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Submission date: 17-Jul-2024 09:54PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 2416146071

File name: 15849-Article_Text-1113904-1-10-20240402.pdf (557.72K)

Word count: 5868
Character count: 31374

AS ISSN: 1412-033X ber 3, March 2024 E-ISSN: 2085-4722 DOI: 10.13057/biodiv/d250329

The suppression of *Ganoderma boninense* on oil palm under mixed planting with taro plants

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Manuscript received: 18 September 2023. Revision accepted: 24 March 2024.

Abstract. Suwandi S, Alesia M, Munandar RP, Fadli R, Suparman S, Irsan C, Musl A. 2024. The suppression of Ganoderma boninense on oil palm under mixed planting with taro plants. Biodiversitas 25: 1143-1150. Basal stem rot, caused by Ganoderma boninense, is highly destructive in monoculture oil palm plantations. This study evaluated Ganoderma boninense infections and oil palm growth in mixed plantings of oil palm seedlings and taro plants (Japanese, Bogor, and Indralaya taro). Ganoderma, colonizing rubber wood blocks, was inoculated into mixed plant, and the infection was compared to single-inoculated oil palm and taro plants. The interference of mixed planting with taro plants on the growth of oil palm seedlings was compared between inoculated and noninoculated mixed and single planting. Ganoderma inoculation caused simultaneous disease (dual-host infection) in mixed oil palm and taro plants. Ganoderma infection was less severe in taro plants compared to oil palm, whether in single or mixed planting. Over six months, oil palm root necrosis and disease index were reduced by 82% to 96% and 65% to 71%, respectively, while no significant effect was observed at nine months. The decay of Ganoderma-colonized wood improved by 44.1% to 84.0% in mixed planting, with no significant impact on mycelium viability. Taro plants did not inhibit oil palm growth, including plant height, leaf area, and relative growth rate of primary root length, in both the presence and the absence of Ganoderma infection. This study highlights the potential of mixed planting with taro to reduce Ganoderma disease in oil palm.

Keywords: Dual-host infection, Ganoderma, intercrop, oil palm, taro plant



Basal stem rot (BSR), caused by polypore fungi Ganoderma boninense Pat. and other Ganoderma spp., is the most significant disease affecting oil palm plantations in Southeast Asia (Pilotti 2005; Midot et al. 2019; Paterson 2023). The fungi infect and cause the decay of roots, bole, and trunk tissue, preventing water and nutrient translocation toward the upper portion of oil palm trees. Diseased palm shows the external symptoms of spear leaves not opening, frond yellowing and wilting, and eventually collapse (Khoo and Chong 2023). BSR infections can lead to mass palm mortality and reduced oil palm yields by up to 68% production in severely affected plantations (Ibrahim et al. 2020; Kamu et al. 2021). In certain inland plantations of North Sumatra, BSR killed up to 67% of oil palm trees within 25 planting years (Riyanto et al. 2020). Meanwhile, in a peatland oil palm plantation in Sumatra, Ganoderma disease killed 30% to 54% of the palm stand. It resulted in an estimated yield reduction of 0.5 to 0.7 t/ha/yr over 14 planting year 4 Pujianto et al. 2016). Recent extensive disease surveillance of 37,359.81 ha of smallholder plantations in Malaysia reported that BSR disease had impacted 6.08% to 27.7% of oil palm in different soil types, including inland, coastal, peat, and lateritic areas (Ibrahim et al. 2020).

Controlling BSR is technically challenging due to the fungal pathogen's survival strategy. Ganoderma boninense forms melanized compact mycelia on infected roots or inside the basal stem, protecting against chemical and biological degradation and enabling the fungus to survive for extended periods (Rees et al. 2009). The propagules of the BSR pathogen colonize the diseased oil palm roots and survive up to four years (Eris et al. 2020). Infested plantations may harbor a multitude of infected roots in the soil, with even the tiniest infected root piece serving as an infective inoculum (Rees et al. 2007). Root contact with infected debris buried in the soil during replanting is recognized as the primary spreading source of infection (Naidu et al. 2017). The abundance of inoculum sources in recent plantings has contributed to increased disease across plant generations (Priwiratama et al. 2020).

Oil palm, a perennial tree, creates a complex habitat with abundant understory vegetation, even in standard monoculture cropping practices of large-scale plantations; herbaceous weeds dominate the understory vegetation of oil palm (Luke et al. 2019). Although considered unintended vegetation, the understory herbaceous plants in oil palm plantations can benefit both belowground and aboveground biodiversity, including improving soil biodiversity (Ashton-Butt et al. 2018) and supporting aboveground invertebrate communities (Ashraf et al. 2018; Spear et al. 2018). Smallholders often practice mixed planting by intercropping oil palm with annual food and cash crops, such as rice, maize, soybean, and cassava, or with perennial herbaceous crops like pineapple, banana, yam, and taro, especially during the first five years before the harvest period (Teuscher et al. 2016). Intercropping oil palm with food and cash

crops such as taro brings mutual economic and environmental benefits (Khasanah et al. 2020).

Moreover, intercropping practices can decrease weed, insect, and disease pressure (Huss et al. 2022). Boudreau (2013) showed that intercropping reduced rot and wilt diseases by 86% in 14 studies comparing monocrops and intercrops. Stomph et al. (2020) reported a similar estimate of 78.6% crop protection benefits from intercropping in 196 cases compared to monocropping. The disease control benefits of intercropping oil palm with taro plants regarding their impact on BSR and the causal pathogen's survival are unknown. Taro plants have a perennial lifecycle, produce corms, and are well-suited for understory intercropping with oil palm. Their extensive root system may potentially influence the survival and growth of soil pathogens. Previous studies have demonstrated the suppression effects of taro plants against the polypore fungal pathogen Rigidoporus microporus, which causes white root rot in rubber trees. The viability and growth of rhizomorphcolonized rubber wood blocks (RWB) were suppressed after the RWB blocks were buried for 90 days in soil containing taro plants (Yulianti et al. 2017). Therefore, this research aimed to evaluate Ganoderma boninense infections and oil palm growth in a mixed planting of oil palm seedlings and taro plants of Japanese, Bogor, and Indralaya taro species.

1 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Plant materials and planting system

Germinating oil palm seeds (D×P cross from t1 Indonesian Oil Palm Research Institute) were pre-grown in trays containing sand media for three months until they had three leaves before being subjected to the mixed cropping treatment. Three cultivars of taro plants (Colocasia esculenta (L.) Schott) were tested, namely Japanese taro (previously called Colocasia esculenta var. antiquorum (Schott) F.T.Hubb. & Rehder), Bogor and Indralaya taro (previously called Colocasia esculenta var. esculenta (L.) Schott). The plants were generated from corms collected from Bogor, West Java, and Indralaya, South Sumatra local markets. The sprouting corms were pre-grown in a sand medium for three months to obtain homogeneous plants.

Ganoderma inoculation was examined in three planting systems: (i) mixed planting between oil palm seedlings with one of three taro plants, (ii) single planting of oil palm seedlings, and (iii) single planting of taro plants. Two additional planting systems, identical to (i) and (ii) but without pathogen inoculation, were implemented to evaluate the impact of inoculation and mixed planting on oil palm growth. In total, 15 planting systems were implemented, each consisting of 15 plants as replication; the experiment was replicated once. The plants were grown in a 1:1 mixture of field soil and sand, with a total volume of five liters, in a black polyethylene bag (polybag). For mixed planting, the plants were spaced for 10 cm. The polybags were arranged at 90 cm spacing under a 25% paranet, and the plants received monthly fertilization with 0.5% NPK 16-16-16 fertilizer.

Plant inoculation and disease evaluation

The study used a highly aggressive isolate of G. boninense (isolate GbA from BSR oil palm in West Sumatra) as the inoculum, prepared as two-month-old mycelium colonizing a 12×5×5-cm RWB (Suwandi et al. 2023). Plants were inoculated by binding a wounded primary root (10 cm long) with a single RWB using parafilm, following Rees et al. (2007). A single RWB was inoculated onto two mixed plants (dual-host inoculation) for mixed planting. Both RWB and inoculated roots were buried five cm below the soil surface. Plants were uprooted at three, six-, and nine-months post-inoculation (MPI) to evaluate root necrosis and disease severity. Root necrosis, indicated by discolored and rotted main roots, was measured to evaluate the extent of root infection. Root infec n was confirmed by directly plating necrotic roots on a Ganoderma-selective medium (GSM) (Ariffin and Idris 1992). Each plant replication was assessed for Ganoderma colonization by examining five replicate roots. Disease index was recorded based on Breton et al.'s (2006) rating, with an addition root rot rating: (0) healthy, (1) rotting on main roots, (2) up to 20% rotting of bole tissues, (3) from 20% to 50% internal rotting, (4) over 50% internal rotting, and (5) total rotting of bole tissues along with total desiccation of the plant.

Inoculum potential and survival

The decay of *Ganoderma*-colonized RWB and mycelial viability were measured to assess the inoculum potential d pathogen survival in response to mixed planting. RWB decay was calculated as the percentage of dry weight loss after nine months of inoculation treatment. *Ganoderma* mycelia viability on RWB was assessed as the percentage of colonized wood fragments from which the mycelia emerged on GSM, with 20 randomly cut wood fragments examined for each RWB.

Growth of oil palm

Plant height, leaf area, and length of main roots were recorded to assess the growth interference of mixed planting with taro plants on oil palm seedlings. Leaf area was measured monthly and predicted using the formula 0.55 × length × width of the leaf blade (Gromikora et al. 2014). Plants were uprooted every three months, and the total length of the main roots was measured using a measuring tape. The relative growth rate of the main roots was calculated at six and nine MPI using the mean natural logarithm-transformed root length (Hoffmann and Poorter 2002).

Data analyses

Data analysis was conducted using R version 4.2.2 (The R Foundation for Statistical Computing). The normal distribution of the data was tested with the Shapiro-Wilk test, and variance homogeneity was checked with Levene's test. Logarithmic transformation was applied to homogenize the variance for the length of root necrosis, which was then subjected to one-way analyses of variance. Mean root necrosis length and disease index were compared using Tukey's honest significance test (HSD test). The mean RWB dry weight loss and percentage of mycelium survival

were compared to the control treatment of single oil palm inoculation using the Dunnett test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Effects on Plant Disease

Root infection of *G. boninense* was determined and confirmed on all inoculated plant species, whether under single or mixed planting, at one MPI. Infected roots exhibited darkening and soft rot. The infection initiated from the inoculation site of roots and extended towards the basal stem for oil palm and the corm for taro plants. In single oil palm planting, *Ganoderma* infection led to complete BSR and plant death at six MPI, with basidiocarp formation on the dead plant. On taro plants, the infection expanded from the roots towards the corm, resulting in corm soft rot or dry rot (Figure 1). Root and corm infections were confirmed by the growth of *G. boninense* mycelium out of diseased plant tissues on GSM (Figure 1). Infection on Indralaya taro caused complete corm rotting

and plant mortality under mixed planting with oil palm nine months after inoculation.

Under mixed planting, Ganoderma inoculation resulted in simultaneous disease in both oil palm and taro plants, known as dual-host infection. At three MPI, there was no significant difference (P>0.05) between oil palm and taro plants in the root length necrosis and disease severity, whether in single or mixed planting. However, by six MPI, the planting system significantly affected oil palm's root necrosis and disease severity. In mixed planting with Japanese taro, Bogor taro, and Indralaya taro, root necrosis of oil palm was reduced by 96%, 91%, and 82%, respectively, compared to single planting. This lower root infection in mixed planting also led to a lower disease index. Mixed planting with Japanese taro, Bogor taro, and Indralaya taro resulted in a disease index of 71%, 71%, and 65% lower than in single planting. In contrast, mixed planting did not influence the disease severity of taro plants, as the length of root necrosis and disease severity did not significantly differ between single and mixed planting. By six MPI, Ganoderma inoculations caused less root necrosis and disease severity in taro plants than in oil palm.

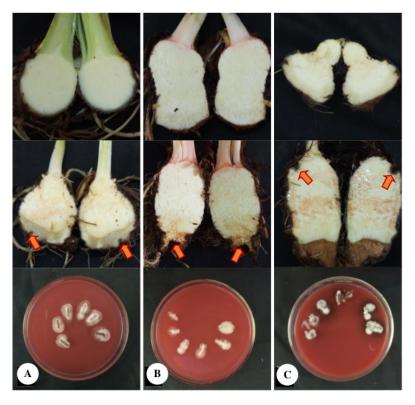


Figure 1. Tuber rots of taros (indicated by arrows) six months after *Ganoderma boninense* inoculation in mixed planting of oil palm and taros plants (middle row) compared to healthy, uninfected tubers (top row): A. Japanese taro, B. Bogor taro, C. Indralaya taro, and mycelium of *G. boninense* growing out of rotted tissues of taros root and tuber on GSM (bottom row A, B and C)

However, by nine MPI, the root necrosis and disease severity of oil palm under mixed planting markedly increased and became non-significantly different from disease under single planting. There was no reduction in oil palm root necrosis and disease severity due to taro plants at nine MPI. Similarly, disease development in taro plants under mixed planting was prominent at nine MPI, with the most severe impact observed in Indralaya taro (Figure 2).

Effects on pathogen inoculum potential and survival

The inoculum potential of *G. boninense* was assessed at nine MPI by measuring the dry weight reduction of RWB due to the fungus's decaying activity. *Ganoderma*-colonized RWB exhibited a dry weight loss of 68% (an increase of

56% relative to single planting) and 65% (an increase of 47% relative to single planting) in mixed planting with Bogor and Indralaya taro, respectively. A single inoculation of Japanese or Indralaya taro also resulted in RWB decay of 64% (an increase of 44% relative to single planting) and 81% (an increase of 84% relative to single planting), respectively (Figure 3). In contrast to the higher RWB decay, dual-host inoculation on oil palm and taro plants had a lesser effect on the survival of *G. boninense* mycelia colonizing RWB (Figure 3). The RWB colonized by *Ganoderma* mycelia, which was used to inoculate the tested plants, remained over 81% viable after being buried for nine months.

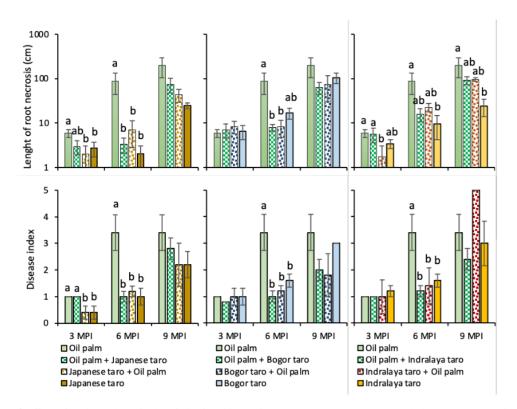


Figure 2. Effects of single or mixed planting of oil palm with taro plants (Japanese taro, Bogor taro, or Indralaya Taro) on Ganoderma boninense infection at three, six, and nine MPI (month post-inoculation) on single-host or dual-host plants. The phic bars with a pattern fill are for plants with mixed planting, and the graphic bar describes the mean for the first mentioned plant. Error bars denote standard error of means (SEM). For each plant species and month, values followed by different letters are significantly different (HSD test)

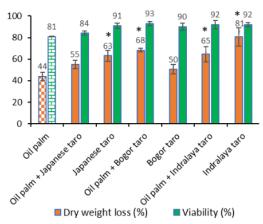


Figure 3. Effects of single or mixed planting of oil palm with taro plants (Japanese taro, Bogor taro, or Indralaya Taro) on the decay of *Ganoderma boninense*-colonized rubber wood block and pathogen viability after burial for nine months. An asterisk (*) denotes a significant difference (Dunnett test) from the respective mean values of oil palm single planting for each dry weight loss and viability.

Effects on oil palm growth

Mixed planting of oil palm seedlings with Japanese or Indralaya taro for ten months (nine M11) in a small volume of soil (five liters) did not affect oil palm growth, as indicated by plant leight (Figure 4A) and leaf area (Figure 4B). Taro plants did not interfere with oil palm growth, whether inoculated with G. boninense (+Gb) or not inoculated (-Gb). For nixed planting with Bogor taro, a notable inhibition of plant height and leaf area in the inoculated oil palm was observed at eight and nine MPI. Oil palm and taro plants showed rapid primary root growth, with a significantly higher relative growth rate (RGR) of primary root length from three to six MPI compared to six to nine MPI. Oil palm primary root growth was unaffected by mixed planting for nine MPI, with no significant difference in RGR values between mixed and single planting. However, taro plants exhibited different patterns of primary root growth. Mixed planting did not impact taro primary root growth during the first six MPIs; a variation in primary root growth was observed. From six to nine MPI, Japanese taro displayed a higher RGR of primary root length in mixed planting, while Indralaya taro showed marked inhibition of root growth in mixed planting compared to single planting (Figure 5).

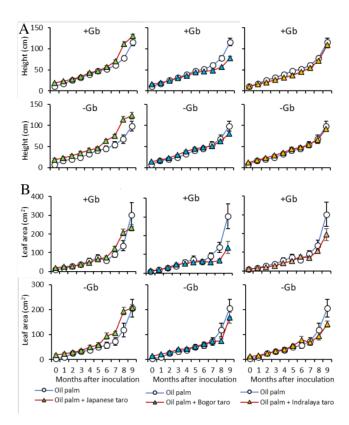


Figure 4. Effects of single or mixed planting with taro plants (Japanese taro, Bogor taro, or Indralaya Taro) on plant height (A) and leaf area (B) of Ganoderma boninense-inoculated oil palm (+ Gb) and noninoculated oil palm (- Gb)

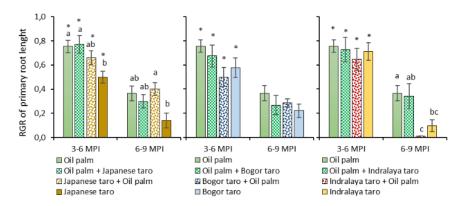


Figure 5. The relative growth rate (RGR) of the primary root length of oil palm and taro plants (Japanese taro, Bogor taro, or Indralaya Taro) under single or mixed planting and inoculated with *Ganoderma boninense*. Graphic bars with a patter ill represent plants in mixed planting, with the graphic bar indicating the mean for the first mentioned plant. Error bars indicate the standard error of means iEM). For each plant species and month, values followed by different letters are significantly different (HSD test). An asterisk (*) denotes a significant difference between the values at three to six MPI and the respective bar at six to nine MPI (months post-inoculation), according to the Welch t-test

Discussion

Ganoderma boninense was artificially inoculated onto various taro plants, including Japanese, Bogor, and Indralaya taro, resulting in infection and rot in their roots and tubers. The presence of G. boninense mycelium was consistently reisolated from the diseased root and tuber tissue, confirming its pathogenicity taro plants. This finding aligns with the knowledge that Ganoderma spp. has a wide range of host plants, all woody plants (Loyd et al. 2018). Previous studies also demonstrated that G. boninense could cause infection in non-woody plants such as ginger, galangal, Java turmeric (Suwandi et al. 2023), and water yam (Fadli et al. 2023). The taro plant infection confirms the pathogen's cosmopolitan nature in using diverse lignin sources, from herbaceous to woody plants. Among the taro varieties tested, Japanese and Bogor taro showed greater resistance to pathogen infection, with root and tuber rot developing more slowly and not leading to plant mortality. Conversely, Indralaya taro proved to be more susceptible to Ganoderma infection, with extensive tuber rot development affecting all tubers, although the plant survived.

Inoculation of a single inoculum of *G. boninense* 1 th two different plant species (dual-host inoculation) in a mixed planting of oil palm and taro plants generated multiple host infections on all mixed plants. All taro plants resisted *G. boninense* infection during rapid root growth between three and six MPI. However, pathogen infection increased from six to nine MPI in the post-corm maturity stages with reduced root growth rates. Indralaya taro showed greater vulnerability in mixed planting, showing the highest disease index and total tuber decay. Indralaya taro matured more quickly than the other two taro varieties, as evidenced by a decline in root growth after six MPI. Taro plants are suggested to be susceptible to *Ganoderma* infection during declining root growth. Oil palm responded

to different severities under single inoculation than dual inoculation, particularly at six MPI. A marked reduction in disease in oil palm was noticed when mixed planted with an active growing taro plant, whereas the disease was less affected when the taro reached the susceptible stage (postcorm maturity). During extensive root growth, taro plants may secrete allelochemicals that directly influence the growth of Ganoderma mycelium. The root exudate from a ten-day-old axenic culture of Xanthosoma sagittifolium taro displayed an antifungal effect on G. boninense mycelium (Suwandi et al. 2022). Taro plants secrete ro 5 exudates rich in organic acids, including oxalic acid, lactic acid, benzoic acid, m-hydroxybenzoic acid, p-hydroxybenzoic acid, vanillic acid, succinic acid, and adipic acid (Ma and Miyasaka 1998; Asao et al. 2003). Some of these acids, like benzoic acid, have demonstrated antifungal properties against G. boninense in vitro. The application of benzoic acid reduced pathogen colonization in infected oil palms (Chong et al. 2019). The secretion of an antifungal allelochemical by taro likely contributes to the resistance response in mixed planted oil palm and taro against Ganoderma at six MPI. This secretion may decrease as taro plants reach post-corm maturity, but the taro corms remain susceptible to Ganoderma. The present study acknowledges certain limitations that should be considered in interpreting the results. Firstly, the relatively short duration of the experiment, spanning nine months, provides insights into the early impact of mixed planting but may not capture the long-term dynamics of G. boninense infections in oil palmtaro intercropping systems. Additionally, using artificial inoculation with a highly aggressive isolate of G. boninense, while necessary for controlled experimentation, may not fully replicate the complex natural conditions of disease spread in the field. Despite these limitations, our research provides valuable insights into the early stages of disease

suppression through mixed planting, and future studies with extended durations and more nuanced inoculation methods can contribute to a greater understanding of these dynamics.

Mixed cropping can increase host diversity, reducing disease pressure through the inoculum dilution mechanism (Zhu and Morel 2019; Villegas-Fernández et al. 2023). However, this mechanism had a minor effect on *Ganoderma* disease reduction, as the disease increased in susceptible mixed planting interactions. Disease reduction in *Ganoderma*-inoculated oil palm was most noticeable during the resistant response of taro plants, as observed in a mixed planting with rhizomatous species like Java curcumin and ginger. Disease suppression was not observed in mixed planting with the susceptible galangal (Suwandi et al. 2023). This highlights the importance of partner plant resistance responses in *Ganoderma* disease suppression in mixed planting.

Reports on the impact of intercropping with taro on the disease of the main crops have been limited, with some concerns that it might increase disease severity. A sixmonth on-farm trial intercropping black pepper with Colocasia taro suggested reduced Phytophthora foot rot disease (Silbanus and Raynor 1993). In another study, intercropping with taro (Colocasia esculenta) was linked to disease reduction in Falcataria moluccana, leading to higher forest tree survival rates (Nandini et al. 2023). Additionally, an artificial inoculation pot trial found that mixed planting with Xanthosoma taro suppressed mycelial growth of Rigidoporus microporus and reduced rubber seedling taproot disease (Yulianti et al. 2017).

The burial of Ganoderma-colonized RWB, whether in single taro plants or mixed taro and oil palm plantings, significantly impacted RWB decay. After 90 days of planting with taro, Ganoderma-colonized wood decayed by 64% to 81%, in contrast to the 44% decay observed in single oil palm planting. This increased wood decay surpassed the 58%-to-79% decay induced by 120 days of inoculation with white-rot hymenomycetes reported by Naidu et al. (2017). The highest RWB decay occurred in the inoculated susceptible Indralaya taro. Increased RWB decay was also observed in mixed oil palm plantings with other susceptible hosts, such as galangal (Suwandi et al. 2023) and water yam (Dioscorea alata) (Fadli et al. 2023). Ganoderma boninense degrades RWB, a lignin and cellulose-rich food base crucial for initiating oil palm infection (Rees et al. 2007). The pathogen likely requires increased wood decomposition activity for severe infection initiation in susceptible hosts. The mechanism underlying how taro plants enhance the decomposition of Ganoderma-colonized wood requires further study. However, the increased RWB decay did not lead to reduced mycelial viability. Even after being buried under taro plants for nine months, the viability of Ganoderma mycelia in RWB remained unaffected. Although they remained viable, the pathogen's inoculum potential might significantly reduce due to wood decay; Ganoderma requires at least nine cm3 of wood as a food base to initiate effective infection (Rees et al. 2007). The potential of taro plants in enhancing Ganoderma-colonized

wood decay suggests its application as a rotation crop for inoculum removal during oil palm replanting.

Taro plants have consistently not shown allelopathic inhibition on oil palm growth. There is no significant difference in leaf area or height between noninoculated oil palm plants in single and mixed planting for eight months after planting. However, growth inhibition was observed after nine months (eight MPI) of planting with Bogor taro and inoculated with G. boninense, likely due to space limitations. Our previous study also observed weak competition in oil palm seedlings mixed with X. sagittifolium taro and inoculated with G. boninense (Rahmadhani et al. 2020). Numerous reports indicate that intercropping with taro plants in an appropriate population does not harm the growth and yield of the main crop (Kazi et al. 2017; Winara et al. 2022; Nandini et al. 2023). The findings from our study emphasize the beneficial use of mixed planting with taro plants in managing Ganoderma BSR and support the need for a long-term field study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was financially supported by a Basic Research Grant (059/E5/PG.02.00.PL/2023 and 0193.05/UN9.3.1/PL/2023) from the Directorate for Research and Community Service, Ministry of Culture, Research and Technology, the Republic of Indonesia.

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