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**169. © Root desiccation and drought stress responses of bareroot *Quercus rubra* seedlings treated with a hydrophilic polymer root dip.** Apostol, K. G., Jacobs, D. F., and Dumroese, R. K. *Plant and Soil* 315:229-240. 2009.

## Root desiccation and drought stress responses of bareroot *Quercus rubra* seedlings treated with a hydrophilic polymer root dip

Kent G. Apostol · Douglass F. Jacobs ·  
R. Kasten Dumroese

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**Abstract** Root hydrogel, a hydrophilic polymer, has been used to improve transplanting success of bare-root conifer seedlings through effects on water holding capacity. We examined mechanisms by which Terra-sorb® Fine Hydrogel reduces damage that occurs when roots of 1-year old, dormant northern red oak (*Quercus rubra* L.) were subjected to short-term (1, 3, and 5 h) pre-transplanting desiccation and long-term (45 days) drought stress following transplanting in a controlled environment chamber or greenhouse conditions. Hydrogel-treated seedlings had 80% greater root moisture content than non-root dipped control seedlings following the pre-transplanting

desiccation period. Hydrogel reduced root membrane leakiness by 31% 5 h after the desiccation exposure. Hydrogel-treated seedlings did not show greater differences in shoot length, plant dry mass, root volume, net photosynthesis, and stomatal conductance compared with control seedlings following the 45-day drought stress exposure. A reduction in mean number of days to bud break in hydrogel-treated seedlings, combined with delayed tissue moisture loss (linked to higher stem water potential), suggests that hydrogel may have provided stress protection to aid survival under short-term desiccation, which may be beneficial toward alleviating initial transplanting stress.

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K. G. Apostol · D. F. Jacobs (✉)  
Hardwood Tree Improvement and Regeneration Center,  
Department of Forestry and Natural Resources,  
Purdue University,  
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2061, USA  
e-mail: djacobs@purdue.edu

R. K. Dumroese  
USDA Forest Service, Southern Research Station,  
1221 South Main Street,  
Moscow, ID 83843, USA

*Present address:*

K. G. Apostol  
Department of Biological Sciences, Bethel University,  
3900 Bethel Drive,  
St. Paul, MN 55112, USA

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### Introduction

Water deficit serves as a primary cause of transplant stress in forest tree seedlings (Burdett 1990; Haase and Rose 1993). Continuous water stress conditions inhibit plant growth, stomatal conductance, and CO<sub>2</sub> assimilation (Brakke and Allen 1995; Gómez-Cadenas et al. 1996). This desiccation-induced injury may delay root regeneration, which is essential for the establishment of newly-planted seedlings. Desiccation of the root system was associated with increased