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Seed Production Estimation for Mountain Big Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* ssp. *vaseyana*)

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ABSTRACT

Seed production is an essential component of postdisturbance recovery for mountain big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* Nutt. ssp. *vaseyana* [Rydb.] Beetle; MBS). We tested a method for rapid estimation of MBS seed production using measurements of inflorescence morphology. We measured total stem length, stem length from first branchlet to stem tip, stem diameter, fresh weight, and number of stem branchlets for 750 inflorescences collected from five central and southern Utah sites. Florets per inflorescence were counted to provide an estimate of seed production potential. We used regression analysis to assess associations between morphological traits and potential seed production and evaluated the efficiency and scalability of each measure for field application. Site means for morphological measures varied ~2 to 11-fold while mean number of florets per inflorescence varied ~8-fold. Inflorescence weight was the best predictor of seed production potential ($P < 0.0001$, $r^2 = 0.897$), although correlations for all tested variables were highly significant. Among-site differences in regression equations for this relationship were not significant ($P = 0.226$), suggesting that a single conversion factor may have broad application. However, validation will require additional testing across a broader range of sites and field conditions. Scalable methods for efficient estimation of sagebrush seed production potential, such as those evaluated in this study, could be useful for managers charged with assessing variability in sagebrush community stability.

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Introduction

Historically, the sagebrush biome was the most widespread nonforest vegetation type in temperate North America, covering perhaps 62 million ha (McArthur and Plummer 1978). Compared with historic conditions, current sagebrush ecosystems are reduced in extent, fragmented, degraded, and face multiple threats (Welch 2005), including altered fire regimes (USDI 2015). Present and projected habitat reductions for sagebrush-dependent species, such as greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus* Bonaparte) and pygmy rabbits (*Brachylagus idahoensis* Merriam), have become a priority concern for land managers in the western United States and have provided the impetus for changes in land management practices (Davies et al. 2011;

USDI 2015). Management practices that maintain or improve ecological resilience to disturbance are deemed crucial to preserve sagebrush ecosystems and associated species (Chambers et al. 2014).

The most widespread and common sagebrush is big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* Nutt.; McArthur and Stevens 2004) with three prominent subspecies. Compared with Wyoming big sagebrush (*A. tridentata* ssp. *wyomingensis* Beetle and Young) and basin big sagebrush (*A. tridentata* ssp. *tridentata* Nutt.), mountain big sagebrush (*A. tridentata* Nutt. ssp. *vaseyana* [Rydb.] Beetle; MBS) occurs at relatively high elevations (1000–3200 m) in semiarid regions where soil and climate conditions are relatively cool and wet (Beetle and Young 1965; Winward 1980). Mountain big sagebrush-dominated communities are generally more resilient than those occupied by the other subspecies (Chambers et al. 2014).

Big sagebrush does not root or crown sprout but relies entirely on seed for regeneration. The soil seed bank in sagebrush communities is short-lived, with most seeds germinating within 1 yr of dispersal (Ziegenhagen and Miller 2009). Therefore, recovery following disturbance is dependent on regular replenishment of the seed bank. A better understanding of seed production variability and how that variability regulates seed bank dynamics is needed.

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Seed production in MBS varies among and within sites and across years (Young et al. 1989; Schlaepfer et al. 2014). Factors that affect reproductive growth and output include soil moisture availability (Booth et al. 2003), disease (Welch and Nelson 1995; Takahashi and Huntly 2010), ungulate (Wagstaff and Welch 1991) and insect herbivory (Takahashi and Huntly 2010), plant age, intraspecific and interspecific competition and genetics (Welch 2005 and references therein). Seeds are small (4 000–6 000 per g; Meyer et al., 1988) but may be produced and dispersed in relatively high densities under favorable conditions (Welch 2005).

Methods that can be used to efficiently estimate MBS seed production potential should be useful for predicting postdisturbance recovery and variability in stand resilience through time. However, obtaining accurate production estimates by field-harvesting seeds from representative plants is time-consuming and difficult due to the indeterminate ripening/dispersal nature of the species. Protocols for estimating seed production based on morphological characteristics have been developed for several plant species. For example, Laubhan and Fredrickson (1992) developed a method for estimating seed production of 11 moist-soil plants in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley using characteristics such as inflorescence number, length, base diameter, and plant height. Greene and Johnson (1994) developed a similar method for predicting seed production in trees. In these examples, simple linear regressions were used to assess the relationships between easily measured and rapidly quantifiable morphological characteristics and seed production. Young et al. (1989) suggested that individual plant characteristics could also be used to explain most of the variation in seed production for big sagebrush.

Our objective was to test the utility of various, easily measured morphological traits for estimating MBS seed production potential. We compare the reliability of each trait across multiple sites and consider the practicality of scaling up protocols for making quick, stand-level assessments.

Methods

Study Site Description and Plot Selection

Five MBS-dominated sites were selected in central and south-central Utah (Table 1). Sites were selected with low to moderate livestock use and the presence of a well-developed, native perennial understory where seed production would be representative of a typical intact sagebrush community. Sites had soils ranging from loam or clay-loam in texture.

Sample Collection

We collected sample inflorescences in the fall (September 4–October 15, 2009) when fruits (achenes) were partially developed but before full maturation and dispersal had occurred. Samples were collected from 5–20 plants at each site. Although the ages of plants were not known, samples were collected from mature plants of various sizes. Study plants were selected to include a full range of inflorescence

sizes/lengths available at each site. We cut ~350 inflorescences at Sunrise and ~100 inflorescences at each of the other four sites. Inflorescences were removed from plants at the point of attachment. We weighed individual inflorescences (to nearest gram) in the field using a hanging scale or in the laboratory soon after collection using a digital balance. We opted for wet weight over dry weight because it may be obtained quickly and easily in the field, allowing for more rapid assessment. Samples were placed in zip-lock style bags on ice during transport and stored at ~2–4°C until fully processed. Samples damaged during transport were excluded from the study.

Laboratory Analyses

We measured additional morphological traits in the laboratory, including total inflorescence stem length and stem length from first inflorescence branchlet (minimum length = 2 cm) to stem tip, basal diameter of inflorescence stem, and number of branchlets on each inflorescence. We counted florets or achenes (hereafter referred to as florets) per inflorescence as a measure of potential seed production. If florets had become dislodged, we counted bare pedicels. Seed viability was not considered, as seeds were not universally mature and our interest was in determining an estimate of the potential fecundity, not actual values. We measured a total of 750 samples from all sites.

Statistical Analyses

Means and standard errors for each of the variables measured were calculated using Systat 13.1 (Systat Software Inc. 2009). We compared means across all populations sampled for statistically significant differences using one-way analysis of variance and Tukey pair-wise comparisons using Systat 13.1 (Table 2; Systat Software Inc. 2009). Where necessary, we performed a square-root transformation to normalize the data and decrease the variance for statistical testing.

To test the relationship between each stem characteristic and the number of florets produced per inflorescence, we conducted regression analyses in Systat 13.1 (SYSTAT 2009). We ran separate regressions for each stem characteristic against the number of florets. These regressions were run for each population and for all populations combined. We analyzed confidence bands around regression lines to assess statistical significance of site-level differences in regression results. For all statistical analyses, we used a P value of ≤ 0.05 for significance.

Results

The five sites sampled in this study varied significantly among all morphological traits measured (see Table 2). Proportional differences between maximum and minimum site means ranged from 10.8 for inflorescence weight to 2.2 for length of stem. The range in site averages for each variable include 1) inflorescence weight: 0.172–1.852 g, 2) stem diameter: 0.568–1.639 cm, 3) length of stem: 13.44–28.34 cm, 4) length of stem from first branchlet to stem tip: 8.73–19.36 cm, 5) length of longest branchlet: 2.89–7.59 cm, and 6) number of branchlets: 3–14. Mean number of florets varied from 64–531 per inflorescence (see Table 2). Across all variables, the Coyote Pond population exhibited the smallest values and the Sunrise population exhibited the highest values ($P \leq 0.05$; see Table 2).

All explanatory variables included in this study demonstrated a significant ($P \leq 0.0001$) positive regression relationship with the response variable, total number of florets. The strongest relationship was observed for inflorescence weight ($r^2 = 0.897$, $P = 0.000$; Fig. 1, a) based on the equation $y = 273.52x$. A strong positive relationship was also observed between the number of florets and the length of the longest branchlet ($r^2 = 0.713$, $P = 0.000$; see Fig. 1, b), noted with the equation $y = 95.632x - 182.32$. There were no differences in seed production potential among sites ($P = 0.793$).

Table 1

Coordinate location, elevation, annual precipitation (30-yr average obtained from PRISM) and average precipitation of sampling yr (2009; obtained from PRISM) of each of 5 study locations in Utah, United States, of mountain big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* ssp. *vaseyana*) communities sampled reproductively in this study.

Site name	Latitude (north)	Longitude (west)	Elevation (m)	Precipitation (mm)	Precipitation 2009 (mm)
Sunrise	39.8627	−112.1039	1972	470	394
Big Twist	38.1784	−112.5109	2255	488	413
Milford	38.3696	−112.8440	2140	431	351
Rocky Flat	38.1710	−112.5149	2284	463	413
Coyote Pond	38.0147	−112.9901	1892	345	247

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