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ENHANCING STRAWBERRY (*Fragaria × ananassa* Duch) GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND YIELD IN A RHIZOSPHERE COOLING SYSTEM BY APPLYING SILICIC ACID AND POTASSIUM BICARBONATE

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In Malaysia, strawberry cultivation is mostly carried out at Cameron Highlands because of the climatic conditions. Therefore, an alternative method of production under lowland conditions, with improved crop performance, is needed. Apparently, silicon fertilizers have been proven to boost crop performance under stressed conditions. Thus, this study aims to determine the effects of silicic acid [bioavailable silicon: $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$] and potassium bicarbonate (KHCO_3) application on the morphological and physiological traits of strawberry cultivars: Festival and Fortuna, using a Rhizosphere Cooling System (RCS) at lowland conditions. $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ and KHCO_3 were applied singly, or combined, as foliar spray or root application at concentrations of 0.25% (v/v) and 0.5% (s/v). The RCS temperature was maintained at $18 \pm 2^\circ\text{C}$ and the plants were monitored for 182 days. Mineral nutrients in the strawberry plant organs were measured using Inductively Coupled Plasma (ICP)-Mass Spectroscopy (ICP-MS) and ICP-Optical Emission Spectroscopy (ICP-OES), whilst fruits sugar content was determined using High-performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC). The results showed that $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ applied singly or combined with KHCO_3 , increased leaf chlorophyll contents, leaf area index, plant biomass, crop growth rates, and net assimilation rate of both cultivars. The yield per plant (YP) of cv. Festival plants given $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ via the roots (78.85g), or KHCO_3 as a foliar spray (80.39g),

differed significantly ($P < 0.05$) from the lowest (28.73g), which was in plants given KHCO_3 (root applications). Root application of Si(OH)_4 resulted in the highest YP of cv. Fortuna (111.85g). This was significantly different ($P < 0.05$) from the YP of the control (67.63g), and plants given treatments without Si(OH)_4 . Although strawberries are Si non-accumulators, more Si was accumulated in the leaves, roots, and crowns of the Si(OH)_4 treated plants; with improved plant macro and micro nutrients uptake. Fruit total soluble solids content and the production of good sugars (sucrose and fructose) were also high in fruits of the Si(OH)_4 treated plants. Overall, the most effective treatment was proven to be root application of 45 mL 0.25% (v/v) Si(OH)_4 . Thus, there is a potential for Si(OH)_4 application to improve soilless strawberry farming and possibly, improve other temperate crops performance under tropical lowland conditions.

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**MENINGKATKAN PERTUMBUHAN, PERKEMBANGAN DAN HASIL
STRAWBERI (*Fragaria × ananassa* Duch) DI DALAM SISTEM
PENYEJUKAN RHIZOSFERA DENGAN MENGGUNAKAN ASID SILICIC
DAN POTASSIUM BICARBONATE**

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Di Malaysia, penanaman strawberi kebanyakannya di Cameron Highlands kerana keadaan persekitaran tanah tinggi. Oleh itu, kaedah alternatif untuk pengeluaran strawberi di kawasan tanah rendah diperlukan. Silikon telah terbukti meningkatkan beberapa prestasi tanaman terutamanya di dalam persekitaran tertekan. Justeru, kajian ini bertujuan untuk menentukan kesan asid silisik [*bioavailable silicon*: $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$] dan kalium bikarbonat (KHCO_3) terhadap morfologi dan fisiologi kultivar (cv.) strawberi: Festival dan Fortuna, di dalam Sistem Penyejukan Rhizosphere (RCS). $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ dan KHCO_3 digunakan secara berasingan dan digabungkan, kedua-duanya dengan semburan daun atau diberikan ke akar pada kepekatan 0.25% (v/v) dan 0.5% (s/v). Suhu RCS dikekalkan pada $18 \pm 2^\circ\text{C}$ dan tumbuhan dipantau selama 182 hari. Nutrien mineral di dalam organ strawberi diukur menggunakan *Inductively Coupled Plasma (ICP)-Mass Spectroscopy* (ICP-MS) dan *ICP-Optical Emission Spectroscopy* (ICP-OES). Kandungan gula buah-buahan diukur menggunakan *High-performance Liquid Chromatography* (HPLC). Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ sahaja dan digabungkan dengan KHCO_3 meningkatkan kandungan klorofil daun, indeks luas daun, biojisim tumbuhan, kadar pertumbuhan tanaman, dan kadar asimilasi kedua-dua kultivar. Terdapat perbezaan yang ketara ($P < 0.05$) di dalam hasil setiap cv. Festival yang diberikan $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ melalui akar (74.74g) dan KHCO_3 melalui daun (80.39g), jika

dibandingkan dengan yang terendah (28.73g) pada tanaman yang diberikan KHCO_3 (aplikasi akar). Aplikasi Si(OH)_4 melalui akar juga menghasilkan hasil buah yang tertinggi bagi setiap cv. Fortuna (111.85g); dan ini adalah berbeza secara ketara ($P < 0.05$) berbanding dengan hasil daripada tanaman kawalan (67.63g), serta tanaman yang tanpa Si(OH)_4 . Walaupun strawberi adalah Si bukan akumulator, lebih banyak Si terkumpul dalam daun, akar dan mahkota tumbuhan yang dirawat Si(OH)_4 ; dengan penyerapan makro dan mikro nutrien tumbuhan yang lebih baik. Pada asasnya, kandungan pepejal larut jumlah buah adalah tinggi di dalam cv. Festival dan cv. Fortuna apabila diberikan Si(OH)_4 melalui akar. Gula semulajadi (gula baik) - sukrosa dan fruktosa, juga dihasilkan lebih banyak di dalam buah strawberi selepas penggunaan Si(OH)_4 . Secara keseluruhan, rawatan yang paling berkesan adalah melalui akar 45 mL 0.25% (v/v) Si(OH)_4 . Oleh itu, aplikasi Si(OH)_4 mempunyai potensi untuk menambah baik penanaman strawberi tanpa tanah dan meningkatkan prestasi tanaman lain yang berada di dalam suhu tanah rendah pamah tropika.