Growth of Filamentous Algae Compared to Microalgae

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ABSTRACT

As the planet faces depletion of its natural resources, alternative and sustainable energy sources are becoming increasingly sought after. Research on the growth of algae has revealed their potential for carbon capture to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and for conversion into a fuel source for bioenergy applications. Filamentous algae have attracted recent attention as an optimal species due to their ease of harvest and dominance over other species. To determine the most suitable species for future biomass applications, a 1000-L open raceway pond was inoculated with the freshwater filamentous alga, Oedogonium, with the addition of CO\(_2\). An additional two 1000-L raceway ponds with established cultures of microalgae already receiving CO\(_2\) were used as a comparison to the growth of Oedogonium. The pond cultures were harvested weekly to determine culture density/growth (mg VSS/L) and harvest productivity (g VSS/m\(^2\)/day). After 6 weeks, Oedogonium harvest productivity exceeded both microalgal ponds at 15.3 (± 0.3) g VSS/m\(^2\)-day compared to 13.1 (± 0.3) and 8.6 (± 0.2) g VSS/m\(^2\)-day for the microalgae. Thus, Oedogonium could serve as a suitable species for biomass production due to its high productivity rates relative to microalgae.

INTRODUCTION

With a large dependence on non-renewable fossil fuels as a source of energy, more sustainable options are being researched to meet society’s energy demands without diminishing finite resources. The growth of various species of algae could potentially provide an alternative energy source, in addition to many other environmental benefits. Algae can be used as a feedstock to produce methane gas, a form of bioenergy, through the process of anaerobic digestion where bacteria break down the organic components of algal biomass and release methane as a by-product (Wilkie, 2008). Arable land is not required for the growth of algae, reducing direct competition with land use for agricultural purposes (Roberts et al., 2013). Algae remove nutrients and toxins from wastewater streams, helping to keep water sources free of contaminants (Cole et al., 2016; Edmundson and Wilkie, 2013; Lincoln et al., 1996; Wilkie and Mulbry, 2002). As part of the process of photosynthesis, algae capture carbon dioxide (CO\(_2\)), a greenhouse gas, from the atmosphere and convert it into their biomass (Lawton et al., 2014).

In many countries, the combustion of coal at power plants generates the majority of their energy in the form of electricity. This process releases large amounts of CO\(_2\) into the atmosphere, contributing to an increase in the earth’s warming potential (Singh et al., 2003). To offset the negative impacts of emissions from coal power plants, new ways to capture this carbon are being studied, including the use of algae. Generating bioenergy from algal biomass results in carbon capture that is equivalent to the carbon release once the fuel is burned, creating an overall carbon neutral process (Schampheiraire and Verstraete, 2009). The uptake of carbon directly from the atmosphere by algae is inefficient, but CO\(_2\) dissolution in water allows better access to the carbon. Depending upon the pH of the water, carbon equilibrates between three different forms: CO\(_2\) (carbon dioxide), HCO\(_3^–\) (bicarbonate), or CO\(_3^{2–}\) (carbonate). HCO\(_3^–\) is the form of carbon most readily available for algal uptake and is at its highest concentration at a pH of approximately 8 (Choo et al., 2008). Roberts et al. (2013) and Cole et al. (2014) determined that CO\(_2\) addition by diffusion in water resulted in an increase in algal biomass productivity. The algal biomass can then be used for multiple applications.

Among the different species of algae being cultivated, Oedogonium, a freshwater filamentous alga, is gaining attention. Typically, cultivation of microalgae has been the most popular choice in recent years for its use in various cosmetic products and in human and animal nutrition (Spolaore et al., 2006). However, filamentous algae are now being researched due to their dominance over other species in many environmental conditions (Lawton et al., 2013). A study based on creating polycultures of the filamentous algae Oedogonium, Cladophora, and Spirogyra and subjecting them to different cultivation conditions to determine a target species for future biomass production demonstrated equal proportions of Oedogonium, Cladophora, and Spirogyra initially. However, after three weeks, the proportion of Oedogonium reached over 80% in all treatments (Lawton et al., 2013). This revealed the potential of Oedogonium as a superior species for biomass applications in terms of its high productivity and dominance over other filamentous species.
species. Additionally, Oedogonium was shown to be a promising species compared to three strains of filamentous algae where increases in lipid and starch concentrations – properties important for biofuel production – were revealed under nitrogen-starved conditions (Zhang et al., 2016). Filamentous algae are also becoming favored in production due to the relative ease of harvesting long thin filaments compared to the small (3-30 µm diameter) cells of microalgae (Molina Grima et al., 2003; Wilkie et al., 2011). Harvesting filamentous algae could lead to a reduction in the costs of algal production (Zhang et al., 2016).

The objective of the current study was to assess the harvest productivity and culture density of Oedogonium with the addition of CO₂ and compare it to the growth of different polycultures of established microalgae already receiving CO₂. This will help to inform which species of algae are best suited for carbon capture and future biomass production.

METHODS

Algal Inoculation and Culture Condition

A 1000-L open raceway pond (Pond 2) in Gainesville, Florida was inoculated with a local culture of the filamentous algae, Oedogonium. The pond included a rotating paddle wheel to promote continuous mixing of the algae to enhance sunlight penetration. An additional two 1000-L raceway ponds (Ponds 1 & 3) with local polycultures of microalgae (Scenedesmus, Dictyosphaerium, Ankistrodesmus, and others) that were already established and receiving CO₂ were used as a comparison to the growth of the freshwater alga, Oedogonium. Each pond was supplied with CO₂ through diffusion to maintain a set pH of 8.0 and fertilized with Miracle-Gro (N-P-K: 30-10-10) at a rate of 41.6 g/week. The CO₂ addition was only new to the Oedogonium pond. Temperature and pH readings were monitored weekly over the course of a six-week study (March 13, 2018 to April 24, 2018). Daily average pond temperatures ranged from 18.1 °C to 18.3 °C.

Harvesting and Sample Collection

Each week, pond depths were measured. If the pond levels were below 25cm, water was added to adjust depths to 25cm to make up for evaporative losses. Pre-harvest samples (1 liter) were collected after the sides and bottoms of each pond were brushed to release any settled algae and provide a representative sample. A large plastic scoop was used to sample a section of each pond and the contents were placed in a container. Once the pre-harvest samples were collected, the ponds were harvested to half-volume (12.5cm) using a suction pump and refilled with dechlorinated tap water to restore to full volume (25cm). After full volume was reached, post-harvest samples were collected by the same method as for the pre-harvest samples.

Each pre-harvest and post-harvest sample was blended and filtered in triplicate. Total and volatile suspended solids were measured according to Standard Methods (APHA, 2012). To determine total suspended solids (mg TSS/L), dry weights were recorded by placing the samples in an oven at 105°C for one hour. The samples were placed in a muffle furnace at 550°C for two hours to determine volatile suspended solids (mg VSS/L). All VSS and TSS data were normalized to correspond with a pond depth of 25cm in case of rain events where depths would increase and culture density would become diluted. Weekly culture growth was calculated by the equation: \( G = VSS_{\text{pre}} - VSS_{\text{post}} \), where \( VSS_{\text{pre}} \) represents ashed pre-harvest culture density averages from the current week and \( VSS_{\text{post}} \) represents ashed post-harvest culture density averages from the previous week. Harvest productivity (g VSS/m²-day) was calculated by using the equation: \( P = (G \times 0.25m)/T \), where \( G \) represents culture growth, \( 0.25m \) represents pond depth and \( T \) represents the number of days.
**Microscopic Analysis of Cultures**

Photomicrographs of the algae were taken at 100x, 250x, and 400x using brightfield microscopy. The images were analyzed on a weekly basis to determine the species makeup and changes in morphotype.

**RESULTS**

**Culture Density/Growth**

Changes in culture density were determined from the sampled data on a weekly basis to analyze culture growth. An increase in culture density was revealed across all ponds (Table 1). Initially, the established microalgal ponds had higher increases in culture density than the *Oedogonium* pond. During week 6 of the experiment, *Oedogonium* had the highest increase in culture density, 427.0 (± 9.1) mg VSS/L compared to the microalgae with 366.7 (± 7.0) and 240.0 (± 5.2) mg VSS/L for Ponds 1 and 3, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Microalgae Pond 1 (mg VSS/L)</th>
<th>Oedogonium Pond 2 (mg VSS/L)</th>
<th>Microalgae Pond 3 (mg VSS/L)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>64.8 ± 3.9</td>
<td>14.4 ± 3.9</td>
<td>66.2 ± 12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>202.6 ± 8.3</td>
<td>130.0 ± 7.2</td>
<td>213.3 ± 2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>265.3 ± 18.0</td>
<td>382.0 ± 8.0</td>
<td>260.0 ± 13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>141.1 ± 17.4</td>
<td>248.2 ± 12.6</td>
<td>175.4 ± 6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>308.0 ± 7.9</td>
<td>305.0 ± 5.3</td>
<td>312.0 ± 3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>366.7 ± 7.0</td>
<td>427.0 ± 9.1</td>
<td>240.0 ± 5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Weekly algal culture growth

Data are means ± standard deviation (n=3).

**Harvest Productivity**

Over the course of the six-week experiment, *Oedogonium* in Pond 2 surpassed the harvest productivity of microalgae in both Ponds 1 and 3 (Figure 1). Initially, *Oedogonium* had a lower productivity at 0.6 (±0.1) g VSS/m²-day during week 1 and 4.6 (± 0.3) g VSS/m²-day during week 2, but increased to 13.7 (± 0.3) g VSS/m²-day by week 3. During week 4, *Oedogonium* productivity decreased slightly to 9.1 (± 0.3) g VSS/m²-day. Productivity increased again during week 5 to 10.9 (± 0.2) g VSS/m²-day and reached a maximum during the final week at 15.3 (± 0.3) g VSS/m²-day. Microalgae in Ponds 1 and 3 had harvest productivities of 2.3 (± 0.1) and 2.3 (± 0.4) g VSS/m²-day during week 1, 7.4 (± 0.3) and 7.7 (± 0.1) g VSS/m²-day during week 2, 9.3 (± 0.6) and 9.5 (± 0.5) g VSS/m²-day during week 3, 5.2 (± 0.6) and 6.4 (± 0.2) g VSS/m²-day by the fourth week, 11.0 (± 0.3) and 11.1 (± 0.1) g VSS/m²-day during week 5, and 13.1 (± 0.3) and 8.6 (± 0.2) g VSS/m²-day by the final week, respectively.
GROWTH OF FILAMENTOUS ALGAE COMPARED TO MICROALGAE

Figure 1. Harvest productivity of *Oedogonium* (Pond 2) and microalgae (Ponds 1 and 3). Data are means ± standard deviation (n=3).

**Microscopic Analysis**

During the first week, *Oedogonium* filaments were a dull green color with cell components aggregated towards the center, away from the cell walls (Figure 2). After three weeks, cell components dispersed, filling the entire capacity of the cell wall (Figure 3). The filaments appeared more robust with a brighter green color. *Dictyosphaerium* was still the dominant microalgae over *Scenedesmus* in Pond 1 after 3 weeks (Figures 4 and 5). Microalgae in Pond 3 transitioned from a balanced culture of *Scenedesmus* and *Ankistrodesmus* in week 3 to a culture dominated primarily by *Ankistrodesmus* during the fourth week (Figures 6 and 7).

![Figure 2. Oedogonium during week 1.](image)

![Figure 3. Oedogonium during week 3.](image)
DISCUSSION

In terms of harvest productivity and culture growth, Oedogonium outperformed both microalgal ponds. Initially, Oedogonium had the lowest growth and a lower productivity for both week 1 and week 2. By week 3, there was a large increase in growth and productivity for the culture. This was likely due to the time required for the culture to adapt to the addition of CO$_2$. The physical changes of the algae indicate that the CO$_2$ addition promoted more robust and brighter green filaments of Oedogonium.

Culture growth and productivity during week 4 likely decreased for all ponds because of a storm that brought 4.9 inches of rain, causing the ponds to overflow and spill some of the biomass. Solar irradiance data obtained from the Florida Automated Weather Network (2018) revealed a significant decrease in irradiance from a high of 252.78 W/m$^2$ at the beginning of week 4 to a low of 21.65 W/m$^2$ by the end of the week (Figure 8). Because algae require sunlight for photosynthesis, their productivities likely decreased as a result of lower solar irradiance during week 4. After the storm, all ponds reached relatively equal productivity levels, which potentially indicates a readjustment period. During the final week, Oedogonium surpassed the productivity of both microalgal ponds and reached it’s peak harvest productivity. Ambient temperatures obtained from the Florida Automated Weather Network (2018) showed temperatures greater than 20°C during the final week with a peak temperature of 23.5°C, which was the highest recorded during
the experimental period. Peak productivity for the *Oedogonium* species during week 6 could be related to the temperature increases. These findings reveal the suitability of *Oedogonium* for future production.

![Solar Irradiance](figure8.png)

*Figure 8. Solar irradiance (W/m²) in Alachua County from Florida Automated Weather Network (2018).*

In a study by Cole et al. (2014) in Australia, biomass productivities of *Oedogonium* in 15,000 L open outdoor tanks using dechlorinated tap water enriched with Guillard's f/2 growth media reached 8.33 (±0.51) g DW (dry weight) m⁻²-day when adding CO₂ to maintain a pH of 7.5. Average culture temperatures during the Australian winter ranged from 18.4°C (± 2.2) to 19.1°C (± 2.24). At a latitude of 19.33°S in Australia, daily average solar irradiance varies between 173.6 W/m² and 231.5 W/m² in the winter (Cole et al., 2018). By comparison, the greatest harvest productivity was higher in this study at 15.3 (± 0.3) g VSS/m²-day, but both studies reveal high productivities of *Oedogonium* with CO₂ supplementation. In the current study, daily average culture temperatures ranged from 18.1°C to 18.3°C between ponds, which are similar to the temperatures in the Cole et al. (2014) study. Solar irradiance was also similar in the current study. Optimal temperature and solar irradiance conditions for the growth of *Oedogonium* were identified to be between 20 and 35°C and greater than 173.6 W/m² (Cole et al., 2018). Thus, harvest productivity of *Oedogonium* might be even higher during summer months when temperatures are higher.

Overall, *Oedogonium* appears to be a suitable species to use for biomass production purposes. Not only did it outperform other genera, the filaments can be harvested easily with a net, and it appears to be quick at adapting to culture conditions to obtain high biomass productivities, demonstrated by its large increase in culture growth during week 2 and week 3. Microalgae may require more cost-intensive production and should be further researched in comparison to different species of filamentous algae. This research suggests *Oedogonium* is an efficient organism for carbon capture and can potentially be used for multiple sustainable practices, including nutrient removal from wastewaters and bioenergy production, in the future.

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REFERENCES


