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# Effects of nurse-tree crop species and density on nutrient and water availability to underplanted *Toona ciliata* in northeastern Argentina

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**Abstract:** Cultivation of high-value hardwoods is often more difficult than cultivation of many pioneer species commonly used in fast-growing plantations. On some sites, the facilitative effects of nurse trees can be necessary for initial crop species establishment, but their competitive effects can also reduce juvenile growth rates of the crop species. To improve establishment success in mixed-species plantations, we tested the effects of the nurse-tree species *Grevillea robusta* A.Cunn. ex R. Br., *Pinus elliottii* Engelm. × *Pinus caribaea* Morelet, and *Pinus taeda* L. and four densities (0%, 25%, 50%, and 75% of the initial density) on *Toona ciliata* M.Roem. light, soil water, and soil nutrient availability. Growth of *T. ciliata* tended to increase with decreasing nurse-tree density and increasing light availability. However, growth was greater under *G. robusta* than under the pines, even where light conditions were similar, corresponding to mostly higher nutrient availability and higher soil water contents underneath *G. robusta*. Wood  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  of *T. ciliata* was positively correlated with growth, foliar nutrient contents (N, P, K, Mg, Ca), and soil water content at a depth of 20–40 cm. Our results suggest that *G. robusta* is less competitive for soil nutrients and water than the pine nurse-tree species.

**Résumé :** La culture de feuillus de haute qualité est souvent plus difficile que celle de plusieurs espèces pionnières couramment utilisées dans les plantations d'espèces à croissance rapide. Sur certaines stations, la facilitation des arbres d'accompagnement peut être nécessaire pour l'établissement initial des espèces d'avenir, mais leur compétition peut aussi réduire le taux de croissance juvénile des espèces d'avenir. Pour améliorer le succès d'établissement de plantations mixtes, nous avons testé les effets des espèces d'accompagnement *Grevillea robusta* A.Cunn. ex R.Br., *Pinus elliottii* Engelm. × *Pinus caribaea* Morelet et *Pinus taeda* L. plantées selon quatre densités (0, 25, 50 et 75 % de la densité initiale) sur la disponibilité de la lumière, de l'eau du sol et des nutriments du sol pour l'espèce d'avenir *Toona ciliata* M.Roem. La croissance de *T. ciliata* a eu tendance à augmenter avec une diminution de la densité des arbres d'accompagnement et avec une augmentation de la disponibilité de la lumière. Cependant, la croissance était plus forte sous *G. robusta* que sous les pins, même lorsque les conditions lumineuses étaient semblables, ce qui correspond généralement à une plus grande disponibilité des nutriments et à une plus grande teneur en eau du sol sous *G. robusta*. La proportion de  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  dans le bois de *T. ciliata* était positivement corrélée à la croissance, au contenu foliaire en nutriments (N, P, K, Mg, Ca) et à la teneur en eau du sol mesurée à une profondeur de 20 à 40 cm. Nos résultats indiquent que *G. robusta* exerce moins de compétition sur les nutriments et l'eau du sol que ne le font les espèces de pin d'accompagnement.

[Traduit par la Rédaction]

## Introduction

Worldwide, the use of wood and wood products is increasing. Increasingly, plantations are not only established to produce pulpwood, firewood, and commodity solid wood products, but also to grow high-value hardwoods, which have become rare in native forests (Evans 2001). However, the cultivation of these species is often more difficult than the cultivation of many of the robust pioneer species com-

monly used in fast-growing plantations. On some sites, establishing nurse trees in advance is necessary to protect underplanted crop species against abiotic or biotic damage and hence establish productive plantations (Bygrave and Bygrave 2005). The facilitative effects of nurse trees can be necessary for initial crop species establishment, but their competitive effects can also reduce juvenile growth rates of the crop species. When nitrogen-fixing tree species are part of a mixture, the net effects of facilitation and competition

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