. Because Azolla grows from vegetative multiplication, inoculum must be maintained in nurseries all year and multiplied for distribution before field inoculation and multiplication. High temperatures cause greater disease and animal attack on azolla. Cool weather is a key to successful Azolla utilization. Among nutrients, P is most important for azolla. Since Azolla floats, it is not able to extract P from soil, thus its growth is often constrained by insufficiency of P if P is not applied into the pond water. The economics of Azolla use is very important. The technology is labor intensive. Often farmers have little or no economic advantage in choosing azolla over chemical fertilizer because the additional costs of labor, land opportunity irrigation, seed/inoculum, phosphate, and pesticides make the use of Azolla uneconomical. Developed with input from JK Ladha Genus of aquatic plants AzollaTemporal range: Maastrichtian-Holocene
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Azolla covering the Canning River, Western Australia
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Azolla is a highly productive plant. It doubles its biomass in 1.9 days or more,[10] depending on conditions, and yield can reach 10 tonnes fresh matter/ha in Asian rice fields. 37.8 t fresh weight/ha (2.78 t DM/ha dry weight) has been reported for Azolla pinnata in India (Hasan et al., 2009).[11] Azolla floats on the surface of water by means of numerous small, closely overlapping scale-like leaves, with their roots hanging in the water. They form a symbiotic relationship with the cyanobacterium Anabaena azollae, which fixes atmospheric nitrogen. The plant can readily colonise areas of freshwater, and grow at great speed - doubling its biomass every two to three days. The typical limiting factor on its growth is phosphorus. An abundance of phosphorus, due for example to eutrophication or chemical runoff, often leads to Azolla blooms. Unlike all other known plants, its symbiotic microorganism transfers directly from one generation to the next. A. azollae is completely dependent on its host, as several of its genes have either been lost or transferred to the nucleus in Azolla's cells.[12]
SEM image of Azolla surface
The nitrogen-fixing capability of Azolla has led to widespread use as a biofertiliser, especially in parts of southeast Asia. The plant has been used to bolster agricultural productivity in China for over a thousand years. When rice paddies are flooded in the spring, they can be planted with Azolla, which then quickly multiplies to cover the water, suppressing weeds. The rotting plant material releases nitrogen into the water for the rice plants, providing up to nine tonnes of protein per hectare per year.[13]
Azolla are weeds in many parts of the world, entirely covering some bodies of water. The myth that no mosquito can penetrate the coating of fern to lay its eggs in the water gives the plant its common name "mosquito fern",[14] and may deter the survival of some of the larvae. Most species can produce large amounts of deoxyanthocyanins in response to various stresses,[15] including bright sunlight and extreme temperatures.[16][17] causing the water surface to appear to be covered with an intensely red carpet. Herbivore feeding induces accumulation of deoxyanthocyanins and leads to a reduction in the proportion of polyunsaturated fatty acids in the fronds, thus lowering their palatability and nutritive value.[18]
Azolla cannot survive winters with prolonged freezing, so is often grown as an ornamental plant at high latitudes where it cannot establish itself firmly enough to become a weed. It is not tolerant of salinity; normal plants cannot survive in greater than 1–1.6‰, and even conditioned organisms die vegetatively (i.e., it does not produce seeds). Thus, live Azolla (inoculum) is maintained throughout the year by growing in small ponds or water filled ditches (e.g., areas of 4–5 m2 and depth of 0.5–1 m. You need around 250–500g (fresh weight) inoculum for such an area). Azolla grows best at a 25oC average daily temperature but dies at higher temperature. It can be utilized by rice in both wet and dry season. Azolla can be used in two ways: 1) as green manure incorporated before transplanting, and 2) as an intercrop incorporated after transplanting. In each case, about 500 kg (fresh weight) per ha is introduced into standing water in the rice field. Pre-transplanting incorporation Grow Azolla for about a month before incorporating at transplanting. Fertilize Azolla with 2.2 kg Phosphorus (P)/ha every 5 d, 4 kg K/ha every 10 d, and/or 500–1000 kg/ha farmyard manure every 5–10 d. If chemical fertilizers are unavailable, ash is substituted. Intercropped Azolla Introduce azolla into the rice field when permanent standing water is available. Intercropped azolla is usually not fertilized (but if super phosphate is available one application of 4.5 kg P/ha per crop is recommended). Under both systems, azolla can be incorporated several times during the crop cycle. Rate of growth Sixteen to twenty days after inoculation the field is covered with about 20 t of Azolla, which is then incorporated into soil. Normally, some Azolla is left after the first incorporation, which then continues to grow. Sometimes 3–4 crops of azolla are produced and incorporated in each crop of rice. This technology produces around 40 t (fresh weight) azolla/ha per rice crop equivalent to around 80 kg N/ha. It requires application of 0.5 t fresh azolla inoculum, 2–3 t farmyard manure, 20–30 kg P, and 20 kg K/ha. Limitations Azolla cannot withstand any drying – so standing water is always required. Because Azolla grows from vegetative multiplication, inoculum must be maintained in nurseries all year and multiplied for distribution before field inoculation and multiplication. High temperatures cause greater disease and animal attack on azolla. Cool weather is a key to successful Azolla utilization. Among nutrients, P is most important for azolla. Since Azolla floats, it is not able to extract P from soil, thus its growth is often constrained by insufficiency of P if P is not applied into the pond water. The economics of Azolla use is very important. The technology is labor intensive. Often farmers have little or no economic advantage in choosing azolla over chemical fertilizer because the additional costs of labor, land opportunity irrigation, seed/inoculum, phosphate, and pesticides make the use of Azolla uneconomical. Developed with input from JK Ladha Genus of aquatic plants AzollaTemporal range: Maastrichtian-Holocene
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Azolla is a highly productive plant. It doubles its biomass in 1.9 days or more,[10] depending on conditions, and yield can reach 10 tonnes fresh matter/ha in Asian rice fields. 37.8 t fresh weight/ha (2.78 t DM/ha dry weight) has been reported for Azolla pinnata in India (Hasan et al., 2009).[11] Azolla floats on the surface of water by means of numerous small, closely overlapping scale-like leaves, with their roots hanging in the water. They form a symbiotic relationship with the cyanobacterium Anabaena azollae, which fixes atmospheric nitrogen. The plant can readily colonise areas of freshwater, and grow at great speed - doubling its biomass every two to three days. The typical limiting factor on its growth is phosphorus. An abundance of phosphorus, due for example to eutrophication or chemical runoff, often leads to Azolla blooms. Unlike all other known plants, its symbiotic microorganism transfers directly from one generation to the next. A. azollae is completely dependent on its host, as several of its genes have either been lost or transferred to the nucleus in Azolla's cells.[12]
SEM image of Azolla surface
The nitrogen-fixing capability of Azolla has led to widespread use as a biofertiliser, especially in parts of southeast Asia. The plant has been used to bolster agricultural productivity in China for over a thousand years. When rice paddies are flooded in the spring, they can be planted with Azolla, which then quickly multiplies to cover the water, suppressing weeds. The rotting plant material releases nitrogen into the water for the rice plants, providing up to nine tonnes of protein per hectare per year.[13]
Azolla are weeds in many parts of the world, entirely covering some bodies of water. The myth that no mosquito can penetrate the coating of fern to lay its eggs in the water gives the plant its common name "mosquito fern",[14] and may deter the survival of some of the larvae. Most species can produce large amounts of deoxyanthocyanins in response to various stresses,[15] including bright sunlight and extreme temperatures.[16][17] causing the water surface to appear to be covered with an intensely red carpet. Herbivore feeding induces accumulation of deoxyanthocyanins and leads to a reduction in the proportion of polyunsaturated fatty acids in the fronds, thus lowering their palatability and nutritive value.[18]
Azolla cannot survive winters with prolonged freezing, so is often grown as an ornamental plant at high latitudes where it cannot establish itself firmly enough to become a weed. It is not tolerant of salinity; normal plants cannot survive in greater than 1–1.6‰, and even conditioned organisms die vegetatively (i.e., it does not produce seeds). Thus, live Azolla (inoculum) is maintained throughout the year by growing in small ponds or water filled ditches (e.g., areas of 4–5 m2 and depth of 0.5–1 m. You need around 250–500g (fresh weight) inoculum for such an area). Azolla grows best at a 25oC average daily temperature but dies at higher temperature. It can be utilized by rice in both wet and dry season. Azolla can be used in two ways: 1) as green manure incorporated before transplanting, and 2) as an intercrop incorporated after transplanting. In each case, about 500 kg (fresh weight) per ha is introduced into standing water in the rice field. Pre-transplanting incorporation Grow Azolla for about a month before incorporating at transplanting. Fertilize Azolla with 2.2 kg Phosphorus (P)/ha every 5 d, 4 kg K/ha every 10 d, and/or 500–1000 kg/ha farmyard manure every 5–10 d. If chemical fertilizers are unavailable, ash is substituted. Intercropped Azolla Introduce azolla into the rice field when permanent standing water is available. Intercropped azolla is usually not fertilized (but if super phosphate is available one application of 4.5 kg P/ha per crop is recommended). Under both systems, azolla can be incorporated several times during the crop cycle. Rate of growth Sixteen to twenty days after inoculation the field is covered with about 20 t of Azolla, which is then incorporated into soil. Normally, some Azolla is left after the first incorporation, which then continues to grow. Sometimes 3–4 crops of azolla are produced and incorporated in each crop of rice. This technology produces around 40 t (fresh weight) azolla/ha per rice crop equivalent to around 80 kg N/ha. It requires application of 0.5 t fresh azolla inoculum, 2–3 t farmyard manure, 20–30 kg P, and 20 kg K/ha. Limitations Azolla cannot withstand any drying – so standing water is always required. Because Azolla grows from vegetative multiplication, inoculum must be maintained in nurseries all year and multiplied for distribution before field inoculation and multiplication. High temperatures cause greater disease and animal attack on azolla. Cool weather is a key to successful Azolla utilization. Among nutrients, P is most important for azolla. Since Azolla floats, it is not able to extract P from soil, thus its growth is often constrained by insufficiency of P if P is not applied into the pond water. The economics of Azolla use is very important. The technology is labor intensive. Often farmers have little or no economic advantage in choosing azolla over chemical fertilizer because the additional costs of labor, land opportunity irrigation, seed/inoculum, phosphate, and pesticides make the use of Azolla uneconomical. Developed with input from JK Ladha Genus of aquatic plants AzollaTemporal range: Maastrichtian-Holocene
Azolla caroliniana Scientific classification Kingdom: Plantae
Clade: Tracheophytes
Division: Polypodiophyta
Class: Polypodiopsida
Order: Salviniales
Family: Salviniaceae
Genus: AzollaLam.[1]
Type species
A. filiculoides[1]
Species
See text
Azolla (mosquito fern, duckweed fern, fairy moss, water fern) is a genus of seven species of aquatic ferns in the family Salviniaceae. They are extremely reduced in form and specialized, looking nothing like other typical ferns but more resembling duckweed or some mosses. Azolla filiculoides is one of just two fern species for which a reference genome has been published.[2] Azolla taken from the Philippines Azolla is considered an invasive plant in wetlands, freshwater lakes and ditches. It can alter aquatic ecosystems and biodiversity substantially.[3]
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Rhizosperma
Azolla cariniana
Azolla imbricata
Azolla nilotica
Decne. ex Mett.
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Azolla
Drawing of Azolla filiculoides, about 5 mm. Upper green leaves perform photosynthesis, lower lack chlorophyll.
Azolla cristata
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Azolla filiculoides
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Sources:[4][5][6][7]
At least six extant species are known from the fossil record: Azolla intertrappea Sahni & H.S. Rao, 1934 (Eocene, India)[8]
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