

**GENETIC IMPROVEMENT OF MAIZE FOR  
TOLERANCE TO SOME ABIOTIC STRESS  
CONDITIONS**

**By**

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#### ABSTRACT

The present study was carried out in 5 seasons during 4 years from 2004 to 2007 at the field of Sids Agric. Res. Sta., ARC. The main objectives were to develop new maize populations of increased tolerance to drought and/ or low-N stresses and evaluate predicted and actual gains from one cycle of  $S_1$  recurrent selection. Two sets of 121  $S_1$ 's were developed from the local population Giza 2, the 1<sup>st</sup> set was evaluated under high- (HN) and low-N (LN) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> under well-water (WW) and intermediate water-stress (IWS) conditions. The highest yielding 18 lines(15%) were selected under each environment. Intercrossing of the four groups of 18  $S_2$ 's was done in separate blocks. The resulted 4 populations (Giza 2-LN, Giza 2-HN, Giza 2-IWS and Giza 2-WW) along with Giza 2 were evaluated for 43 traits under 4 environments (HN, LN, IWS and SWS). Results indicated wide genetic variation among  $S_1$  progenies for most studied traits under all selection environments. Broad sense heritability estimates were generally higher under low-N and water-stress than under non-stress conditions. Results indicated that anthesis-silking interval, ears plant<sup>-1</sup> and stay green traits could be valuable criteria in increasing the selection efficiency for both low-N and drought tolerance. Actual superiority in grain yield over Giza 2 due to one cycle of  $S_1$  recurrent selection were shown by the three improved populations [(Giza 2-IWS, (26.01%), Giza 2-LN, (21.88%) and Giza 2-HN, (23.22%)] under low-N and by Giza 2-IWS (22.56%) and Giza 2 HN (9.74%) under water stressed target environment. Grain dry matter (GDM), total above ground dry matter and total N content were the best predictors of genotypic performance of economic and biological nitrogen use efficiency and nitrogen uptake efficiency, respectively. GDM proved to be a good predictor for measuring all nitrogen use efficiency traits.

**Key words:** Maize, Recurrent selection, Nitrogen use efficiency, Low-N tolerance, Drought tolerance, Selection environment, Target environment, Alternative criteria, Population improvement.

## DEDICATION

*I dedicate this work to whom my heart felt thanks; TO THE SOUL OF MY FATHER, AND MY MOTHER AND TO MY WIFE and MY CHILDREN for their patience and help, as well as to MY SISTERS and BROTHERS For all the support they lovely offered along the period of my post graduation.*

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# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>REVIEW OF LITERATURE</b> .....	5
<b>1. Definitions</b> .....	5
<b>2. Intra-population improvement for low-N tolerance</b> .....	8
<b>3. Intra-population improvement for drought tolerance</b> .....	14
<b>4. Secondary traits</b> .....	23
<b>MATERIALS AND METHODS</b> .....	45
<b>RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</b> .....	59
<b>1. Experiment I: Evaluation of S<sub>1</sub>'s for low-N tolerance</b> .....	59
a. Analysis of variance.....	59
b. Performance of S <sub>1</sub> progenies:.....	62
c. Correlations between traits.....	72
d. Variance components and heritability:.....	75
e. Expected genetic advance from selection.....	78
1. Direct selection.....	78
2. Indirect selection.....	79
a. Selection environment vs target environment.....	79
b. A secondary trait vs grain yield.....	82
<b>2. Experiment II: Evaluation of S<sub>1</sub> progenies for drought tolerance</b> .....	83
a. Analysis of variance.....	83
b. Performance of S <sub>1</sub> progenies.....	87
c. Correlations between traits.....	98
d. Variance components and heritability.....	101
e. Expected genetic advance from selection.....	103
1. Direct selection.....	103
2. Indirect selection.....	105
a. Selection environment vs target environment.....	105
b. A secondary trait vs grain yield.....	107
<b>3. Experiment III: Evaluation of Populations for low-N and drought tolerance</b> .....	108
a. Analysis of variance.....	108
b. Performance of populations.....	119
c. Alternative screening criteria for NUE traits.....	128
d. Change due to selection.....	131
1. Change in grain yield plant <sup>-1</sup> .....	131
2. Change in the unselected traits.....	134
e. Actual vs predicted progress.....	137
<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	141
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	157
<b>ARABIC SUMMARY</b>	

## LIST OF TABLES

Table No.	Title	Page
1	Analysis variance and expected mean squares (E.M.S) of RCB design under separate environments.	58
2	Separate and combined analysis of variance for yield and its components of 121 S <sub>1</sub> progenies (derived from Giza-2 population) grown under high- and low-N conditions at Sids in 2005 season.	61
3	Separate and combined analysis of variance for some phenological, morphological and physiological traits of 121 S <sub>1</sub> progenies (derived from Giza-2 population) grown under high- and low-N conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	62
4	Means and ranges for all studied traits of 121 S <sub>1</sub> 's and selected 18 S <sub>1</sub> s (based on grain yield) derived from Giza-2 population and evaluated under high- and low-N conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	64
5	Mean and rank (between parentheses) of yield and its components for the best 18 S <sub>1</sub> progenies selected for superiority in grain yield under high-N conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	68
6	Mean and rank (between parentheses) of phenological and morphological characters for the best 18 S <sub>1</sub> progenies selected for superiority in grain yield under high-N conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	69
7	Mean and rank (between parentheses) of yield and its components for the best 18 S <sub>1</sub> progenies selected for superiority in grain yield under low-N conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	70
8	Mean and rank (between parentheses) of phonological and morphological characters for the best 18 S <sub>1</sub> progenies selected for superiority in grain yield under low-N conditions at Sids in 2005 season.	71



9	Genetic correlation coefficients ( $r_g$ ) between pairs of studied traits of 121 $S_1$ progenies under high-N (below diagonal) and low-N (above diagonal) conditions at Sids in 2005 season (N = 242).....	74
10	Genetic ( $\delta_g^2$ ) and phenotypic ( $\delta_p^2$ ) variances, heritability in the broad sense ( $h_b^2$ ) for all studied traits of 121 $S_1$ 's (derived from Giza-2) evaluated under high- and low-N conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	78
11	Genetic advance from direct selection ( <i>i.e.</i> selection environment same as target environment) and correlated genetic response (CR) for indirect selection ( <i>i.e.</i> selection and target environments differ in nitrogen levels or selection in a secondary trait for the improvement of grain plant <sup>-1</sup> ).....	81
12	Separate and combined analysis of variance for yield and it's components of 121 $S_1$ 's (derived from Giza-2 grown under well-water and inter-mediate water-stress conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	86
13	Separate and combined analysis of variance for some phenological and morphological traits of 121 $S_1$ 's (derived from Giza-2) grown under well-water and inter-mediate water-stress conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	87
14	Means and ranges for all studied traits of 121 $S_1$ 's and selected 18 $S_1$ 's (based on grain yield) derived from Giza-2 population evaluated under intermediate water-stress (IWS) and well-water (WW) conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	89
15	Mean and rank (between parentheses) of yield and its components for the best 18 $S_1$ progenies selected for superiority in grain yield under well-water conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	94
16	Mean and rank (between parentheses) of phenological and morphological characters for the best 18 $S_1$ progenies selected for superiority in grain yield under well-water conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	95

17	Mean and rank (between parentheses) of yield and its components for the best 18 S <sub>1</sub> progenies selected for superiority in grain yield under water-stress conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	96
18	Mean and rank (between parentheses) of phenological and morphological characters for the best 18 S <sub>1</sub> progenies selected for superiority in grain yield under water-stress conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	97
19	Genetic correlation coefficients ( $r_g$ ) between pairs of studied traits of the 121 S <sub>1</sub> progenies under well-water (below diagonal) and inter-mediate water-stress (above diagonal) conditions in 2005 season (N =242).....	101
20	Genetic ( $\delta_g^2$ ), phenotypic ( $\delta_p^2$ ) variances, and heritability in the broad sense ( $h_b^2$ ) for all studied traits of 121 S <sub>1</sub> ' s (derived from Giza-2 evaluated under well-water and intermediate water-stress conditions at Sids in 2005 season.....	105
21	Genetic advance from direct selection ( <i>i.e.</i> selection environment same as target environment) and correlated genetic response (CR) for indirect selection ( <i>i.e.</i> selection and target environments differ in irrigation regimes or selection in a secondary trait for the improvement of grain plant <sup>1</sup> ).....	108
22	Genetic correlations ( $r_g$ ) between pairs of studied traits of the 121 S <sub>1</sub> progenies under well-water (below diagonal) and inter-mediate water-stress (above diagonal) conditions in 2005 season (N = 242).....	111
23	Analysis of variance under high-N (well-water), low-N and across high- and low-N for all studied traits of the 5 populations (4 improved and one original) at Sids in 2007season.....	114

24	Separate and combined analysis of variance for studied traits of the five populations (4 improved and one original) grown under water stress at flowering (intermediate water stress) and water stress at flowering and grain filling stages (severe water stress) conditions at Sids in 2007 season.....	120
25	Means of yield and agronomic traits for 5 maize populations (4 improved and one original) evaluated under high-N-WW, low-N, intermediate water stress at flowering (IWS) and severe water stress (SWS) environments at Sids in 2007 season.....	123
26	Means of dry matter and nitrogen efficiency traits for the 5 populations (4 improved and one original) evaluated under high-N-WW and low-N environments at Sids in 2007 season.....	125
27	Genetic correlation coefficients ( $P < 0.01$ ) between nitrogen efficiency traits and selective alternative criteria in maize genotypes.....	133
28	Actual progress in grain yield plant <sup>-1</sup> via one cycle of S <sub>1</sub> recurrent selection.....	136
29	Actual change in unselected yield and agronomic traits due to one cycle of S <sub>1</sub> recurrent selection in the 4 improved populations Giza 2-WW, Giza 2-IWS, Giza 2-HN and Giza 2-LN in absolute (AC) and relative (RC%) values as compared to the original population Giza-2 under high-N-WW, intermediate water stress at flowering (IWS) and severe water stress (SWS) conditions at Sids in 2007 season.....	138
30	Actual change (%) in unselected traits due to one cycle of S <sub>1</sub> recurrent selection in 4 improved populations (Giza 2-WW, Giza 2-, Giza 2-HN and Giza 2-LN) as compared to the original population (Giza 2) under intermediate- (IWS) and severe water stress (SWS) target environments at Sids in 2007 season.....	140



## INTRODUCTION

Maize (*Zea mays* L.) is one of the most important cereal crops in the world as well as in Egypt. Worldwide, the total acreage of maize was 160.65 million hectares in 2008; the total production was 791.5 million tons, with an average productivity of 4.93 tons of grain ha<sup>-1</sup> (Report of USDA, 2009). According to this report, Egypt grew in 2008 0.72 hectares (1.71 million feddans) and produced 6.17 million tons of grains, with an average yield 8.58 tons ha<sup>-1</sup> ( 25.24 ardabs/feddan). (One feddan (fed) = 4200 m<sup>2</sup> and one ardab (ard) = 140 Kg). According to the same report, Egypt ranks the fourth in the world with respect of average productivity after USA, France and Italy. However, the local production of maize is not sufficient to satisfy the local consumption. So Egypt imports every year about five million tons of maize grains. The problem in the future is that there will be no available maize grain in the producing countries for export, because they will use it in the manufacture of ethanol; a new alternate energy source.

To reach self-sufficiency of maize production in Egypt, efforts are devoted to extend the acreage of maize; in the desert and to improve the maize productivity from unit area. Growing maize in the sandy soils of the desert, characterized by low water holding capacity and low soil nitrogen would expose maize plants to drought and low N stresses which cause great losses in grain yield.

Nitrogen is the most important nutritive element for the worldwide production of maize. Because of high price ratios between

fertilizer and grain, limited availability of fertilizer, and low purchasing power of farmers, nitrogen status of Egyptian soils is low, especially in newly-reclaimed soils. As a result, maize yield potentiality will not be achieved, so breeding for tolerance to low N is therefore very necessary. Loss of maize grain yield due to low N stress alone varies from 10 to 50% (Wolf *et al.*, 1988, Logrono and Lothrop, 1996). Two basic approaches could be further used to improve maize productivity in a sustainable fashion in areas with low nitrogen (Kamara *et al.*, 2005 and Meseka *et al.*, 2006). First, innovative agronomic practices could be developed to make better use of nitrogen from organic matter and nitrogen inputs from biological fixation and atmospheric deposition. The second approach would be to lower crop demand for nitrogen through breeding (Smith *et al.*, 1995). It could be achieved *via* selection for low-N tolerance with high nitrogen use efficiency and high potential.

Breeding for tolerance to an abiotic stress such as drought or low-N is difficult because the genetic mechanism that controls the expression of such tolerance in crop plants is poorly understood and because of the polygenic nature of such a complicated character (Rossiele and Hambling, 1981; Kebede *et al.*, 2001).

The population improvement of maize for increasing drought and/or low-N tolerance could result in producing improved populations that could be used directly as new open-pollinated cultivars or indirectly as suitable sources for extracting improved inbred lines which could be used in developing drought and/or low-N tolerant single and 3-way cross hybrids. Population improvement can be

achieved *via* a number of selection procedures; one of them is the recurrent selection. The main advantage of recurrent selection is to increase the frequency of favorable alleles for the quantitative traits with maintenance of the additive genetic variance (amenable to selection) of such traits in the improved population. Since drought or low-N tolerance is expressed polygenically, this suggests that recurrent selection could be an appropriate and effective breeding method for improving maize germplasm for such traits (Hallauer and Miranda, 1988).

S<sub>1</sub> recurrent selection is widely used as an easy and highly efficient procedure for intra-population improvement in maize. Selection based on S<sub>1</sub> progeny performance is effective in utilizing the additive genetic variance in a better way than other intra-population improvement methods and presents an opportunity for selection against major deleterious recessive genes that become homozygous with inbreeding (Genter, 1971 and 1973; Tanner and Smith, 1987; Hallauer and Miranda, 1988).

In the last decades, efforts of plant breeders were devoted to improve drought tolerance as well as low-N tolerance in maize populations *via* S<sub>1</sub> recurrent selection. They were able to improve grain yield productivity in each cycle of S<sub>1</sub> recurrent selection by an average increase reached to 14.6% per cycle under drought stress (Edmeades *et al.*, 1996; Edmeades *et al.*, 1999; Edmeades and Chapman, 1999; Al-Naggar *et al.*, 2004) and to 12.8% under low-N stress (Laffite *et al.*, 1997; Omoigui *et al.* 2006). S<sub>1</sub> recurrent selection for increased drought tolerance was associated with a significant reduction in anthesis-silking