

# High light intensities can be used to grow healthy and robust cannabis plants during the vegetative stage of indoor production

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**Additional index words.** Light-emitting diodes, PPFD, DLI, growth, morphology

## Abstract.

Although the vegetative stage of indoor cannabis production can be relatively short in duration, there is a high energy demand due to higher light intensities (LI) than the clonal propagation stage and longer photoperiods than the flowering stage (i.e., 16 – 24 hours vs. 12 hours). While electric lighting is a major component of both energy consumption and overall production costs, there is a lack of scientific information to guide cultivators in selecting a LI that corresponds to their vegetative stage production strategies. To determine the vegetative plant responses to LI, clonal plants of ‘Gelato’ were grown for 21 days with canopy-level photosynthetic photon flux densities (PPFD) ranging between 135 and 1430  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  on a 16-hour photoperiod (i.e., daily light integrals of  $\approx 8$  to 80  $\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{d}^{-1}$ ). Plant height and growth index responded quadratically; the number of nodes, stem thickness, and aboveground dry weight increased asymptotically; and internode length and water content of aboveground tissues decreased linearly with increasing LI. Foliar attributes had varying responses to LI. Chlorophyll content index increased asymptotically, leaf size decreased linearly and specific leaf weight increased linearly with increasing LI. Generally, PPFD levels of  $\approx 900 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  produced compact, robust plants that are commercially relevant, while PPFD levels of  $\approx 600 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  promoted plant morphology with more open architecture – to increase airflow and reduce the potential foliar pests in compact (i.e., indica-dominant) genotypes.

## Introduction

Drug-type cannabis is a high-value crop that is mainly grown in controlled environments [e.g., indoors (i.e., with no natural lighting) and greenhouses] where growing conditions can be maintained for consistent, year-round production (Benke and Tomkins, 2017; Despommier, 2013). Electricity costs are particularly high in indoor environments (Mills, 2012) because the

47 plants completely rely on electric light sources for providing photosynthetically active radiation  
48 (*PAR*, 400-700 nm). Electric lighting is also used in greenhouse environments to provide  
49 supplemental *PAR* when the natural light levels are insufficient [e.g., when daylengths are short  
50 or when it is cloudy outside (Bilodeau et al., 2019)]. Since light has a major role in moderating  
51 plant morphology and ontogeny, light intensity (LI), spectrum, and photoperiod can be  
52 manipulated by the cultivator to produce plants with the desired morphological characteristics  
53 during the various growth stages of indoor cannabis production; ultimately resulting in high yield  
54 and quality of the marketable products (e.g., mature female inflorescences). Lighting-related  
55 electricity consumption is also a major consideration, due to its exceptionally high cost (e.g., per  
56 unit of crop yield) in indoor cannabis production (Arnold, 2013; Mehboob et al., 2020).

57  
58 Each of three distinct growth stages that are commonly used in indoor cannabis production (i.e.,  
59 propagation, vegetative growth, and flowering) have different photoperiod and LI requirements.  
60 In the propagation stage, the photoperiod is generally 18 – 24 h (Chandra et al., 2020) and  
61 canopy-level photosynthetic photon flux density (PPFD,  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ ) is usually low (Fluence,  
62 2020; Lumigrow, 2017) to minimize transpiration loss as the clonal plants establish new root  
63 systems. After approximately two weeks in propagation, rooted cuttings (i.e., transplants)  
64 transition into the vegetative stage (Caplan et al. 2018) where they are exposed to similar  
65 photoperiods but higher PPFD than propagation to encourage strong vegetative growth to  
66 prepare the plants for the flowering stage (Rodriguez-Morrison et al, 2021). After approximately  
67 two to four weeks in the vegetative stage, plants are transitioned to a 12-h photoperiod and even  
68 higher PPFD to enhance growth and yield. Depending on the genotype, indoor-grown cannabis  
69 crops normally spend between 6 and 12 weeks under the 12-h flowering photoperiod before the  
70 female inflorescences have reached optimum maturity for harvesting (Carpentier et al., 2012).

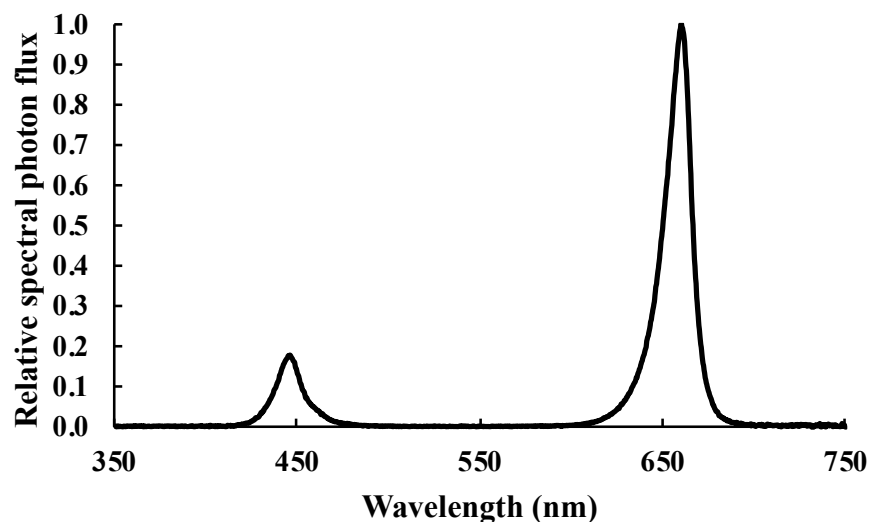
71  
72 The optimum post-vegetative stage morphology varies depending on the cultivators' production  
73 system (e.g., length of vegetative stage, plant density in both vegetative and flowering stages,  
74 growing media type and rootzone volume, type of trellising system used in flowering, etc.), but  
75 the general goal is to ensure high transplant success and strong vegetative growth (Vanhove et  
76 al., 2011). The LI during the vegetative stage can influence plant growth attributes such as  
77 height, stem thickness, branching, leaf size, leaf thickness, and biomass partitioning (Poorter et  
78 al., 2019). Since these attributes affect a crop's robustness as it enters the flowering stage, the  
79 vegetative stage LI must be selected to promote the development of the foundational structure  
80 (e.g., thicker stems and more nodes) needed to support prolific inflorescence development, which  
81 can account for more than half of the total aboveground biomass at peak maturity (Rodriguez-  
82 Morrison et al., 2021).

83  
84 The current lack of scientific information related to LI during the vegetative stage has resulted in  
85 a broad range of canopy-level PPFDs (e.g., 250 to 650  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ ) being recommended to  
86 cultivators (Fluence, 2020; Lumigrow, 2017). Since cannabis can tolerate (Chandra et al., 2008)  
87 and even flourish (Rodriguez-Morrison et al., 2021) under very high LI, there is opportunity to  
88 elevate PPFD during the vegetative stage to enhance plant structure and shorten the length of the  
89 vegetative stage. Therefore, the objective of this study was to determine the effects of a broad  
90 range of LI on vegetative stage cannabis morphology and growth attributes, to guide cultivators  
91 towards optimizing the LI for their specific production strategies.

92

## 93 **Materials and Methods**

94 *Plant propagation and cultivation.* Uniform clonal cuttings of the cannabis genotype ‘Gelato-29’  
 95 (short and bushy growth habit) were coated with 0.1% indole-3-butyric acid rooting hormone  
 96 (StimRoot #1; Master Plant-Prod Inc., Brampton, ON, Canada) at the base of each cutting and  
 97 inserted into cylindrical rockwool plugs (3.6 cm diameter × 4.0 cm height; Grodan, Milton, ON,  
 98 Canada) at one cutting per plug. Plugs were pre-soaked in a preventative biological fungicide  
 99 solution (RootShield WP; Bioworks, Victor, NY, USA) at 0.45 g·L<sup>-1</sup> in distilled water, with a  
 100 final electrical conductivity (EC) of 0.7 dS·m<sup>-1</sup> and pH of 5.2. The plugs were placed in  
 101 propagation trays (0.5 × 0.3 m, 50 Plug Pre-filled; A.M.A Horticulture Inc., Kingsville, ON,  
 102 Canada) and covered with transparent plastic lids (0.29 × 0.55 × 0.19 m, 7-inch Propagation  
 103 Dome; Mondi Products, Vancouver, BC, Canada). Cuttings were rooted for 14 d under a 16-h  
 104 photoperiod with a targeted canopy-level PPFD of 200 μmol·m<sup>-2</sup>·s<sup>-1</sup> from light-emitting diodes  
 105 (LEDs) (Toplight-Targeted Spectrum; Lumigrow, Emeryville, CA, USA). Only the blue (B, 400-  
 106 500 nm) and red (R, 600-700 nm) channels were used, with peak wavelengths and full-width at  
 107 half maximum (FWHM) of 445 nm and 17 nm for red and 665 nm and 16 nm for blue, and a  
 108 photon flux ratio of B15:R85 (Fig. 1). Spectrum and LI were evaluated using a radiometrically-  
 109 calibrated spectrometer (XR-Flame-S; Ocean Optics, Dunedin, FL, USA) coupled to a CC3  
 110 cosine-corrector attached to a 1.9 m × 400 μm UV-Vis optical fibre. The intensities of B and R  
 111 LEDs were modified using the lighting control software (smartPAR; Lumigrow) to achieve the  
 112 prescribed PPFD and B:R.



113  
 114 Figure 1. Relative spectral photon flux distribution of blue (B) and red (R) LEDs used during the  
 115 propagation and vegetative stages.

116  
 117 Uniformly-sized rooted cuttings with height and number of nodes of (mean ± SE, n = 90) 13 ±  
 118 0.2 cm and 5 ± 0.1, respectively, were transplanted into rockwool blocks (0.15 × 0.15 × 0.15 m,  
 119 Grodan) and grown for 21 d under a 16-h photoperiod. The initial height, measured from  
 120 substrate surface to the highest point on the plant, and the number of nodes for each plant were  
 121 recorded. The transplants were not irrigated for the first three days to encourage root growth and  
 122 were then drip-irrigated twice daily at 2 L·hr<sup>-1</sup> for 540 s, such that each plant received roughly  
 123 0.6 L·d<sup>-1</sup>. The nutrient solution was comprised of Dutch Nutrients Gro A and Gro B

124 (Homegrown Hydroponics, Toronto, ON, Canada) at a rate of  $5 \text{ mL}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$  in rain water, resulting in  
125 an EC of  $\approx 1.8 \text{ dS}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}$  and pH of  $\approx 5.7$ .

126  
127 The experiment was conducted in a commercial cannabis greenhouse facility in Southern  
128 Ontario, Canada. Three enclosures ( $5.9 \times 4.1 \times 2.7 \text{ m}$ ) were used, each consisting of two benches  
129 ( $5.9 \times 1.8 \text{ m}$ ) that were separated by 0.5 m and encompassed with panda film (Vivosun, City of  
130 Industry, CA, USA) – black side facing inwards – to block natural light and minimize solar  
131 heating. Each enclosure was divided into five  $\times 1 \text{ m}^2$  plots, with a minimum lateral separation of  
132 0.65 m between the edges of adjacent plots. Each plot consisted of 12 plants (i.e., 12 plants/ $\text{m}^2$ ),  
133 arranged in four rows of three plants each, such that all plants were equally spaced. The plants in  
134 the outer rows were border plants while the six plants in the inner rows were measured  
135 experimentally (i.e., treatment plants). Plants were irrigated using the same nutrient solution that  
136 was used during the transplant stage (described above). Air temperature and relative humidity  
137 (RH) were recorded every 300 s using data loggers (HOBO MX2301A; Onset Computer  
138 Corporation, Bourne, MA, USA) located at light fixture level in each enclosure. Across the three  
139 enclosures, the daytime temperature and RH were (mean  $\pm$  SD,  $n = 3$ )  $25 \pm 0.3 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  and  $37 \pm 0.6\%$   
140 [i.e., vapor pressure deficit (VPD)  $\approx 2.0 \text{ kPa}$ ], respectively, and nighttime temperature and RH  
141 were  $22 \pm 0.1 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  and  $40 \pm 0.6\%$  (i.e., VPD  $\approx 1.6 \text{ kPa}$ ), respectively.

142  
143 *Light intensity treatments.* This experiment was arranged as a randomized complete block design  
144 (RCBD) with five target LI treatments (200, 450, 700, 950, and  $1200 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ ) using the  
145 same light fixtures and spectrum from the propagation stage (described above) and three  
146 concurrent replications (i.e., the enclosures). Pairs of LED bars ( $1.09 \times 0.11 \text{ m}$ ) were spaced 0.4  
147 m apart ‘on-center’ over each plot. For the  $1200 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  treatment plots, an additional pair  
148 of LED bars were evenly spaced between the first pair of LED bars. All treatments had a  
149 photoperiod of 16 h (0600 HR to 2200 HR). Spectrum and PPFD, at initial canopy level, were set  
150 (as described above) using smartPAR (Lumigrow) and the spectrometer (Ocean Optics).  
151 Following initial setup, the PPFD at the top of each plant was measured and recorded twice  
152 weekly using a quantum sensor (LI-180; LI-COR Biosciences, Lincoln, NE, USA), and the  
153 fixture hang-heights were adjusted accordingly, to maintain consistent canopy-level PPFDs  
154 throughout the trial.

155  
156 Although the layout of the experiment was a RCBD, the trial was conducted as a gradient design  
157 (Jones-Baumgardt et al., 2020; Rodriguez-Morrison et al., 2021) with each plant treated as an  
158 experimental unit and assigned a LI level consistent with their respective accumulated light  
159 histories. To this end, the average PPFD (APPFD) each individual plant received over the trial  
160 was obtained by computing the light integrals between each bi-weekly PPFD measurement  
161 period, summing these integrals over the entire trial to determine a total light integral (TLI,  
162  $\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}$ ), and then back-calculating to determine APPFD by dividing TLI by the total number of  
163 seconds of lighting during the trial (i.e.,  $3600 \text{ s}\cdot\text{hr}^{-1} \times 16 \text{ hr}\cdot\text{d}^{-1} \times 21 \text{ d}$ ).

164  
165 *Plant growth and leaf morphology.* The plants were harvested 21 d after the start of the LI  
166 treatments. Final height and number of nodes for each plant were recorded. Increases in height  
167 ( $\Delta\text{H}$ ) and number of nodes ( $\Delta\text{NN}$ ) were determined by subtracting initial values from harvest  
168 values. Internode length (IL) was determined by dividing  $\Delta\text{H}$  by  $\Delta\text{NN}$ . The width of each plant  
169 was measured as the maximum lateral spread in two perpendicular axes based on the geographic

170 orientation on the bench: north-south (N-S) and east-west (E-W). Growth index (GI) was  
171 calculated using the following equation:  $[(\text{Final height} \times \text{Width}_{\text{N-S}} \times \text{Width}_{\text{E-W}}) / 300]$  (from  
172 Ruter, 1992). Chlorophyll content index (i.e., SPAD) was measured three times (then averaged)  
173 on one of the youngest fully-expanded leaves using a chlorophyll meter (SPAD 502; Spectrum  
174 Technologies Inc., Aurora, IL, USA). Stem thickness (ST) was measured at the first internode  
175 using a digital caliper. The stem of each plant was cut at substrate level and aboveground fresh  
176 weight (FW) was measured using a digital scale (AX622N/E Adventure Precision Balance;  
177 OHAUS Corporation, Parsippany, NJ, USA). All aboveground tissues were dried to constant  
178 weight at 65 °C and re-weighed to determine dry weight (DW). Aboveground tissue water  
179 content (WC) was calculated using the following equation:  $[(\text{FW} - \text{DW}) / \text{FW}] \times 100\%$ . Single  
180 leaves from the tenth node from the bottom of each plant were scanned (CanoScan LiDE 25;  
181 Canon Inc., Japan) at 600 dpi resolution and then dried to constant weight at 65 °C. Leaf size  
182 ( $\text{cm}^2/\text{leaf}$ ) was computed from the digital images using ImageJ (Version 1.52q; National  
183 Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA). The DW of each scanned leaf was determined using  
184 an analytical balance (AE 100; Mettler Toledo, Columbus, OH, USA) and specific leaf weight  
185 (SLW;  $\text{mg}\cdot\text{cm}^{-2}$ ) was determined by dividing leaf DW by leaf size.

186  
187 *Data processing.* All data were analyzed using least-squares non-linear regression in Prism  
188 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, USA) with APPFD as the independent variable, to  
189 determine the best-fit model for each attribute ( $P \leq 0.05$ ). The models tested were linear,  
190 quadratic, and asymptotic. Outliers were detected and removed using a Q-coefficient of 1.0 in  
191 Prism's ROUT outlier detection algorithm. For quadratic responses, the vertices were calculated  
192 to determine the light saturation points (LSP) for each attribute. The asymptotic equation:  $Y = a$   
193  $+ be^{(kX)}$ , where Y, a, e, and X represent the measured attribute, maximum value for the measured  
194 attribute (i.e., the horizontal asymptote), Euler's number, and APPFD, respectively, was used to  
195 model non-linear relationships that did not have a vertex within the tested APPFD range. For  
196 asymptotic models, maximum quantum efficiency (MQE) was derived from the slope of the  
197 linear portion of the models, over the APPFD range of 130 to 200  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ . Further, PPFD<sub>20</sub>  
198 (i.e., a practical LSP) was defined for the asymptotic models as the APPFD level where the  
199 localized slope of the curve fell below 20% of the slope at MQE. The PPFD<sub>20</sub> was used to  
200 indicate that increasing the APPFD beyond this level resulted in minimal further increases in the  
201 respective responses; thus, acting as a proxy for a LI-response efficiency threshold.

202

## 203 **Results**

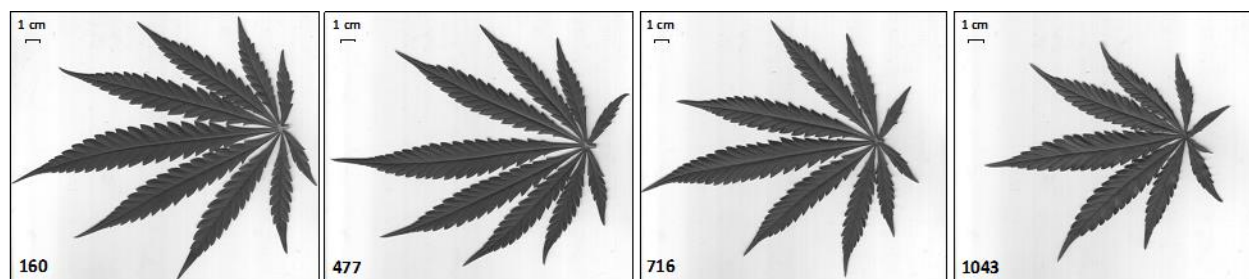
204 The range of APPFDs that plants grew under in this trial was 135 to 1430  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ ,  
205 corresponding to daily light integrals (DLI) ranging from 7.8 to 82  $\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{d}^{-1}$ . Notably, there  
206 were no signs of transplant shock or light stress, even in plants placed under the highest LIs  
207 (which were up to 7 times higher than the LI in the propagation stage). Overall, plants grown  
208 under different LIs exhibited varying architectures (Fig. 2) and leaf morphology (Fig. 3).  
209 Generally, plants grown under high LI had more compact, denser growth, resulting in shorter  
210 plants, greater numbers of potential flowering sites, and higher aboveground biomass. However,  
211 individual measured growth attributes had varying responses to increasing LI. While some  
212 attributes exhibited linear responses to LI, several attributes exhibited saturating responses to  
213 increasing LI, and others had maxima at moderate APPFD levels.

214

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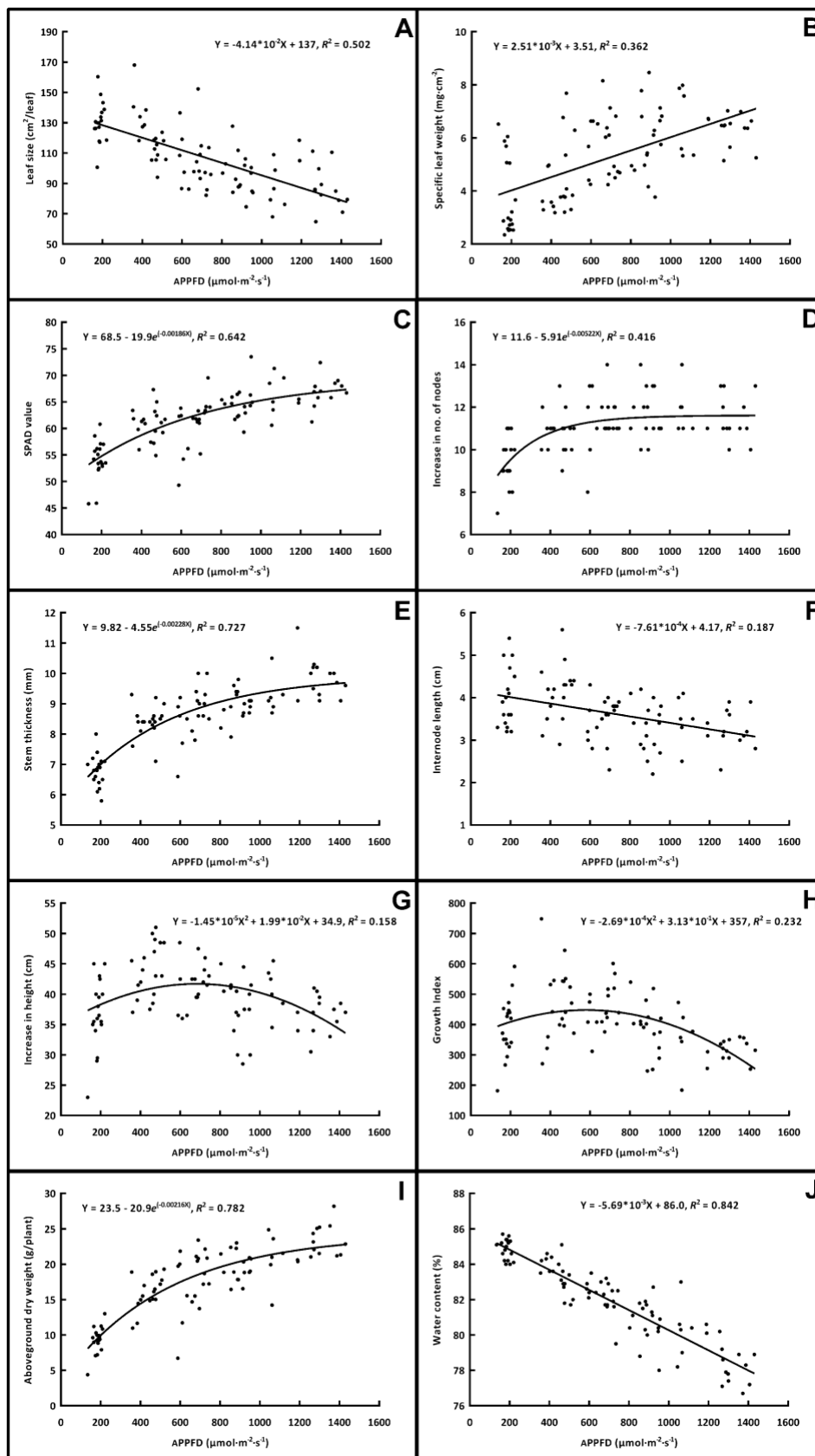


216 Figure 2. Cannabis plants after growing under canopy-level average photosynthetic photon flux  
 217 densities (APPFD) of 179, 478, 713, 917, and 1367  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  with a 16-h photoperiod for 21  
 218 d.  
 219



220 Figure 3. Single cannabis leaves taken at the tenth node after growing under canopy-level  
 221 average photosynthetic photon flux densities (APPFD) of 160, 477, 716, and 1043  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$   
 222 with a 16-h photoperiod for 21 d.  
 223

224 Increasing LI resulted in smaller leaflets with smaller, more numerous serrations along the leaflet  
 225 margins (Fig. 3). Individual leaf size decreased linearly (Fig. 4A) and individual leaf biomass  
 226 increased linearly (data not shown) resulting in an 84% increase in SLW (Fig. 4B) at the  
 227 maximum vs. minimum APPFD. SPAD, an area-based index of chlorophyll content, increased  
 228 asymptotically with increasing LI, and was 24% higher at the PPFD<sub>20</sub> of 1030 vs. 135  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$   
 229  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  (Fig. 4C). The  $\Delta\text{NN}$  and ST also increased asymptotically with increasing LI, with  
 230 respective PPFD<sub>20</sub> of 472 and 870  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ , where  $\Delta\text{NN}$  and ST were 28% and 41% higher  
 231 vs. the minimum APPFD (Fig. 4D and E). The IL decreased linearly with increasing LI, resulting  
 232 in 24% shorter internodes at the maximum vs. minimum APPFD (Fig. 4F). Both  $\Delta\text{H}$  and GI (of  
 233 which final height is a coefficient) had quadratic responses to LI, with maxima at 686 and 582  
 234  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ , respectively (Fig. 4G and H). The maximum  $\Delta\text{H}$  was 12% and 24% higher than at  
 235 the minimum and maximum APPFD, respectively and the maximum GI was 14% and 76%  
 236 higher than at the minimum and maximum APPFD, respectively. Aboveground DW increased  
 237 asymptotically with increasing LI and was 2.6 times higher at the PPFD<sub>20</sub> of 910 vs. the  
 238 minimum APPFD (Fig. 4I) while WC decreased linearly by 9% at maximum vs. minimum  
 239 APPFD (Fig. 4J).



241 Figure 4. Individual leaf area (A) and specific leaf weight of individual leaves taken at the tenth  
242 node (B), leaf chlorophyll content index (i.e., SPAD value) of the youngest fully-expanded leaf  
243 (C), increase in the number of nodes (D), stem thickness (E), internode length (F), increase in  
244 height (G), growth index (H), aboveground dry weight (I), and aboveground plant tissue water  
245 content (J) of vegetative cannabis plants grown for 21 d under average photosynthetic photon  
246 flux densities (APPFD) ranging from 135 to 1430  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ . Each data point represents an  
247 individual plant with its own APPFD.

248

## 249 Discussion

250 In the indoor cannabis production industry, there is considerable variability in the  
251 characterization of what constitutes an optimum structure of clonal plants prior to the initiation  
252 of the (flower-inducing) short-day photoperiod. This is due to myriad factors, including:  
253 genotypic specific growth habit [e.g., indica- vs. sativa-dominant plant structure (Jin et al.,  
254 2021)], size of plants, substrate volume, cropping density, environmental settings (including LI),  
255 and many cultivator-specific plant husbandry practices such as periodic de-leafing and utilization  
256 of plant training (e.g., stakes, trellis-supports, etc.). Notwithstanding these variances, the  
257 underlying goals of the vegetative stage are steadfast: to produce healthy, resilient plants that are  
258 capable of supporting prolific inflorescence biomass production, from both assimilative and  
259 structural perspectives. Therefore, within the aforementioned cultivator-specific constraints,  
260 plants coming out of the vegetative stage should have a general structure that is primed to  
261 optimize future photosynthetic capacity, facilitate airflow within the crop canopy, maximize  
262 potential flowering sites, and bear the weight of the mature inflorescences. These parameters  
263 necessitate plants that have foliar architecture and morphology capable of intercepting and  
264 utilizing the incoming *PAR*, with as many nodes as possible [cannabis flower buds arise from  
265 foliar axils (Spitzer-Rimon et al., 2019)], and that have relatively compact growth (i.e., short  
266 internodes) with robust stems.

267

268 Key plant morphological and physiological attributes have shown varying responses to LI. In a  
269 comprehensive review paper, Poorter et al. (2019) summarized the characteristic responses of  
270 many attributes from myriad herbaceous and woody plants using relative response models over  
271 DLIs up to 50  $\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{d}^{-1}$  (i.e., equivalent to  $\approx 870 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  in the present study).  
272 Extrapolating their findings to the APPFD range in the present study, they found that individual  
273 leaf area decreased by  $\approx 23\%$  and SLW nearly doubled with increasing LI, although there were  
274 no LI treatment effects on area-based chlorophyll content. The LI treatment effects on leaf  
275 morphology were somewhat smaller in Poorter et al. (2019) compared to the present study,  
276 suggesting that cannabis may have relatively high phenotypic plasticity for leaf morphology  
277 adaptations to LI. However, the present study observed a 24% increase in area-based chlorophyll  
278 content, which may indicate that cannabis favours upregulating photosynthetic capacity (i.e.,  
279 maximizing resource utilization) over the common foliar morphology-based adaptive responses  
280 to high light stress. **Clonal cannabis' very high photosynthetic capacity (Chandra et al., 2008;  
281 Rodriguez-Morrison et al., 2021) appears to be present even at the relatively young vegetative  
282 stage (Chandra et al., 2015). In the context of indoor production, the reduction in individual leaf  
283 area with increasing LI may also confer an increase in whole-plant net photosynthesis, since a  
284 greater proportion of the incident *PAR* should penetrate deeper into the canopy through inherent  
285 reductions in self-shading. Moreover, leaves with higher SLW, which is strongly correlated with  
286 leaf thickness (Vile et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 1999), can increase water use efficiency (Yun and**



287 Taylor, 1986), enhance resistance to pathogens (Guest and Brown, 1997), and minimize  
288 mechanical damage.

289  
290 The intensity of *PAR* in the vegetative stage can have major influences on plant structure during  
291 this short but critical stage of production. Though not often reported (because it is a destructive  
292 measurement), aboveground biomass (i.e., DW) is perhaps the single most comprehensive  
293 parameter that relates LI effects on vegetative growth. As it does in floral and non-floral biomass  
294 at optimum inflorescence maturity (Rodriguez-Morrison et al., 2021), DW during the vegetative  
295 stage had a strong linear response to increasing LI. There was almost a 3-fold increase in DW  
296 over the 135 to 1430  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$   $\Delta$ PPFD range in the present study, although 90% of the  
297 maximum increase in DW was attained at an APPFD of only  $\approx 900 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ . Further,  
298 aboveground tissue moisture content decreased linearly with increasing LI (Fig. 4J), which is a  
299 common response to LI (Poorter et al., 2019) that normally confers an increase in mechanical  
300 strength (Shah et al., 2017). Both  $\Delta H$  and GI were maximized at moderate APPFD levels of  $\approx$   
301  $600 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ . While these are generally negative characteristics in the context of vegetative-  
302 stage cannabis, open plant architectures may benefit denser genotypes (e.g., indica-dominant) by  
303 increasing the airflow within the canopy, potentially suppressing foliar pests while making  
304 routine pest monitoring easier (Bakro et al., 2018; Chandra et al., 2017). In contrast, plants were  
305 smaller at  $\approx 900$  vs.  $600 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  but had  $\approx 15\%$  higher DW and  $\approx 6\%$  thicker stems (i.e.,  $\approx$   
306  $13\%$  higher cross-sectional area). Since the number of nodes saturated at relatively low LI, a  
307 canopy-level PPFd target of about  $900 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  may be most appropriate for producing  
308 robust but not overly compact plants while also minimizing lighting-related energy and  
309 infrastructure costs. Although not as common in commercial settings, production facilities that  
310 target more open plant architecture and greater energy conservation may opt for canopy-level  
311 PPFd target of  $\approx 600 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ .

312  
313 Another consideration is the adaptive capacity of vegetative plants to the normal increases in  
314 canopy-level LI as they transition into the flowering phase, which are necessary to maintain the  
315 DLI in conjunction with shortening the photoperiod to induce strong flowering responses –  
316 normally from  $\geq 16$  h to  $\leq 12$  h (Potter, 2014). Therefore, to maintain the same DLI as in the  
317 vegetative phase, the PPFd must be increased by at least 25%. However, cannabis takes time to  
318 acclimate its photosynthetic capacity to higher LIs when transitioning out of the vegetative phase  
319 (Rodriguez-Morrison et al., 2021). Given vegetative cannabis' demonstrated capacity to  
320 proliferate under high LIs, using canopy-level PPFds  $\geq 900 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ , particularly in the  
321 latter stages of the vegetative phase (i.e., after plants have recovered from transplant shock), may  
322 optimize their adaptation to the higher LIs in the flowering phase while also potentially  
323 shortening the vegetative phase.

324  
325 The industry recommendations for LI during cannabis' vegetative stage are variable (e.g.,  
326 Fluence, 2020; Lumigrow, 2017); however, few contemporary recommendations suggest  
327 exposing vegetative cannabis plants to PPFds higher than  $800 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  in indoor production  
328 systems. The current study demonstrates that vegetative cannabis can be exposed to substantially  
329 higher LIs (than commonly-used in the industry) with positive morphological outcomes that can  
330 prime plants for the transition into the flowering phase.

331

332

### 333 **Conclusion**

334 Within the parameters of this investigation, we observed that PPFD levels between 600 and 900  
335  $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$  appeared to achieve an appropriate balance in optimizing key morphological  
336 parameters in vegetative cannabis while minimizing energy use associated with excessively-high  
337 LIs and also considering different production strategies. Although the desired morphological and  
338 growth attributes of vegetative-stage clonal cannabis plants will be subjective to each genotype  
339 and production scenario, the presented LI responses can assist cultivators in optimizing the LI for  
340 their individual production goals; balancing the potential economic returns against elevated input  
341 costs associated with supplying more PAR to their crops.

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