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Identification of beneficial Lebanese *Trichoderma spp.* wheat endophytes

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17

18 **Abstract**

19 Wheat is one of the most important crops in the world. Its production can be influenced by a diversity
20 of beneficial and pathogenic rhizospheric microbes, including fungi. Amongst them, beneficial
21 *Trichoderma spp.* can be used as alternatives to chemical fertilizers, as they are cheaper and harmless
22 to the environment. Our study aimed to isolate, identify, and characterize *Trichoderma spp.* from
23 Lebanon associated to wheat. Two *Trichoderma* strains belonging to *T. afroharzianum*, and *T.*
24 *guizhouense* species, were isolated and found to be endophytes enhancing root growth and producing

25 IAA. Inoculation also improved seedling development, and boosted general production. These
26 *Trichoderma spp.* have thus the capacity to be used as organic fertilizers for wheat.

27

28 **Keywords:** *Trichoderma spp.*, Endophyte, Auxins, 3-indole-acetic acid, Plant root growth
29 promotion, Wheat yield.

30

31 **Introduction**

32 Wheat (*Triticum* sp. L.) is one of the most important crops in the world, ranking third behind corn and
33 rice, while providing the basic nutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, minerals, and fibers) to
34 humans (Asseng et al., 2011). The world population is projected to exceed 8 billion by the end of 2022,
35 and the demand for wheat is expected to exceed 880 million metric tons by 2050 (
36 <https://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/csdb/en/>). Wheat culture has thus to be widened for
37 overcoming world increasing demand. In addition, recent challenging crisis like Covid-19 (coronavirus
38 disease 2019) pandemic and the world conflicts negatively impact wheat production and will probably
39 threaten wheat markets in the near future (Glauben et al. 2022; ASCAME, 2022). On the other hand,
40 communities are requesting for sustainable, cleaner, and harmless production approaches to avoid more
41 climate change development. In this context, alternative strategies have to be followed, and finding
42 new safer solutions is necessary in order for example to reduce the widespread use of chemical
43 fertilizers which negatively affect earth's natural resources. As a result, recent studies aimed at
44 improving biofertilizers and plant bio stimulants using beneficial bacteria, yeasts, or fungi. Among
45 fungi, *Trichoderma* spp. are ubiquitous free-living fungi (Almi & Dehimat, 2016; Esposito & da Silva,
46 1998) of the *Hypocreaceae* family, occurring widely in all soils (Ghazanfar et al., 2018) and
47 representing major components of the soil mycoflora (Kubicek et al., 2003; Widden & Abitbol, 1980).
48 These ascomycete fungi, which inhabit root ecosystems, grow and proliferate using carbohydrates
49 secreted by plant roots. They also behave as endophytes, penetrating the epidermis of the root tissue
50 (rhizodermis), and few cell layers below (Topolovec-Pintarić, 2019). They proliferate better at
51 mesophilic temperatures (15–35 ° C) (Carro-Huerga et al., 2021) and tolerate a wide pH range
52 (Topolovec-Pintarić, 2019). These fungi improve plant photosynthetic capacity, and induce defenses
53 (Vargas et al., 2009, 2011) and many stress-sensitive genes (Alfano et al., 2007; Brotman et al., 2012;
54 Morán-Diez et al., 2012). *Trichoderma* are among the best studied biological control microbes, and are
55 marketed as active ingredients in biofertilizers (plant growth promoters), biopesticides, bioremediates,

56 and natural resistance stimulants. Consequently, their application reduces production costs, and
57 negative environmental impact (Dennis and Webster 1971a; Dennis and Webster 1971b; Harman and
58 Kubicek 2002; Ghazanfar et al. 2018). *Trichoderma* fungi improve plant growth through the
59 solubilization of nutrients, and therefore have better effects under nutritional and abiotic stress
60 conditions (Mastouri et al., 2010, 2012; Shoresh et al., 2010). The use of *Trichoderma* in seed coating
61 also improves physiological stresses such as aging, and seed dormancy (Delgado-Sánchez *et al.* 2010;
62 2011; Mastouri *et al.*, 2010). The plant hormone auxin controls many aspects of development including
63 plant tissue growth, cell division, cell differentiation, and protein synthesis. The plant naturally
64 produced auxin IAA that can be also produced by microorganisms like fungi including *Trichoderma*.

65 In this study we identified and characterize two *Trichoderma* strains from Lebanon and tested their
66 ability to promote wheat growth.

67

68 **Materials and methods**

69 **Plant material:**

70 The wheat cultivar ‘Apogee’ was used for fungal characterization (G. Li *et al.* 2017; Gatti *et al.* 2018).
71 Apogee has a relatively brief life cycle under long days, and without vernalization, it flowers 25 days
72 after planting.

73 **Soil and plant sampling:**

74 Samples in this study were collected on May 2020 (late spring and early summer) from three different
75 sites in Lebanon namely: 1) The international center for agricultural research in the dry areas
76 (ICARDA) -Terbol; 33.81263953421374, 35.99166470541601, 2) Lebanese agricultural research
77 institute (LARI) – Tal Amara; 33.86500666714277, 35.984715713142634, and 3) Doueir;
78 33.39043029381532, 35.417987723093724. For every location, five samples from soil, together with
79 five plant samples were screened for *Trichoderma spp.* .

80 Soil samples were taken from the soil section called "horizon", using a 0 to 15 cm top layer shovel,
81 representing the surface area of the profile, where nutrients and most of the roots are present, and where
82 nutrient absorption takes place. This also corresponds to the area where *Trichoderma spp.* are generally
83 found. Sampling was carried out within a radius of 10 to 30 cm from the base of the plant depending
84 on the case. Each sample was transferred in an appropriate plastic bag with its reference (place, date,

85 sample number, etc.). Five samples were collected, and homogenized before the final packaging of
86 approximately 1 kg of the sample, placed in plastic bags (to avoid contamination) was kept frozen (-
87 20°C).

88 For plant sampling, 5-6 independent plant samples (root and stem) spaced at least 10 m apart were
89 placed in plastic bags and kept frozen (-20°C).

90 **Fungus isolation from soil:**

91 1g of soil was homogenized in 10 ml sterile distilled water by thorough vortexing, then filtrated onto
92 sterile Miracloth[®]. The filtrate was then plated onto 9 cm diameter petri dishes (100 ul filtrate plated
93 per dish), containing potato dextrose agar (PDA) amended with rose Bengal (0.15 g/L),
94 pentachloronitro-benzene (0.15 g/L), chloramphenicol (34 µg/ml), and ampicillin (100 µg/ml). One
95 petri dish was plated per soil mixture.

96 **Fungus isolation from plants:**

97 The internal colonization of roots or stems by potential *Trichoderma* sp. was detected following surface
98 sterilization of approximately 2 cm root fragments for 10 sec in 95% ethanol, rinse in sterile water for
99 10 sec, submersion for 20 sec in 2.5% sodium hypochlorite, then washed three times (2 times for 20
100 sec, and a third time for 60 sec) in sterile water. Fragments were then let dry under laminar flow on
101 sterile filter. 0.5 cm fragments were placed on PDA amended with rose Bengal, pentachloronitro-
102 Benzene, chloramphenicol and ampicillin. Plates were incubated at 24°C in the dark for 4-6 days, until
103 fungal development. After 4 days a large number of fungal strains appeared and were transplanted (1st
104 transplanting incubate at 26°C). Later, 10 days old, pre-incubated Petri dish (26°C) was selected, in
105 order to make the 2nd transplant on PDA complemented with Rose Bengal (for Soil and Plant samples).
106 A week after, purification was done by scraping half a colony, depending on the growth rate.
107 Purification was done by plating 1/10, 1/100 or 1/1000 dilutions on PDA complemented with Rose
108 Bengal. After 7 days, the fungal strains were transplanted on PDA and incubated at 26°C.

109 **DNA isolation, sequencing and phylogenetic analyses:**

110 DNA isolation: Liquid culture were done in potato dextrose broth (PDB) medium (50ml), with 5 plugs
111 (agar + fungi) for 3 days (under agitation) according to (Atoui et al., 2012), with modifications as
112 follows: for approximately 200 mg of powder (ball or mortar grinding). 1 mL of extraction buffer (200
113 mM Tris – HCl, pH 7.5; 288 mM NaCl; 25 mM EDTA, pH8.0; 0.5% SDS) was added and vortexed
114 vigourously till homogenization. Tubes were centrifuged at 12,000 rpm for 5 minutes (4°C). 750 µL

115 were then transferred to a new tube, and 215 μ L of 3M potassium acetate were added, mixed and
116 incubated on ice for 30 min, centrifuged at 12,000 rpm for 15 min at 4°C. 700 μ L of the supernatant
117 were collected, transferred to a new tube and 500 μ L of cold isopropanol (-20°C) were added. Tubes
118 were centrifuged at 12,000 rpm for 15 min at 4 ° C. The supernatant was removed, and the pellet
119 washed with 500 μ L of cold 70% ethanol (-20°C) for 5 min (4°C). The tubes were vortexed, and
120 centrifuged at 12,000 rpm for 5 min at 4 ° C. The supernatant was removed, the pellet was briefly dried,
121 and resuspended in 200 μ L of sterile milliQ H₂O + 1 mg/mL RNase A (1/10 stock solution at 10
122 mg/mL). The sample was incubated for 1h at 37 ° C, and DNA concentration was done using
123 NanoDrop. As control, 2 to 5 μ L of each sample was run on 0.8% agarose gel.

124 DNA sequencing: Further *Trichoderma* identification was done by partial sequencing of the transcribed
125 spacer sites (ITS) (550 bp), the Calmoduline gene (CAL) (458 bp) and the Elongation Factor (EF) gene
126 (350 bp). The oligonucleotides used for amplification and sequencing are: for the calmoduline (CAL-
127 228F: GAGTTCAAGGAGGCCTTCTCCC / CAL-737R: CATCTTTCTGGCCATCATGG), for the
128 elongation factor gene (EF1-728F: CATCGAGAAGTTCGAGAAGG/ EF1-986R:
129 TACTTGAAGGAACCCTTACC), and for the internal transcribed space (ITS1:
130 TCCGTAGGTGAACCTGCGG/ ITS4: TCCTCCGCTTATTGATATTGC). The nucleotide sequences
131 were compared with those deposited in GenBank using the BLAST program on the NCBI website.

132 The phylogenetic tree was constructed using the MEGA-X program (Kumar et al., 2018). The
133 sequences used correspond to a concatemer of the CAL, EF and ITS1 sequences. Supplementary Table
134 (1) shows detailed supplementary information for the strains used in the phylogenetic analyses, with
135 their corresponding geographic origin, substrate, voucher number, and GenBank accession numbers.
136 Briefly, the evolutionary history was inferred by using the Maximum Likelihood method, and Tamura-
137 Nei model (Tamura & Nei, 1993). The bootstrap consensus tree, inferred from 1000 replicates
138 (Felsenstein, 1985), is taken to represent the evolutionary history of the taxa analyzed (Felsenstein,
139 1985). Branches corresponding to partitions, reproduced in less than 50% bootstrap replicates were
140 collapsed. The percentage of replicate trees, in which the associated taxa clustered together in the
141 bootstrap test (1000 replicates) were shown next to the branches (Felsenstein, 1985). Initial tree (s) for
142 the heuristic search were obtained automatically by applying Neighbor-Join, and BioNJ algorithms, to
143 a matrix of pairwise distances, and were estimated using the Tamura-Nei model, and then the topology,
144 with superior log likelihood value was selected. This analysis involved 26 nucleotide sequences.

145 **Morphological characterization of the *Trichoderma* strains:**

146 The fungal strains were maintained on PDA with glucose at 26°C for 7 days. Microscopic visualization
147 of *Trichoderma* conidiophores was done using fungi grown for 3 days on a PDA plate complemented
148 with glucose (Glc).

149 **Endophytism tests:**

150 The endophytic capacity was tested using the Apogee spring wheat variety. The endophytism behavior
151 of the 2 *Trichoderma* strains was examined using confocal microscopy. Two methods of inoculation
152 were used and described below as the PDA inoculation method and the spore inoculation method. This
153 experiment was repeated twice, and 5 samples were taken for each condition (with and without
154 *Trichoderma*) for analysis.

155 For the PDA inoculation method, the seed sterilization protocol was modified from Jaber (2018). Seeds
156 were soaked for 5 min with bleach (0.6% sodium hypochlorite) with stirring (150-200 rpm), then rinsed
157 three times for 10 min with sterile milliQ water. They were then stratified for 3 to 5 days in the dark at
158 4°C, in distilled sterilized water. The inoculation was done on a PDA with 1% Ampicillin (100
159 mg/ml)/1% Chloramphenicol (34 mg/ml) dish. Five wheat seeds were spread over a circle of 3 cm
160 diameter and cultured at 26 °C and in the dark. 24 hours later, a *Trichoderma* plug was added (7 days
161 of culture on PDA) in the center of the petri dish and incubated at 26°C. Finally, roots were harvested
162 after 5 days of culture.

163 For the spore inoculation method, the seed sterilization was carried out as mentioned above. The
164 coating of the seeds with *Trichoderma* spores was then done as follow: the seeds and a spore solution
165 (three 7 days old *Trichoderma* petri dishes were used, where germinated spores were rubbed off by
166 distilled sterilized water, then filtered to collect a free-hyphae spore solution, and finally measure the
167 concentration using Thoma's-cell slide to get a 10⁷ spores / 10ml final concentration. The solution was
168 then shaken for 20-30 min, then dried for a few minutes in the hood, before sowing. Seeds were then
169 sown in glass tubes in ½ MS (2.2g / L) with phytigel (2g / L), about 5mm deep, to prevent the roots
170 from remaining on the surface.

171 *Root samples treatment for imaging:* After 5 days of incubation, roots were collected, gently cleaned
172 from the excess of external fungal colonization, cut in 1.5 / 2.0 cm length, and washed with water or
173 PBS 1X: 20 min. Root fragments were fixed overnight in a mixture of 95% Ethanol - 100% acetic acid
174 (3: 1) (v: v). Samples were then stabilized 1h stabilization 1X PBS.

175 Roots were included in 1X PBS with 3% agarose for 5 min (“Seaken LE Agarose for electrophoresis”)
176 (0.6 g of agarose in 20 mL). For staining, cross-sections were immersed in the staining solution (20
177 $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$ propidium iodide; 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$ WGA-Alexa Fluor 488, 0.02% Tween 20 made up in 1X PBS) for
178 2 min, immersed in water for few seconds to remove the staining solution excess. Cross sections of
179 wheat roots were visualized to check endophytism using Confocal microscope (Zeiss LSM880).

180

181 ***In planta* wheat yield evaluation:**

182 To evaluate wheat yield under controlled conditions, 10 days old plantlets, from seeds, pre-cultured on
183 both, PDA (PDA approach), and phytigel ½ MS media (tube approach), were used. 32 plantlets from
184 each treatment (with, and without *Trichoderma*) were transplanted to sterilized peatmoss soil
185 (www.jiffygroup.com- Substrates for the professional horticulture) with perlite (3:1). Wheat yield and
186 yield components, including number of spikes/plants, number of grains/plants, grain weight/plant (g),
187 whole plant dry weight (g), hundred grain weight (g), and harvesting index (HI%). were then measured.

188 All plants were kept in a growth chamber, under 16h: 8h light to dark period, with 265 $\mu\text{E m}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$, at
189 22 °C, and 20 °C, day to night temperatures, and 60% relative humidity (RH). Regular irrigation was
190 practiced, in parallel with fertilization practices at 14:12:32 N:P:K, plus 41 g Hortrilon engrais
191 micronutrients (B 0.5%, Cu 2.5%, Fe 5.0%, Mn 2.5%, Mo 0.5%, and Zn 0.6%) (<https://www.fertil.fr/>).

192 **Statistical analysis:**

193 Statistical analysis was conducted for the treatments, on a completely randomized design (CRD), and
194 a factorial completely randomized design, with 32 replicates. The R software (R 3.3.4; R development
195 core team, 2017) was used to analyze experimental data, calculate means, standard deviations, bar
196 charts, and interaction, using the R package “ggplot2” (Wickham, 2009). Analysis of variance
197 (ANOVA) was performed using the “lmerTest” R package (Kuznetsova et al., 2017).

198 To test the effect of the *Trichoderma* strains on wheat root development, *Trichoderma* spores (10^7
199 spores/10 ml) were incubated with wheat seeds in a tube containing 0.5X MS medium (Kapusi &
200 Stoger, 2022) with phytigel without sugar. 10 days after germination, we measured the primary root
201 growth.

202 ***Trichoderma* auxin production:**

203 Auxin production was measured using the Gusmiaty method (Gusmiaty et al., 2019) with some
204 modifications in presence or absence of tryptophan.

205 Briefly, five plugs of each *Trichoderma* strain with, and without tryptophan were incubated in 0.5X
206 MS liquid medium (2151,45 mg/L), 2-(N-morpholino) ethanesulfonic acid (MES) (0.25 g/L), glucose
207 2%, pH = 5.78 adjusted with 1M KOH (3 biological repeats).

208 To determine the auxin concentration (IAA in our case), Salkowski reagent, and IAA standard curve
209 were done, according to (Gusmiaty et al., 2019). A standard IAA solution curve showing the
210 relationship between the standard IAA solution (x), and its absorbance (y), was made, and allowed the
211 quantification of IAA production by *Trichoderma* using the following equation: $Y = a + bX$ (a =
212 Intersep, b = Slope (Regression Coefficient), Y = Absorbance, X = Concentration).

213 **Preparation of Total Protein Extracts and SDS-PAGE:**

214 Total protein extracts were prepared from wheat grains grounded in liquid nitrogen using mortar and
215 pestle. From 50 mg of flour, total soluble proteins were extracted at room temperature in 960 µl
216 thiourea/urea lysis buffer (Harder et al., 1999) containing 7 M urea, 2 M thiourea, 6 mM Tris-HCl, 4.2
217 mM Trizma® base (Sigma-Aldrich, Lyon, France), 4% (w/v) CHAPS) supplemented with 162 µl of
218 the protease inhibitor cocktail Complete Mini (Roche Diagnostics France, Meylan, France). Then, 22,5
219 µl of dithiothreitol (DTT, 1 M, Sigma-Aldrich), 4 µl of DNase I (Roche Diagnostics) and 10 µl of
220 RNase A (Sigma-Aldrich) were added to the sample. For each sample, the protein extract was stirred
221 for 30 min at 4°C and then centrifuged (35,000g, 15 min) at 4°C. The supernatant was submitted to a
222 second clarifying centrifugation as above. The final supernatant corresponded to the total protein
223 extract. Protein concentration in each extract was measured according to Bradford (1976). Bovine
224 serum albumin was used as a standard. Separation of proteins was performed by sodium dodecyl
225 sulphate polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) with a 4% (w/v) polyacrylamide stacking
226 gel and a 12% (w/v) polyacrylamide resolving gel as described by Laemmli (1970). Electrophoresis
227 was carried out at a constant current of 110 volts (10 mA) for 2 h using a Tris-glycine running buffer
228 with of 0.2%. After electrophoresis, proteins were stained with GelCode® Blue Stain Reagent (Thermo
229 Scientific, Rockford, IL).

230

231 **Results**

232 **Characterization of two Lebanese *Trichoderma* strains isolated from wheat**

233 In order to isolate *Trichoderma* fungi associated to wheat in Lebanon, 40 fungal isolates were isolated
234 in total from three sampling sites. 21 were isolated from soil and 19 were isolated from plants. DNA
235 was prepared from them and the ITS sequences amplified and sequenced. Based on the ITS sequences
236 from these 40 colonies, 2 fungal isolates of the genus *Trichoderma* were identified (Supplementary
237 Table 2). The two isolates were derived from site 3 (Doueir) and were named S3PA (isolated from
238 stem base), and S3SB (isolated from soil). The other isolates included fungi from the genus: *Alternaria*,
239 *Aspergillus*, *Boeremia*, *Cladorrhinum*, *Fusarium*, *Macrophomina*, *Microdochium*, *Mucor*, *Penicillium*,
240 *Stromatinia*, and *Talaromyces* (Supplementary Table 2).

241 A more precise molecular description of these two *Trichoderma* fungi was done by characterizing the
242 partial sequences of their Elongation factor (EF-1) and Calmodulin (Cal) gene sequences. The three
243 partial sequences (ITS-EF-1 and Cal) were then concatemerized (550, 350, and 489 bp, respectively)
244 and compared to the same concatemerized sequences of 14 *Trichoderma* species (Supplementary Table
245 1) from the public database and representing the *Trichoderma* diversity. The result of this analysis
246 (Figure 1) showed that the two isolates probably belong to the two species *T. afroharzianum* and *T.*
247 *guizhouense* belonging to the *Harzianum* species complex.

248 **Morphological characterization of the two Lebanese *Trichoderma* strains**

249 After 48h at 26°C on PDA, the *T. guizhouense* formed an abundant aerial mycelium, cottony and
250 radiating a white color. At 72 h, the formation of a greenish ring was observed, which increased by
251 time of incubation, and diffused in the media, until covering almost the whole petri dish at 168 h. The
252 conidia were visualized from 48h in broad concentric bands (green), in the aerial hyphae (Figure 2A).
253 After 72h of growth on PDA (26°C), *T. afroharzianum* produced an abundant aerial mycelium, cottony,
254 radiating a white color (Figure 2B). A dense hyphae growth in the petri dish center was observed after
255 transplantation of *Trichoderma*, while 96 h later, the formation of a greenish ring was observed, which
256 increased with the time of incubation, and diffused in the media, until covering almost the whole petri
257 dish at 168 h.

258 We then morphologically characterized the two newly isolated strains. After 3 days, pyramidal
259 conidiophores were repeatedly branched, irregularly arranged in whorls, and showed clusters of
260 divergent, usually unevenly folded, barrel shaped, to nearly sub-globose phialides. The ellipsoidal to
261 globose conidia tend to be greenish to light turquoise, sometimes hyaline to cluster in aggregates at the

262 terminal of the phialides (Zhu & Zhuang, 2015). Conidiophores of *T. guizhouense*, showed opposite
263 branches. The main axis and each branch terminated at a cruciate whorl of 3 ampulliform phialides
264 (Figure 2C). Conidia, appearing within 48–72 h, were typically abundant, and disposed in one, or three
265 concentric rings, around the point of inoculation. Green pigment sometimes diffused in the medium
266 (Figure 2B). After 3 days of incubation on PDA, the pyramidal conidiophores of *T. afroharzianum*
267 showed opposite branches. The main axis, and each branch terminated at a cruciate whorl of 3
268 ampulliform phialides green to dark green when aging (Figure 2D).

269 The two isolated strains thus grow rapidly on PDA medium with phenotypic characteristics of other
270 *Trichoderma* stains (Chaverri et al., 2015).

271 **The Lebanese *Trichoderma* strains are wheat root endophytes**

272 *Trichoderma* fungi were previously described as endophytes (Tseng et al., 2020). In order to know if
273 the two Lebanese strains isolated from wheat behave also as endophytes, two modes of inoculation
274 were tested, either by inoculating the seeds by co-cultivation on PDA medium (PDA inoculation
275 method), either by spore coating of the seeds and germination of the seeds *in vitro* (spore inoculation
276 method, see Material and Method section). In both cases the root sections of the plants were stained
277 with propidium iodide and WGA-Alexa Fluor 488, staining the fungus in green. These sections were
278 observed using confocal microscopy. Using both inoculation methods, fungal hyphae were observed
279 inside the root for the two *Trichoderma* strains (Figure 3). The infection level observed using the PDA
280 inoculation method seemed to be higher than the spore inoculation method that had lower concentration
281 of the spore solution. In addition, *T. guizhouense* infected rhizodermis and cortex cells using the first
282 methods (Figure 3A, B) and mostly rhizodermis using spore coating (Figure 3 E, F). The *T.*
283 *afroharzianum* strain appears less efficient in root colonization, invading mostly the rhizodermis cell
284 layer using the PDA inoculation (Figure 3.C, D) and colonizing only the root surface using spore
285 coating (Figure 3 G, H). Using leaves of 4 weeks old plants, we were unable to reisolate the inoculated
286 fungi, suggesting that these *Trichoderma* strains are not able to colonize the aerial part of the plant.

287 Altogether this experiment shows that the two strains can behave as fungal wheat root endophytes but
288 that *T. guizhouense* can invade more efficiently root tissue as compared to *T. afroharzianum* and that
289 the inoculation method can influence the level of colonization.

290 **The two *Trichoderma* strains promote wheat root growth and wheat aerial development and** 291 **produce auxin**

292 *Trichoderma* strains have been often used as plant growth promoting microorganisms (Tseng et al.,
293 2020). In order to know if the two strains studied here can also behave as plant growth promoting
294 fungi (PGPF), we tested their growth promotion effect on young seedlings *in vitro*, using the spore
295 coating method and ½ MS medium without sucrose.

296 This experiment shows that the presence of the two *Trichoderma* strain resulted in a significant
297 increase of the primary, and secondary root growth, as well as the aerial part of the plant (Figure 4A).
298 Total root, and aerial length (cm) of inoculated wheat plants, with and without *T. guizhouense* and *T.*
299 *afroharzianum* respectively, is shown in Figure 4B. The results indicated that plants which were
300 incubated with either *T. guizhouense* or *T. afroharzianum* had increased root growth and aerial
301 development as compared to non-inoculated plants. Root length was increased by 37.6% and 37.7%
302 for plants inoculated by *T. afroharzianum* and *T. guizhouense* respectively. For the aerial part we
303 observed a 5.2% increase in length with both fungi. In this experiment, the inoculation by the
304 *Trichoderma* strains enhanced principal root length (55%), total root length (70%), and aerial part
305 lengths (35%) as well as total aerial plant weight (Figure 4B and Supplementary Figure 1A).

306 Total root, and aerial mass of wheat plants, with and without *T. guizhouense* and *T. afroharzianum*
307 respectively are shown in Supplementary Figure 1C. The inoculation with *T. afroharzianum* resulted
308 in an increased of 61% for the total root mass and 41%, for total aerial mass, while the treatment with
309 *T. guizhouense* resulted in an increase of 63% for total root mass and 43%, for the aerial mass.

310
311 We further measured the principal root length of inoculated wheat plants over a 10 days period
312 (kinetics), with and without *T. guizhouense* or *T. afroharzianum*. The root growth promoting effect of
313 the two strains was already detectable 2 days after sawing and continued to increase over the 10 days
314 period (Supplementary Figure 1A).

315 The increased root growth observed in presence of the two strains might result from fungal auxin
316 production. We thus measured auxin production by the two *Trichoderma* strains in culture, in presence
317 and absence of tryptophan, an auxin precursor. This experiment shows that the two strains can produce
318 auxin in culture and that addition of tryptophan enhances IAA production by 2.5%, and 1.23%, for *T.*
319 *guizhouense* and *T. afroharzianum* respectively.

320 These experiments show that wheat inoculation by the *Trichoderma* Lebanese strains enhances root
321 growth and this might result from auxin production by the fungi.

322

323 **Inoculation by the *Trichoderma* Lebanese strains enhances wheat yield**

324 As shown above, *Trichoderma* inoculation by the two *Trichoderma* strains enhanced wheat seedling
325 growth. We thus tested their effect on the complete development of the wheat plants grown in soil. The
326 two inoculation methods described above were used before plant transplantation in pots but no
327 significant difference could be observed as a result of the inoculation method. Plants were grown to
328 maturity and the different wheat yield components measured (Figure 5, Supplementary Figure 2). This
329 analysis showed that the plant weight (Figure 5A), the number of spikes per plant (Figure 5B), the total
330 grain weight per plant (Figure 5C) and the grain number per plant (Figure 5D) were increased following
331 inoculation by the two fungi. In contrast the 100 grains weight remained unchanged. Altogether, yield
332 harvest index (HI%) was increased around 6% (PDA inoculation method) and 10% (spore inoculation
333 method) by the fungal inoculations (Supplementary Figure 2B).

334 In order to know whether fungal inoculation could change seed protein quantity as well as seed protein
335 pattern of the grains we analyzed them in plants inoculated by the two strains and following the two
336 inoculation methods. As shown on Supplementary Figure 2C neither the protein contents nor the
337 protein profiles were modified in the wheat grains by the *Trichoderma* inoculation.

338 Thus, inoculation of plants, independently of the method used increased wheat yield including number
339 of spikes/plants, number of grains/plants, grain weight/plant, whole plant dry weight, and harvesting
340 index (HI%), but did not modify the seed protein content

341

342 **Discussion**

343 Plants interact with many microorganisms in nature and it is believed that a better understanding of
344 these interactions can help develop a sustainable agriculture less dependent from pesticides and
345 polluting fertilizers. Among interacting microorganisms some are deleterious (pathogens) but others
346 are beneficial (Singh et al., 2018). The fungus *Trichoderma* is widely studied as a beneficial
347 microorganism, promoting plant growth but also protecting plants against pathogens (Mukhopadhyay
348 & Kumar, 2020). *Trichoderma* can be used as PGPF with dicot or monocot crops like tomato and wheat
349 for example (Sood et al., 2020; Stewart & Hill, 2014).

350 The beneficial natural endophyte characteristic of most of the *T. harzianum* species members, on a
351 wide number of plant species, resulted in their used as bio stimulants improving plant development,

352 nutrient absorption, as well as resistance to various biological and environmental stresses (Kakabouki
353 et al., 2021). During endophytic interaction, *Trichoderma* colonizes the root surface and produces
354 various changes in plant morphological traits when the hyphae begin to penetrate the root epidermis.
355 The production of hydrolytic enzymes such as cellulases and proteases typically aids root penetration
356 (Enshasy et al., 2020) but also prime the plant defenses, enhancing protection against pathogens
357 (Mukhopadhyay & Kumar, 2020). *Trichoderma spp.* can also produce elicitors that may manipulate
358 hormone signal transduction, including salicylic acid (SA), jasmonic acid (JA), and ethylene (ET),
359 frequently involved in systemic resistance in plants (Nawrocka & Małolepsza, 2013; Zhao et al., 2021).
360 *Trichoderma* species can also improve plant growth through a variety of other mechanisms, including
361 mycoparasitism, antibiosis, toxin degradation, inactivation of pathogenic enzyme pathways, resistance
362 against pathogens, enhanced nutrient solubilization and uptake, inorganic nutrient sequestration,
363 together with enhanced root hair development (Shahriar et al., 2022).

364 Among crops, wheat is one of the major staple foods around the world. Previous studies have shown
365 that it can benefit from interaction with *Trichoderma* fungi for growth promotion or pathogen
366 protection (TariqJaveed et al., 2021). In this study we have isolated two *Trichoderma* strains from
367 Lebanese soils, characterized them, and evaluated their growth promotion effect on wheat. Molecular
368 and taxonomic characterization showed that the two strains are *T. guizhouense*, and *T. afroharzianum*
369 isolates belonging to the Harzianum complex (Chaverri et al., 2015; Stummer et al., 2020). The
370 morphology of the two strains is in agreement with *Trichoderma* morphology (Zhu & Zhuang, 2015).
371 In addition, these two isolates were also able to colonize the root rhizoderm, and external cortex, while
372 markedly enhancing seedling root growth. In contrast our study suggested that the two Lebanese
373 isolates lack the ability to colonize wheat aerial tissues under the conditions used. Growth conditions
374 might influence colonization as the *T. afroharzianum* strain was isolated from the base of the aerial
375 part of a field grown plant.

376 The influence of the two *Trichoderma* strains inoculation on wheat root development suggested that
377 they may produce auxin (Nieto-Jacobo et al., 2017). IAA is the main auxin promoting root system
378 development, and able to modify root architecture in the *Trichoderma* plant interaction (Illescas et al.,
379 2021). Additional *Trichoderma* metabolites, and proteins (effectors) are also known to significantly
380 modulate IAA production in plants, resulting in root hair growth and enhanced root mass development
381 (Illescas et al., 2021). These results are in agreement with previous studies showing that auxin-
382 generating *Trichoderma* strains interact with wheat and other plants (Illescas et al., 2021; Pelagio-
383 Flores et al., 2017). After root colonization, *Trichoderma* fungi stimulate root development and modify

384 plant metabolism, by releasing numerous secondary compounds (Kakabouki et al., 2021). For example,
385 harzianic acid is one of *T. harzianum* metabolites that is responsible for promoting plant growth (Vinale
386 et al., 2014; Xie et al., 2021) and acting as biocontrol agent.

387 Recent studies carried out on model plants like *Arabidopsis thaliana* inoculated by *T. atroviride*, and
388 *T. guizhouense* strains showed that *Trichoderma* volatiles increased endogenous sugar contents in
389 shoots, roots and root exudates, and could enhance *Arabidopsis* root development, root architecture,
390 and promote the symbiosis efficiency. These effects were suggested to be related to auxin transport
391 and signaling (Esparza-Reynoso et al., 2021; Y. Li et al., 2022). In the meantime, approaches of
392 inoculating *Trichoderma* to promote plant growth varied between seed/seedling treatments, soil
393 processing, and foliar spray (Bhandari et al., 2021).

394 IAA biosynthesis in fungi is tryptophan-dependent, and supplying this amino acid to the medium,
395 increases IAA production (Nieto-Jacobo et al., 2017). We indeed could enhance IAA production in
396 culture of *T. afroharzianum*, and *T. guizhouense* by adding tryptophan to the medium. Further studies
397 have to be carried out to indicate the optimum IAA concentration, required to reach the maximum root
398 growth, and/or yield, and good agronomic traits, with precise determination of *Trichoderma* inoculums
399 (Harman, 2000).

400 In this work we tested the ability of *T. afroharzianum* and *T. guizhouense* to enhance wheat growth
401 (plant growth promotion) using two seed inoculation methods: 1) PDA mediated inoculation, and 2)
402 spore inoculation. Our resulted showed a notable increased in seedling development during the first 10
403 days following seed inoculation by the *T. afroharzianum*, and *T. guizhouense* fungi (Figure 4. A,B).
404 This result is in agreement with previous studies (Kucuk, 2014) showing that root and shoot growth of
405 wheat could be improved by *T. harzianum*, isolated from Turkey.

406 Similar effects were observed when inoculating seedlings with other *Trichoderma spp.* (Oliveira et al.
407 2018; Kthiri et al. 2020; Mahato, Bhujju, et Shrestha 2018; Anjum et al. 2020). These studies indicated
408 that many growth or yield parameters like the percentage of germination (PG), root length (RL), shoot
409 length (SL), total length (TL), fresh root mass (FRM), fresh shoot mass (FSM), total fresh mass (TFM),
410 dry root mass (DRM), dry shoot mass (DSM), total biomass (BIO), root mass ratio (RMR), shoot mass
411 ratio (SMR) and aerial part/root system ratio (AP/RS), were augmented. Similarly, *T. yunnanense*, and
412 *T. afroharzianum* isolates produced IAA under salt stress (200 mM), and could stimulate
413 photosynthesis, water utilization, and growth of wheat in saline conditions (Oljira et al. 2020; Zhang,
414 Gan, et Xu 2018).

415

416 Our study is also in agreement with previous studies (Colla *et al.* 2015; Silletti *et al.* 2021), where seed
417 coating could encourage seed germination, and the quality of yield and grain, including protein and
418 mineral composition in durum wheat. Xue *et al.* (2017) inoculated six different *Trichoderma* strains
419 on wheat seedlings and found that the six strains had the ability of increasing plant dry weight, and
420 total yield, over a three years experiment. This is in line with our data showing that treatment with the
421 two Lebanese *Trichoderma* strains could significantly affect plant yield. The HI% indicated an
422 increased yield, as a response to treatments with both *T. guizhouense* and *T. afroharzianum* strains but
423 *T. afroharzianum* showed higher impact on yield and its components. The fungal growth promotion
424 effects are not completely described but it is known that *Trichoderma* can stimulate plant food scanning
425 by enhancing root elongation in order to invade more, either shallow surface, or even deeper
426 underneath areas, seeking for nutrients uptake. This capacity probably essentially relies on auxin
427 production (Zin & Badaluddin, 2020). In agreement with this, in our study *T. afroharzianum* and *T.*
428 *guizhouense* isolated strains effectively strongly promoted primary and secondary root elongation.

429 In addition, *Trichoderma spp.* are known to increase the plant nutrient availability needs by solubilizing
430 minerals such as Fe, Mn, Zn, and P, and providing extra nitrogen to the plant. As a result, after
431 *Trichoderma* colonization, secondary metabolites production is also increased (Kakabouki *et al.*,
432 2021).

433 Protein content of grains is an important agronomic character for wheat (Illescas *et al.*, 2022). Protein
434 analysis of the grains revealed that in our experiments the inoculation by *Trichoderma spp.* did not
435 modify their protein nature and content. This shows that *Trichoderma* can promote wheat growth and
436 enhance grain production, without changing the grain protein composition. This observation might be
437 correlated with the other part of our study indicating that the weight of hundred grains is not changed
438 despite yield increase.

439 In conclusion, with the increased global demand, during a chain of serious crisis, and environmental
440 impacts, expanding wheat production is considered an urgent request. Unconventional strategies are
441 necessary for guaranteeing food security and providing sustainability with safer applications. In this
442 study two *Trichoderma* strains were isolated from the Lebanese lands, identified, characterized, and
443 proved to be endophytes. We proposed that IAA production by the two strains may explain their growth
444 promoting effect.

445

446 **Conflict of Interest**

447 The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial
448 relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

449 **Author Contributions**

450 NM, PR, MD, FA and NB conceived and designed the experiments. NM, CM, PR, MD, GA, AP, BC
451 and LR conducted the experiments and analyses. PR, NM, GA, and FA drafted the manuscript. All
452 authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

453

454

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466

467

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674

675

676 **Figure legends**

677 **Figure 1.** Phylogenetic tree of CAL-EF-ITS branch includes only species in the *T. harzianum* complex.
678 Two species are identified from Lebanon and are placed in this tree: *T. afroharzianum* (T. S3PA) and
679 *T. guizhouense* (T. S3SB). Strains used in this phylogenetic analysis are described in supplementary

680 Table 1 with their corresponding geographic origin, substrate, voucher number and GenBank accession
681 numbers. *T. aggressivum* is used as an outgroup in this analysis.

682

683 **Figure 2.** Growth of *T. guizhouense* (A) and *T. afroharzianum* (B) for one week on PDA
684 supplemented with glucose. The age of the culture is indicated below the picture in hours.
685 Microscopic visualization of conidiophores of *T. guizhouense* (C) *T. afroharzianum* (D) (x1000). (I)
686 hyphae, (II) conidiophores, (III) Phialides and (IV) conidia (the scale bar corresponds to 10µm).

687

688 **Figure 3.** A-D: cross section of wheat root seedlings inoculated with *T. guizhouense* (A, B) or *T.*
689 *afroharzianum* (C, D) using the PDA inoculation method. E-H: cross section of wheat root seedlings
690 inoculated with *T. guizhouense* (E, F), with *T. afroharzianum* (G, H) using the spore inoculation
691 method. (Ep) epidermis, (C) cortex (Cc) central cylinder, (Hy) fungal hyphae. The fungal hyphae are
692 stained green using WGA-Alexa Fluor 488, and the root cell wall are stained red using propidium
693 iodide, (BDFH correspond to the boxes of ACEG respectively).

694

695 **Figure 4.** Growth of roots and aerial parts after 10 days of culture, with and without *Trichoderma*
696 (A); I) not inoculated, II) a representative seedling inoculated with *T. guizhouense*, III) a
697 representative seedling inoculated with *T. afroharzianum*, (B) Total root, and aerial length (cm) of
698 non-inoculated (N.I.) or inoculated wheat plants with *T. guizhouense* (T.G.) and *T. afroharzianum*
699 (T.A.), respectively, (C) IAA production capability of the two *Trichoderma* isolates (T.G. and T.A.)
700 with and without tryptophan.

701

702 **Figure 5.** Yield parameters: A) Total dry plant weight (g)/plant; B) Number of spikes/plant; C) Total
703 grains weight (g)/plant; D) Number of grains/plant, as influenced by PDA and spore inoculation
704 methods. N.I.: non-inoculated; T.G.: wheat plants inoculated with *T. guizhouense*; T.A.: wheat plants
705 inoculated with *T. afroharzianum*. Values in the same graph having different letters are significantly
706 different, at $P \leq 0.01$ (ANOVA test).

707

708 **Supplementary material**

709 **Supplementary Table 1:** Strains used in the phylogenetic analyses, with their corresponding
710 geographic origin, substrate, voucher number and GenBank accession numbers

711 **Supplementary Table 2:** Fungal strains isolated from Lebanon from different ecological site.

712 **Supplementary Figure 1.** (A) principal root length (cm) over a 10 days period. (B) total root, and
713 aerial length (cm). (C) total root, and aerial mass (g). N.I.: non-inoculated; T.G.: wheat plants
714 inoculated with *T. guizhouense*; T.A.: wheat plants inoculated with *T. afroharzianum*. Values in the
715 same column having different letters are significantly different, at $P \leq 0.01$ (ANOVA test).

716 **Supplementary Figure 2.** (A) Harvest index (%) and (B) 100 grain weight (g). N.I.: non-inoculated;
717 T.G.: wheat plants inoculated with *T. guizhouense*; T.A.: wheat plants inoculated with *T.*
718 *afroharzianum*. (C) protein analysis (composition and content) of wheat plants non-inoculated (cont)
719 or inoculated with *T. guizhouense* (TGUI) or *T. afroharzianum* (Taf) as influenced by PDA
720 inoculation method (PDA) or the spore inoculation method (Tubes). The protein content of 100
721 grains in each condition is indicated below the gel pictures. Values in in each graph having different
722 letters are significantly different, at $P \leq 0.01$ (ANOVA test).

723

Supplementary Material

Supplementary Tables

Supplementary Table 1. Strains used in the phylogenetic analyses, with their corresponding geographic origin, substrate, voucher number and GenBank accession numbers

Species	Voucher/culture Nos.	Geographic origin	Substrate	Genbank accession Nos.		
				<i>CAL</i>	ITS	<i>EF1</i>
<i>T. afarasin</i>	CBS 130742 = Dis 314f	Cameroon	<i>Cola altissima</i> trunk endophyte	FJ442312	FJ442259	FJ463400
<i>T. afarasin</i>	Dis 377a	Cameroon	<i>Cola</i> sp. trunk endophyte	KP115277	FJ442665	FJ463322
<i>T. afarasin</i>	CBS 130501 = G.J.S. 06-98	Cameroon	Soil	FJ442353	FJ442630	FJ463327
<i>T. afarasin</i> *	CBS 130755 = IMI 393967	Cameroon	Soil	FJ442388	AY027784	AF348093

	= G.J.S. 99-227					
<i>T. afroharzianum</i>	G. Harman 1295-22 = ATCC 29847 = T22 = GJS 94-26	Colombia and New York ²	G. Harman, patented biocontrol strain	AF469190	AF469188	AF469194
<i>T. afroharzianum</i>	G.J.S. 00-24	Mexico	Soil	AF442880	AF443922	AF443940
<i>T. afroharzianum</i> *	CBS 124620 = G.J.S. 04-186	Peru	On basidioma of <i>Moniliophthora</i> <i>roreri</i> on fruit of <i>Theobroma</i>	FJ442370	FJ442265	FJ463301
<i>T. afroharzianum</i>	CBS 124614 = G.J.S. 04-193	Peru	On basidioma of <i>Moniliophthora</i> <i>roreri</i> on fruit of <i>Theobroma</i>	FJ442372	FJ442233	FJ463298
<i>T. afroharzianum</i>	G.J.S. 05-113	Italy	Wheat seed	FJ442371	FJ442235	FJ463378
<i>T. afroharzianum</i>	G.J.S. 97-263	Japan	Soil	AF442877	AF194010	AF348091

<i>T. afroharzianum</i>	G.J.S. 97-268	Japan	Soil	AF442878	AF194015	AF348105
<i>T. afroharzianum</i>	IMI 393972 = G.J.S. 99-225	Cameroon	Soil	AF442882	AY027781	AF348106
<i>T. aggressivum</i>	CBS 433.95	Northern Ireland	Mushroom compost	FJ442279	FJ442605	AF348097
<i>T. atrobrunneum</i>	CBS 130440 = G.J.S. 04-67	Italy	Soil	FJ442329	FJ442273	FJ463360
<i>T. atrobrunneum</i>	G.J.S. 05-100	Italy	<i>Castanea sativa</i> twig	FJ442364	FJ442234	FJ463299
<i>T. atrobrunneum</i>	G.J.S. 05-101	Italy	Soil	FJ442331	FJ442677	FJ463392
<i>T. camerunense*</i>	CBS 137272 = G.J.S. 99-230	Cameroon	Soil	AF442875	AY027780	AF348107
<i>T. camerunense</i>	G.J.S. 99-231	Cameroon	Soil	AF442874	AY027783	AF348108
<i>T. endophyticum</i>	CBS 130730 = Dis 217h	Ecuador	<i>Theobroma</i> <i>gileri</i> trunk endophyte	FJ442293	FJ442242	FJ463314
<i>T. endophyticum</i>	Dis 217o	Ecuador	<i>Theobroma</i> <i>gileri</i> trunk	FJ442294	FJ442241	FJ463323

<i>endophyticum</i>			endophyte			
<i>T.</i>	Dis 220k	Ecuador	<i>Theobroma</i>	FJ442299	FJ442270	FJ463328
<i>endophyticum</i>			<i>gileri</i> trunk endophyte			
<i>T. guizhouense</i>	DAOM 231435	Rwanda	Soil	FJ577721	EF191296	EF191321
<i>T. guizhouense</i>	G.J.S. 07-18	Ghana	Soil	FJ442355	FJ442641	FJ463390
<i>T. guizhouense</i>	ATCC 90179	Indonesia	Dead wood	AF442881	AF443923	AF443941
	= IMI 374787					
	= G.J.S. 85-119					
<i>T. guizhouense</i>	NBRC 30608	Japan	Dead branch	FJ442379	DQ018116	AY937440
	= IFO 30608					
	= G.J.S. 97-28					
<i>T. harzianum*</i>	CBS 226.95	U.K.	Soil	AF442864	AJ222720	AF348101
	= G.J.S 95-43					
<i>T. harzianum</i>	CBS 227.95	U.K.	Soil	AF442866	AJ222721	AF348100
	= G.J.S 95-40					
<i>T. harzianum</i>	IMI 359823	Northern Ireland	Mushroom compost	AF442865	X73690	AF348092

<i>T. inhamatum</i> *	CBS 273.78 = IMI 287526 = G.J.S. 95-39	Colombia	Soil	AF442891	FJ442680	AF348099
<i>T. lentiforme</i>	CBS 130726 = Dis 110a	Ecuador	<i>Theobroma</i> <i>cacao</i> trunk endophyte	FJ442287	FJ442681	FJ851872
<i>T. lentiforme</i>	Dis 167c	Brazil	<i>Theobroma</i> <i>cacao</i> trunk endophyte	FJ442365	FJ442269	FJ463309
<i>T. lentiforme</i>	Dis 218e	Ecuador	<i>Theobroma</i> <i>gileri</i> trunk endophyte	FJ442296	FJ442220	FJ463310
<i>T. lixii</i> **	CBS 110080 = ATCC MYA- 2478 = G.J.S. 97-96 = BPI 745654	Thailand	Decayed <i>Ganoderma</i> basidiocarp	AF442872	AF443920	AF443938
<i>T. neotropiale</i> *	G.J.S. 11-185 = CBS 130633 LA11	Peru	<i>Hevea</i> <i>guianensis</i> trunk endophyte	KP115279	HQ022407	HQ022771

<i>T. neotropiale</i>	G.J.S. 11-187 = T51	Peru	<i>Hevea</i> <i>brasiliensis</i> trunk endophyte	KP115280	FJ884180	FJ967825
<i>T. rifaii</i>	CBS 130745 = Dis 337f	Panama	<i>Theobroma</i> <i>cacao</i> trunk endophyte	FJ442315	FJ442621	FJ463321
<i>T. simmonsii</i>	CBS 123799 = IMI 393966 = G.J.S. 90-22	USA, Wisconsin	Decorticated wood	AF442867	AF443915	AF443933
<i>T. simmonsii</i> *	CBS 130431 = G.J.S. 91-138	USA, Maryland	Decaying bark	AF442869	AF443917	AF443935
<i>T. simmonsii</i>	CBS 546.92 = ATCC MYA- 2453 = G.J.S. 92-100	USA, Alabama	Decorticated wood	AF442871	AF443919	AF443937
<i>T. simmonsii</i>	CBS 130432 = G.J.S. 94-53 BPI 749348	USA, Illinois	Decorticated wood	AF442868	AF443916	AF443934

* Indicates a type culture.

** Indicates an epitype culture.

¹ CBS = CBS Fungal Biodiversity Centre culture collection, the Netherlands; DAOM. = Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada National Mycological Culture Collection; IMI. = CABI culture collection, UK; ATCC. = American Type Culture Collection, Manassas, Virginia, USA; BPI = US National Fungus Collection; WU = Herbarium WU, Institute of Botany, University of Vienna, Austria; G.J.S. = G. J. Samuels; P.C. = P. Chaverri; Hypo, C.P.K., S and WJ = W. Jaklitsch collection numbers; Dis = H.C. Evans endophyte cultures; LA, CM, PP, T = P. Chaverri endophyte cultures. Where a plant name alone is given, the substrate is twigs or branches and fungi growing on them.

² T22 is product of fusion of protoplasts of two cultures: ATCC 60850, which was isolated from soil in Colombia, and ATCC 20707, which was isolated from soil in New York state. See Ahmad and Baker (1987a,b) and Stasz et al. (1988).

Ahmad JS, Baker R. 1987a. Competitive saprophytic ability and cellulolytic activity of rhizosphere-competent mutants of *Trichoderma harzianum*. *Phytopathology* 77:358–362.

—, —. 1987b. Rhizosphere competence of *Trichoderma harzianum*. *Phytopathology* 77:182–189.

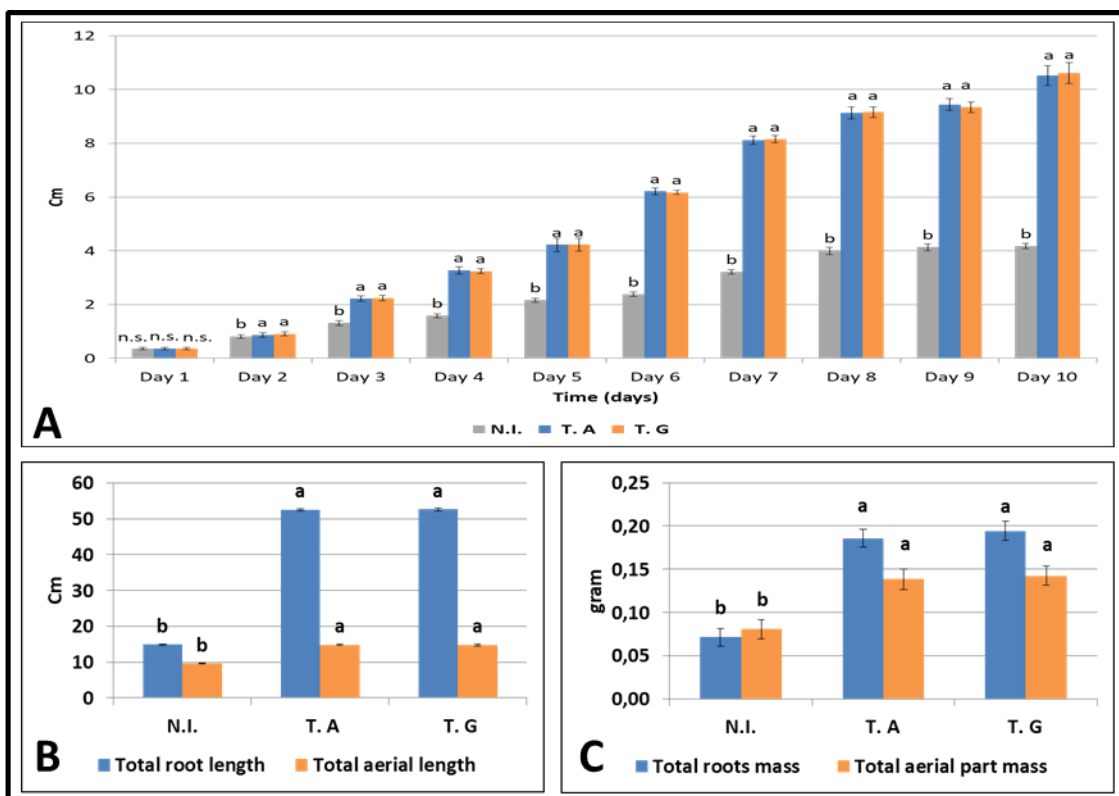
Stasz TE, Harman GE, Weeden NF. 1988. Protoplast preparation and fusion in 2 biocontrol strains of *Trichoderma harzianum*. *Mycologia* 80:141–150.

Supplementary Table 2. Fungal strains isolated from Lebanon from different ecological site.

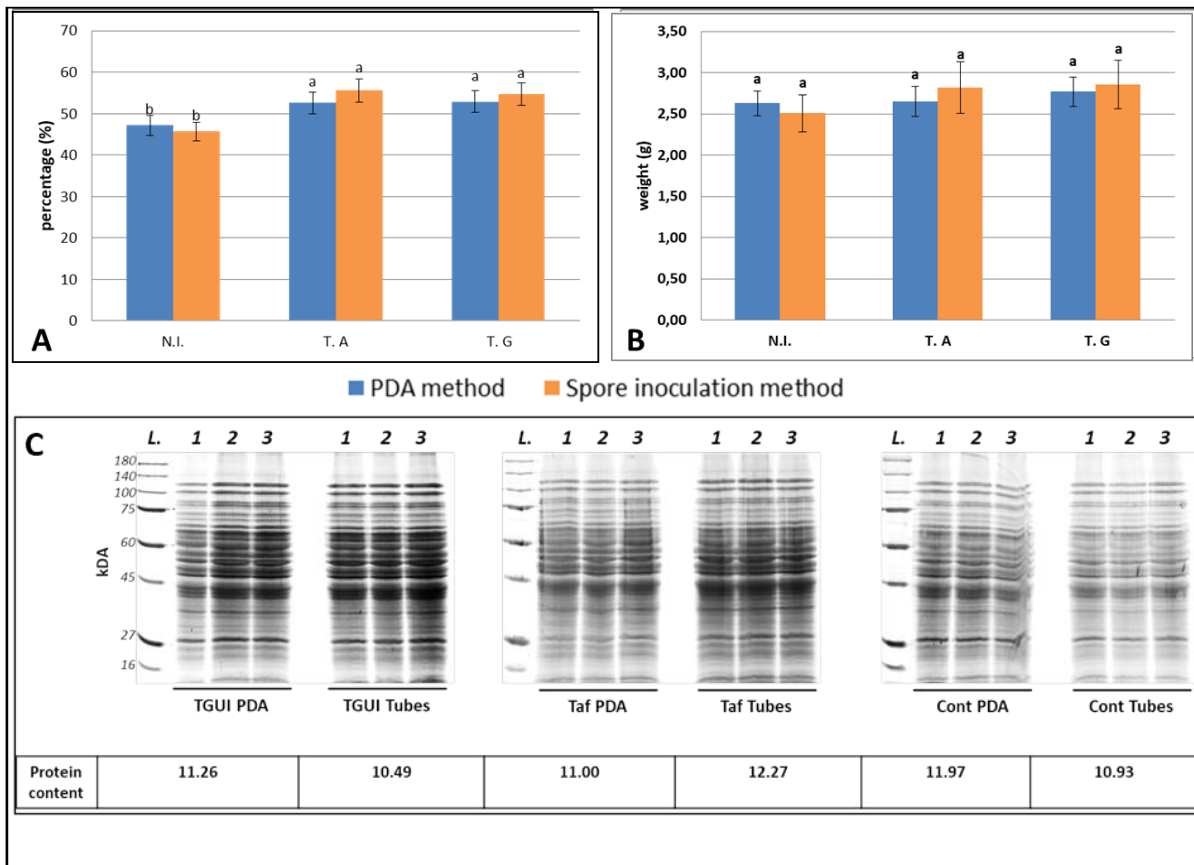
Site	Fugus location	Genus (according to ITS)
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Site 1 ICARDA	Soil	<i>Alternaria sp.</i> (x1)
		<i>Aspergillus sp.</i> (x11)
		<i>Cladorrhinum sp.</i> (x2)
		<i>Talaromyces sp.</i> (x1)
	Root or stem	<i>Alternaria sp.</i> (x2)
		<i>Fusarium sp.</i> (x5)
		<i>Mucor sp.</i> (x1)
		<i>Stromatinia sp.</i> (x2)
Site 2 Tal_Amara	Soil	<i>Aspergillus sp.</i> (x2)
		<i>Penicillium sp.</i> (x1)
	Root or stem	<i>Boeremia sp.</i> (x1)
		<i>Mucor sp.</i> (x1)
Site 3 Doueir	Soil	<i>Fusarium sp.</i> (x1)
		<i>Trichoderma sp.</i> (x1)
		<i>Mucor sp.</i> (x1)
	Root or stem	<i>Fusarium sp.</i> (x3)
		<i>Trichoderma sp.</i> (x1)
		<i>Macrophomina sp.</i> (x1)
		<i>Microdochium sp.</i> (x1)

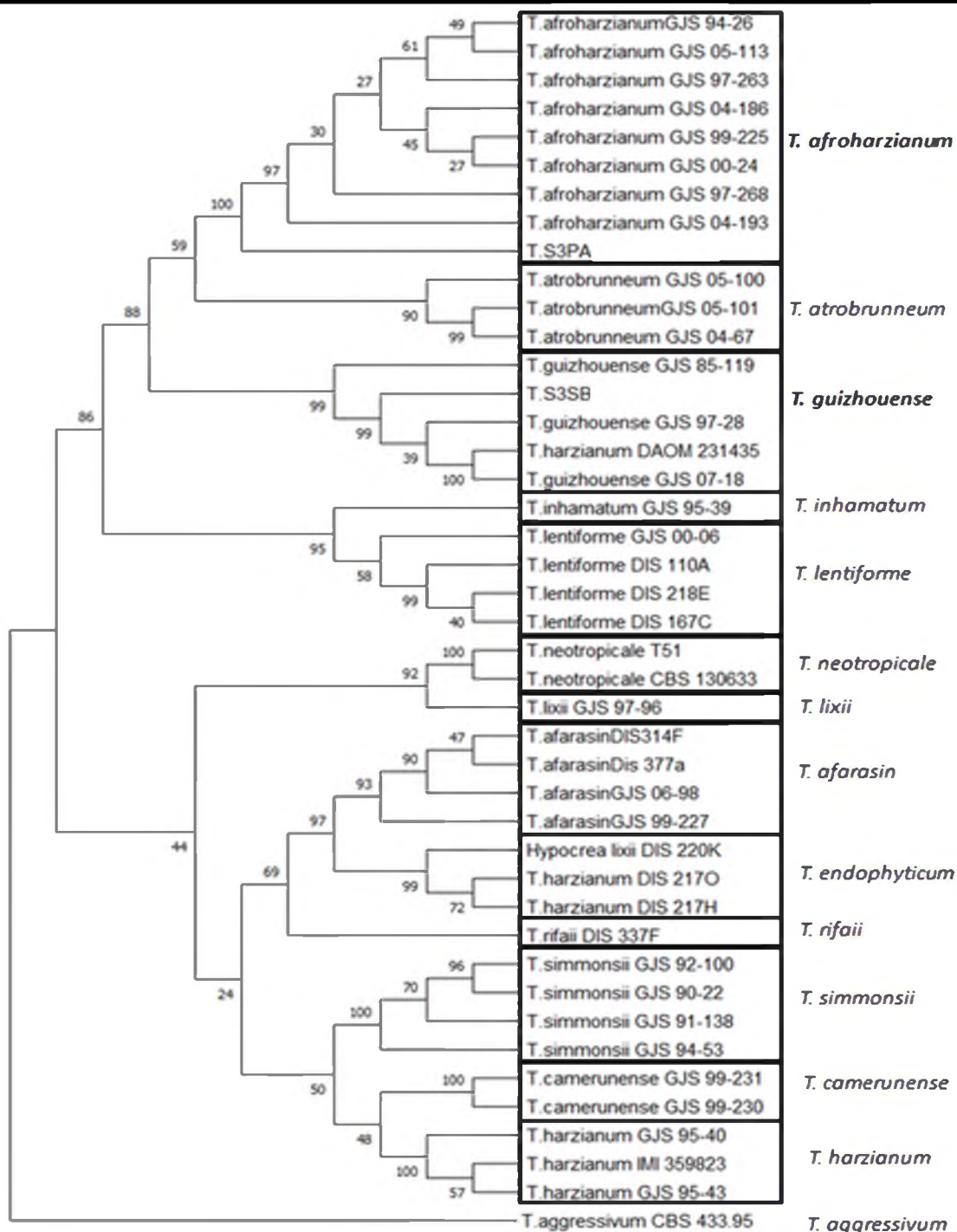
Supplementary Figures

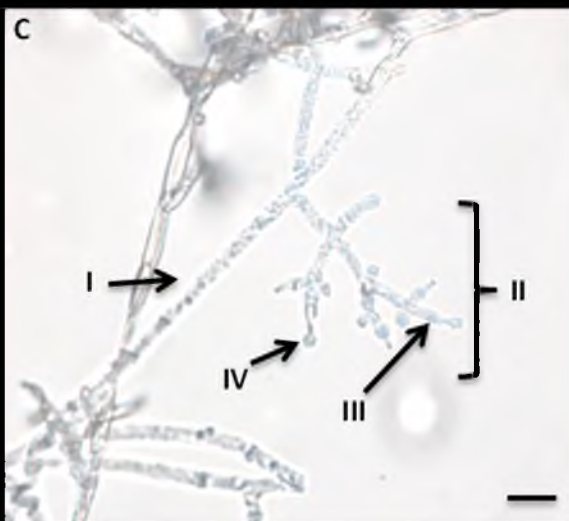
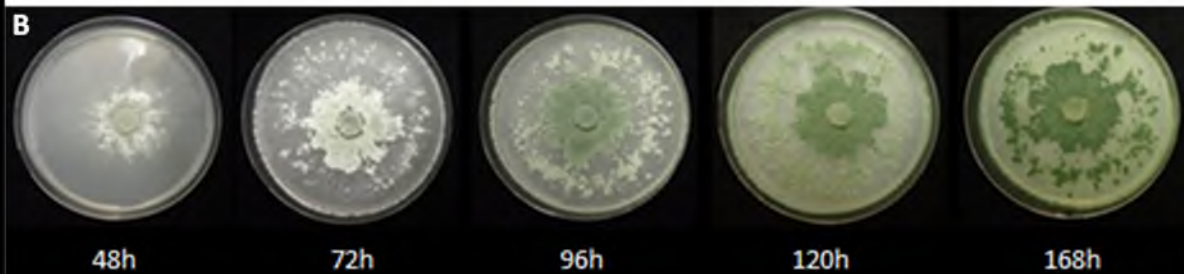
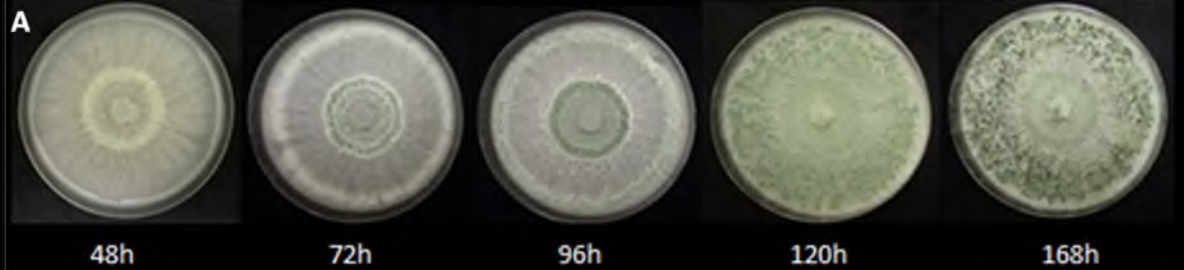


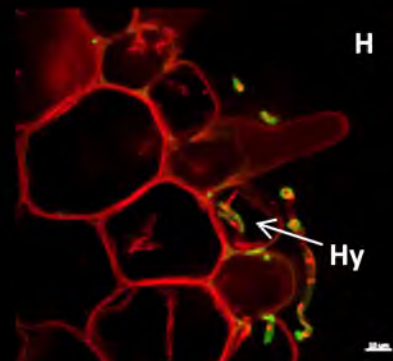
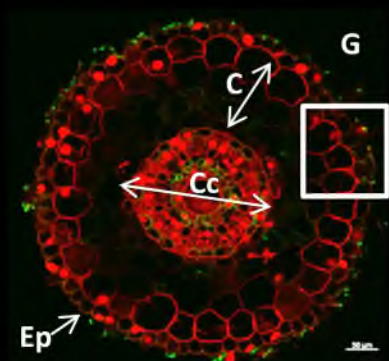
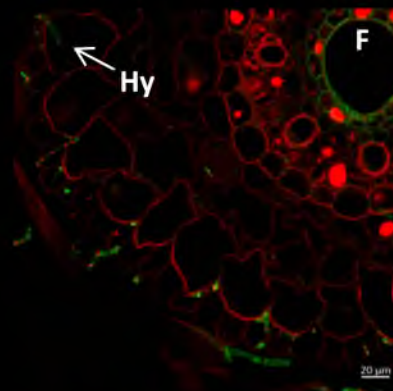
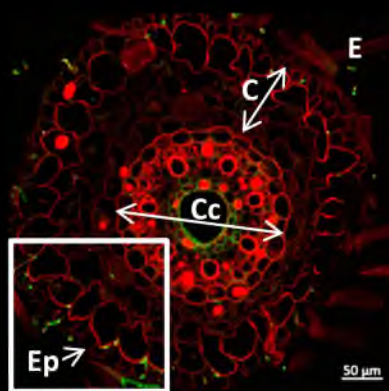
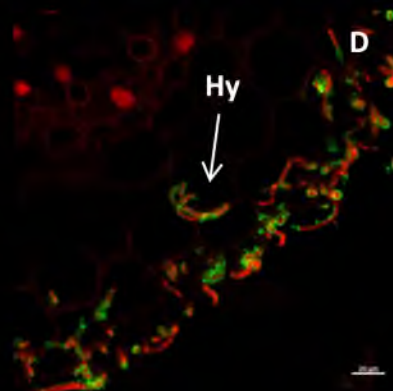
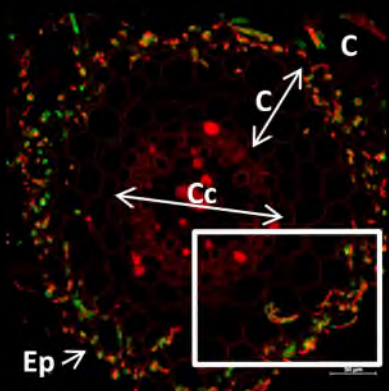
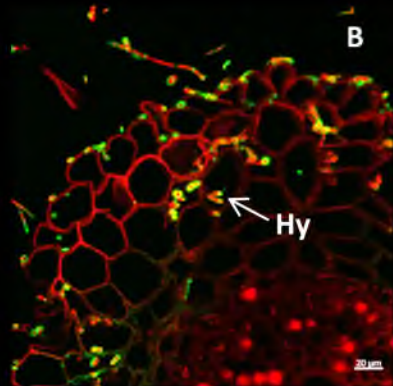
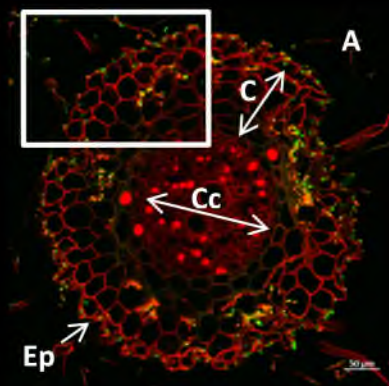
Supplementary Figure 1. (A) principal root length (cm) over a 10 days period. (B) total root, and aerial length (cm). (C) total root, and aerial mass (g). N.I.: non-inoculated; T.G.: wheat plants inoculated with *T. guizhouense*; T.A.: wheat plants inoculated with *T. afroharzianum*. Values in the same column having different letters are significantly different, at $P \leq 0.01$ (ANOVA test).



Supplementary Figure 2. (A) Harvest index (%) and (B) 100 grain weight (g). N.I.: non-inoculated; T.G.: wheat plants inoculated with *T. guizhouense*; T.A.: wheat plants inoculated with *T. afroharzianum*. (C) protein analysis (composition and content) of wheat plants non-inoculated (cont) or inoculated with *T. guizhouense* (TGUI) or *T. afroharzianum* (Taf) as influenced by PDA inoculation method (PDA) or the spore inoculation method (Tubes). The protein content of 100 grains in each condition is indicated below the gel pictures. Values in in each graph having different letters are significantly different, at $P \leq 0.01$ (ANOVA test).

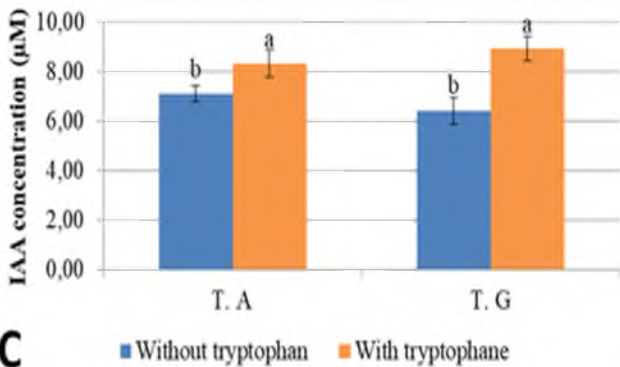
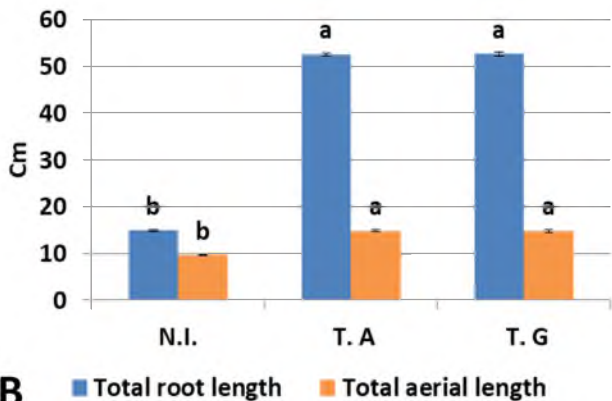


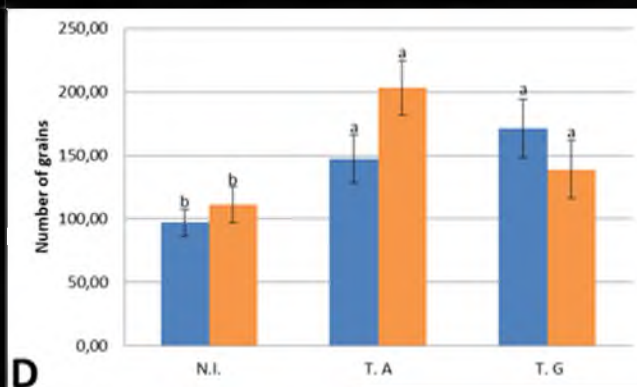
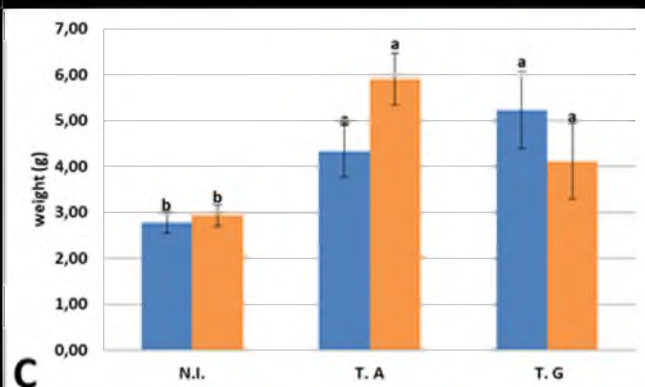
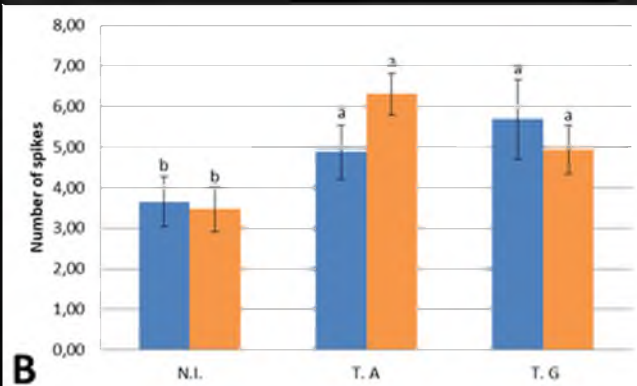
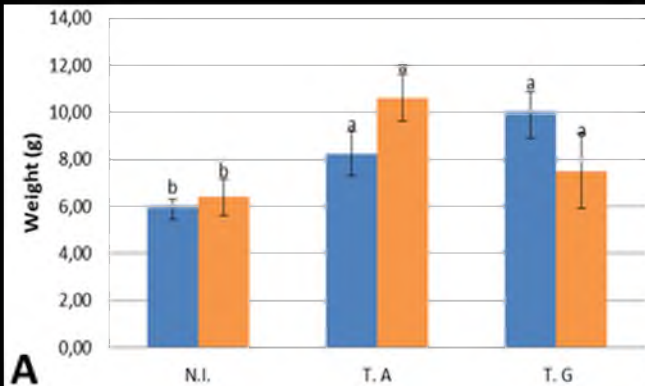






A





■ PDA method ■ Spore inoculation method