

Biochar – a Panacea for Agriculture or Just Carbon?

Elvir Tenic*, Rishikesh Ghogare* and Amit Dhingra^{1,§}

1 Affiliation 1; elvir.tenic@wsu.edu, Department of Horticulture, Washington State University, Pullman, WA USA

2 Affiliation 2; rishikesh.ghogare@wsu.edu, Department of Horticulture, Washington State University, Pullman, WA USA

* These authors contributed equally to this work

§ Correspondence: adhingra@wsu.edu; Department of Horticulture, Washington State University, Pullman, WA USA

Abstract: The sustainable production of food faces formidable challenges. Foremost is the availability of arable soils, which have been ravaged by the overuse of fertilizers and detrimental soil management techniques. As such, maintenance of soil quality, and reclamation of marginal soils, has become an increasingly important endeavor. Recently, there has been emerging interest in the use of biochar, a carbon rich, porous material thought to improve various aspects of soil performance. Biochar (BC) is produced through the thermochemical decomposition of organic matter at high temperature in an oxygen limited environment, in a process known as pyrolysis. Importantly, the source of organic material, or ‘feedstock,’ used in this process and different parameters of pyrolysis, especially temperature, determine the chemical and physical properties of biochar. Incorporation of BC impacts soil-water relations, tillth and nutrient status, pH, soil organic matter (SOM), and microbial activity. Soil amendment with BC has been shown to have an overall positive impact on soil health and crop productivity; however, initial soil properties need to be considered prior to the application of BC. There is an urgent need to understand the effects of long-term field application of BC and how it influences the soil microcosm. This knowledge will facilitate predictable enhancement of crop productivity and meaningful carbon sequestration.

Abbreviations: BC - biochar, SOM - soil organic matter, GHG – greenhouse gas, CEC - cation exchange capacity, FTIR - Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy, SBBC – sugarcane bagasse biochar, C – carbon, N- nitrogen, P- phosphorous, K – potassium, Ca – calcium, Mg – magnesium, Fe – iron, Na – sodium, Si – silicon, Cd – cadmium, Cu – copper, Ni – nickel, Pb – lead, Zn - zinc

Keywords: agronomy; sustainability; organic fertilizer; crop productivity; soil acidification; soil organic matter; pyrolysis; microbial activity

1. Introduction

“If you desire peace, cultivate justice, but at the same time cultivate the fields to produce more bread; otherwise there will be no peace” Norman Borlaug, Oslo, Norway, December 11, 1970. Nobel lecture.

What was prevalent in the 1960s holds true yet again—the world stands at a threshold where the availability of food is threatened, albeit for reasons different than six decades ago. The changing climate, deteriorating land and water conditions, and loss of biodiversity present unprecedented challenges for humankind [1]. At present, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are increasing rapidly, with carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels rising more than 3% annually since the 2000s. These GHG discharges have a drastic impact on the climate, despite global efforts to reduce the emissions over the last few

decades [2]. As a step towards reducing GHG emissions, more than 100 countries signed and ratified the Paris Climate Agreement, aiming to limit the increase in global temperature to 1.5-2°C over the next 30 years [3]. Achievement of this target requires swift adoption of carbon-neutral and carbon-negative technologies to limit the global GHG emissions to approximately 9.8 gigatons of carbon [4,5]. Several approaches are being considered for CO₂ removal from the atmosphere, such as the adoption of bioenergy, direct carbon capture, afforestation and reforestation, modification of agricultural practices, use of bioenergy, and direct infusion of recalcitrant carbon into the soil using biochar (BC) [6–9]. Longer-term sequestration of carbon into the soil using biochar is one of the potential carbon-negative approaches. As soils can store twice as much carbon compared to atmospheric reserves and for longer periods, it has been hypothesized that increasing global soil organic matter stocks by 4 per 1000 (or 0.4%) per year in agricultural land can offset 30% of global greenhouse emission [4].

The agricultural and industrial revolutions, combined with unsustainable farming practices, have significantly affected global soil health. This is mainly a consequence of the type of fertilizer used in crop production. Earlier practices of using manure and compost replenished the soil organic matter (SOM) on a regular basis. However, the use of petroleum-derived chemical fertilizers is detrimental to SOM as they enhance accumulation of salt and reduce microbial diversity. Fertilizers derived from the Haber-Bosch process contribute to more than 1% of total global CO₂ emissions [10,11]. Soil health has further declined with gradual acidification of arable lands, negatively affecting crop yields throughout the world. While the use of compost and manure to enhance and maintain SOM is an option, it presents limitations due to accumulation of heavy metals, increased pathogen pressure, and leaching of excess nutrients into waterways leading to eutrophication.

There is a long history of enriching soils with recalcitrant carbon practiced by indigenous farmers in different parts of the world. Black-earth-like anthropogenic soils known as 'Terra Preta' have been discovered in several regions of South America and Japan. These dark soils were amended with charcoal-like substances, generally referred to as biochar (BC), which conferred enhanced fertility to the soil [12,13]. Chemical analysis revealed that the BC-treated areas contained 70-times more carbon than the surrounding soils, demonstrating its long half-life [14]. The enhanced fertility of these soils most likely resulted from increased SOM, higher pH, higher water holding capacity, and high nutrient holding capacity [14–16]. Due to the potential advantages of 'Terra Preta,' several global efforts are afoot to recreate such soils. Biochar represents an organic soil amendment that improves soil quality for agricultural production [17].

This review discusses and summarizes the various impacts biochar has on soil parameters and crop productivity. The discussion concludes with a summary of some of the challenges that need to be addressed for widespread use of biochar in agriculture.

2. Biochar and Soil

2.1. Biochar

Biochar (BC) is a carbon (C)-rich, porous material produced during the process of pyrolysis, which involves thermochemical decomposition of organic matter in an oxygen limited environment. Any feedstock, such as forest residue, agricultural byproducts and waste biomass can be converted into liquid fuels, gasses, and BC. The properties and yields of BC are highly variable depending on the rate of pyrolysis (fast/slow), feedstock, pyrolysis temperature, and retention time. Generally, slow pyrolysis with a heating rate of 5 – 20°C per minute with higher residence time results in higher BC

yield [18,19]. Fast pyrolysis with higher heating rate (>100 °C/min) and lower residence time results in higher yield of liquid fuel and reduced BC output [20]. Due to the complex nature of pyrolysis and diversity of feedstock, the final chemical and physical properties of BC vary. For example, a recent meta-analysis concluded that BC produced at higher temperature (600°C - 699°C) had a higher pH ~9 compared to BC produced at lower temperatures (300°C - 399°C) with pH ~5 [21]. This observation was supported by another recent meta-analysis [22]. The higher reaction temperatures reduce the amount of aliphatic carbons, oxygenated functional groups, cation exchange capacity (CEC), and total content of N, H, and O. However, higher temperature of production resulted in increased pH, amount of C fixed, total ash content, total C, and surface area of BC [21,23,24]. Ultimately the bulk property and surface characteristics of any BC is determined by the feedstock source along with the pyrolysis parameters [19,25]. There remains a critical need to understand the characteristics of BCs produced from different feedstock, pyrolysis parameters, and the resulting relative impact on soil. In the following sections, recent research on BCs has been collated and the effects of various BC regimens on soil physical properties, soil-water relations, soil organic matter, microbial activity, soil tilth and nutrient status, pH, crop productivity, biotic and abiotic stresses have been discussed.

2.2. Impact of Biochar on Soil

2.2.1. Physical Properties

Physical properties of soil, such as bulk density, porosity, and water retention are important variables that impact plant growth and development. Human intervention in agricultural practices causes soil compaction, which is one of the key factors affecting plant growth [26]. Soil compaction above 1.7g cm⁻³ results in restricted root growth and limits access to water and nutrients [27]. As a consequence, yields of many crops such as soybean and corn have been shown to be negatively impacted [28,29]. Amending soils with biochar increases soil porosity while decreasing soil bulk density, which aids in transport of water, nutrients, and gases. These alterations encourage root formation and increased microbial respiration [22].

A meta-analysis reported that the addition of BC to soil reduced bulk density of the soil by an average of 7.6% and increased its water holding capacity and porosity by 15.1% and 8.4%, respectively [30]. Similar results were reported in another meta-analysis where the average bulk density was decreased by 12% [31]. Fifteen of the 17 studies conducted in 2019 reported that biochar effectively reduced soil bulk density and increased porosity and available water content (Table 1). However, there were two studies that reported either no effect on bulk density after addition of BC [32] or an insignificant decrease [33]. It was also observed that larger average BC particle size was more effective in reducing bulk density of sandy loam soil than sandy soil [34]. In case of sandy soil, bulk density significantly decreased and water holding capacity was significantly increased with addition of BC with small particle size [34]. A majority of the recent studies used biochar produced from agricultural residue and woody residue. Generally, a positive effect on the physical properties of soil was reported (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected studies summarizing the impact of biochar on the physical properties of soil.

Exp. type	BC feedstock	Pyrolysis temperature (°C)	Soil type	Bulk density	Available water content	Total porosity	Country	Reference
Lab	Agricultural residues	450	Loamy	Slightly decreased	Increased	Increased	Brazil	[33]
			Sandy	Slightly decreased	Increased	Increased		
Lab	Woody residues	620	Sandy loam	Decreased	Increased	N/A	Portugal	[34]
			Sandy	Decreased	Increased			
Field	N/A	N/A	N/A	Decreased	Increased	Increased	Pakistan	[35]
Field	Sewage sludge	700-850	Loamy sand	Decreased	N/A	N/A	China	[36]
Lab	Agricultural residues	450	Sandy loam	Decreased	No effect	Increased	Brazil	[37]
			Clay loam	Decreased	Increased	Increased		
Field	Agricultural residues	200-600	Loam sand	Decreased	N/A	Increased	Iran	[38]
Field	Agricultural residues	360	Sandy loam	Decreased	N/A	Increased	China	[39]
Lab	Agricultural residues	300 & 700	Desert	Decreased	Increased	Increased	China	[40]
Field	Woody residues	N/A	N/A	Decreased	Increased	Increased	Kenya	[41]
Lab	Agricultural residues	350-650	Sandy	Decreased	Increased	N/A	UAE	[42]
Lab	Woody residues	350	Sandy loam	Decreased	Increased	Increased	Brazil	[43]
Field	Woody residues	500	Silt loam	Decreased	Increased	Increased	USA	[44]
Field	Agricultural residues	550-600	Clay loam	Decreased	N/A	Increased	China	[45]
Yard	Agricultural residues	400-450	Planoso l	Decreased	Increased	Increased	China	[46]
Field	Agricultural residues	550	Haplic Luvisol	Decreased	Increased	Increased	Slovakia	[47]
Lab	Forest residue	450	Desert sandy	Decreased	Increased	Increased	UAE	[48]
Field	Agricultural residues	550	Sandy clay loam	No difference	Increased	Increased	Ghana	[32]

Field	Woody residues	580	Luvisol	Decreased	Increased	Increased	Nigeria	[49]
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A most recent meta-analysis showed an average increase in soil porosity by 6.27%, decrease in bulk density by 7.47%, and increase in water holding capacity by 9.82% [50]. However, biochar derived from softwood and walnut shell did not affect soil porosity or water retention over a period of six years in silty clay soil. It was suggested the effect on soil porosity and water retention was temporary until the pores of biochar were occluded with clay or soil organic matter (SOM) [51]. Woody biomass derived-biochar was shown to have no effect on soil porosity or water retention after four years of amendment [52].

Comparably, in the case of soil bulk density, a majority of the studies reported a decrease after BC amendment [30,31,50]. There were also a few reports where no significant decrease in bulk density was observed [53–56]. A majority of the data from previous meta-analyses and reports indicate that addition of BC to a coarse, textured soil had a larger positive impact on soil physical properties compared to clay textured soil [30,31,50,57,58].

Biochar produced from wheat straw (550°C - 600°C) incorporated with clay loamy soil improved its physical properties and enhanced the yield of wheat when irrigated with saline water [45]. The biochar amendment decreased soil bulk density by 5.5% - 11.6% and increased porosity by 35.4% - 49.5%. The biochar amendment also seemed to mitigate soil sodicity and also increased total NPK availability in mixed soil layer. This resulted in the improvement of wheat yield by 8.6% and 8.4% at the BC application rates of 10 and 20 t/ha⁻¹, respectively [45]. However, at the application rate of 30 t/ha⁻¹ the improvement in yield was the lowest (2.2%) probably due to high salinity and immobilization of N. This study suggests that for saline irrigation in clay loamy soil, the optimal application rate of BC produced from agricultural residue should be between 10-20 t/ha⁻¹[45]. These studies imply that initial soil characteristics, along with BC application rate and type, determine the final changes in the physical properties of the soil.

2.3. Soil-Water relations

Accessible fresh water supplies are becoming increasingly limited, and 70% of available fresh water supports crop irrigation [59]. Although biochar holds promise for improved hydrological functions, there are differing schools of thought regarding the role of BC in improving the long-term water holding capacity of soil [60]. BC amendment has been reported to increase rainfall absorption and soil water-holding capacity, particularly in non-irrigated production regions [61–63]. However, the preexisting physical and biochemical characteristics of the soil and the wide array of BC production parameters (feedstock inputs, pyrolysis temperatures, application methods, and geographical variables) ultimately determine the BC's impact on water holding capacity. In order to probe the influence of BC on water dynamics, initial experiments were performed with soil columns in greenhouses with addition of farm or potting soils. Field studies are now becoming prevalent in peer reviewed literature, particularly within the last 10 years.

The identification of key features that contribute to improved water retention could lead to an expanded role for BC in crop production. Overall, it was determined that feedstock selection and pyrolysis temperature, the most predictive variables impacting water status, impact BC surface chemistry and porosity, the latter of which is a major contributor to the water holding capacity of BC

[64,65]. Pore saturation is highly dependent on BC surface chemistry, which is affected by pyrolysis temperature. An increase in pyrolysis temperature volatilizes organic elements and thermally cracks the biomass, thereby rendering hydrophobic compounds more hydrophilic and increasing overall BC porosity [66]. Conversely, BCs produced via low temperature pyrolysis exhibit negative capillary pressure, inhibiting the hydration of the pore space [67].

Comparative analysis of Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy data collected from nine different feedstocks pyrolyzed at 250°C, 500°C, and 700°C revealed the relationship between BC surface chemistry and hydrophobicity [68]. The spectrometer data indicated that the functional group C=O in carboxylic acid was present only in the BC obtained from pyrolysis at 250°C, making it hydrophobic. BC produced at 500°C and 700°C were deemed more appropriate for improving soil water status. A significant correlation was identified between low pyrolysis temperature (<300°C) and surface functional groups (specifically acidic moieties), and increased hydrophobicity contributing to low water retention was reported [64,69]. Other factors, including cation exchange capacity, play a role along with the variables of surface groups and porosity in determining the hydrophobic properties for each specific BC [70].

Considerable variation in total pore volumes was reported in BCs produced at 400°C, 600°C and 800°C from various feedstocks. Wood-based BC possessed a comparatively higher range of micropores (5–30µm) and, although the number of micropores decreased with increasing pyrolysis temperatures, this BC still retained relatively large pore volumes overall due to pyrogenic micropores. In contrast, pore volumes of BC derived from poultry manure and agricultural wastewater sludge were smaller, indicating that these feedstocks may not be suitable for improving water retention in amended soils [71]. While BC amendment imparts large increases in porosity, permeability, and moisture retention in clay soils, these effects are diminished in silt-loam soils [72,73]. Particle size of BC had clear impact on soil bulk density, with a linear decrease in bulk density of sandy soil observed when large-particle-containing hardwood BC (620°C) was used. Smaller BC particles increased water holding capacity compared to larger BC particles [34], possibly due to increased microporosity resulting from higher pyrolysis temperatures. Despite this, addition of BC at 25 Mg ha⁻¹ to sandy soils did not result in increased water retention. In a study with *Miscanthus giganteus* residue-derived BC (450°C), the increased porosity of larger BC particles proved beneficial for soil water retention, while smaller BC particles under 0.15mm retained water too well, thereby strongly reducing its bioavailability [33].

BC was reported to increase the water holding capacity in coarse and medium textured soils by an average of 51% and 13%, respectively [74]. This was attributed to a higher abundance of soil micropores resulting from the intrinsic micro-porosity of BC. However, a reduction in water holding capacity was reported in fine-textured soils, possibly due to the overall decrease in micropores or occlusion of existing pores. Field studies of high-porosity BCs derived from softwood (600°C – 700°C) and walnut shell (900°C) reported temporary improvement of water holding capacity; however, no long-term improvement was seen in BC-amended silty-clay-loam soils subjected to a corn-tomato rotation with conventional or organic production regimes [51]. Plant-available water in fine-textured soils could be enhanced through management or manipulation of hydrophobic properties of BC, thereby improving BC-soil interactions [74]. For example, it has been reported that grapevine feedstocks subjected to low pyrolysis temperatures (~400°C) yield BC with a 23% higher available

water content in clay soils [75].

2.4. Soil tilth and nutrient status

Defining management approaches to increase the productivity of agricultural soils remains a priority as food demand increases and arable farmland decreases [76]. As a mineral-rich organic material, BC can be incorporated into agricultural soils, potentially serving as a slow-releasing fertilizer, positively affecting soil tilth and enhancing the nutrient status of agricultural soils [77–79]. The basis for this potential use lies in the unique porosity of BC, its facilitation of chemical and physical interactions between nutrients and the carbon material, and its strong intrinsic sorption properties. Due to the large surface area, porous microstructures, and negative surface charge, BC enhances nutrient retention in the soil. Furthermore, the nutrient retention properties of BC may significantly reduce irrigation or rainfall-induced leaching of water-soluble minerals [62,80]. The slow desorption of the BC-sequestered nutrient elements may supply a steady rate of nutrient delivery, thereby alleviating the need for excessive fertilizer use. Together, these agronomic benefits to soil health may also mitigate freshwater eutrophication that results from fertilizer runoff, prevent pesticide contamination, and reduce the risk of environmental damage [81–83].

While composition varies based on feedstock and pyrolysis parameters, a universal characteristic of BC is that it is carbon-dense, which facilitates retention of necessary plant nutrients such as N, P, K, Mg, Fe and Ca [84–87]. Depending on the soil status and existing nutrient deficiencies, BCs can be custom-manufactured to replenish depleted nutrients. It has been demonstrated that BCs derived from different feedstocks possess variable amounts of beneficial plant nutrients [43,62,87–90]. The general characteristics of three major BC feedstock sources are as follows:

- Organic waste feedstocks, such as animal manure and sewage sludge-derived BC, are rich in potassium and phosphorus, low in C levels, and low in surface area; additionally, eggshell-derived BC is elevated in calcium levels
- Wood-based BC is high in organic matter and surface area, while low in CEC and N, P, and K levels
- Crop residue-derived BC properties reside somewhere in between those of the two previous categories, with specific crops producing BC with different properties (e.g., wheat and rice BC is high in silicon content; soybean BC is high in N)

These feedstocks can be blended in appropriate ratios to produce BCs with desired nutrient and/or mineral profiles. Further modifications, including alteration of pyrolysis parameters, physical alterations, chemical modifications, and BC-mediated composting have been discussed to aid in the customization of BC to ameliorate detrimental soil aspects [87].

Soil pH and abundance/availability of important plant nutrients such as phosphorus (P) and nitrogen (N) are positively affected in BC-amended soils. Limiting the pyrolysis temperatures to less than 700°C enhances the levels of P and N in BC, both of which can be lost at higher temperatures due to volatilization and transformation of NH₄⁺ to heterocyclic-N [88]. Wood-derived BC (450°C – 550°C) applied at 20 t/ha⁻¹ significantly improved the bioavailability of P in sandy soils, an effect that was primarily attributed to perturbation of abiotic processes (adsorption/desorption of P, altered redox potentials, development of organo-mineral aggregations) [91]. BC nitrogen levels are correlated closely with the original source of the char; feedstocks high

protein biomass, such as grasses, generate BCs with higher N levels (~10% by weight), while wood-derived BCs tend to be N-poor (~1% by weight) [88]. While several individual studies show that wheat BC (450°C) applications increased total soil N [92], other studies found significant decreases of soil NH_4^+ and NO_3^- following BC addition. The latter outcome was likely due to inherent recalcitrance of the small amount of extractable inorganic N and organic N present. In the studies reporting increased N, this increase could be attributed to heightened abundance of recruited microorganisms, which assist in the degradation of soil organic nitrogen [93].

In addition to improving mineral nutrient retention, BC has a role in amelioration of soil erosion and improvement of overall soil structure [94,95]. A study utilizing hardwood (600°C) BC at 15 and 30 t/ha⁻¹ concentrations to amend clay-rich soils in incubation containers demonstrated improved soil aggregate structure and soil stabilization [96]. This is likely due to interaction of carboxylic and phenolic functional groups on the BC surface, resulting in formation of cation bridges and consequent BC-mineral complexes [97]. For example, micro-aggregates observed to form upon incorporation of hardwood-derived BC (700°C) into soil with application rates of 2.5% or 5% correlated with 50% - 64% decrease in soil loss, respectively [98]. An additional study with oak wood-derived BC applied at a rate of 10 Mg/ha⁻¹ provided further evidence for the stabilizing effects of BC, with significant decreases in soil loss of almost 20% observed in a simulated rainfall experiment. In addition to improving soil retention, BC appeared to reduce the impact force from rainfall, thereby facilitating reduction of particle detachment [99].

2.5. Soil acidification

The expanding global incidence of soil acidification is concerning, with acidic soils (pH<5.5) currently accounting for approximately 50% of arable land [100,101]. The excessively low pH of acidic soil results in reduced productivity and decreased crop fertility. The main causes of soil acidification include the use of ammonia-based fertilizers and low nitrogen use efficiency. In soil, ammonia fertilizers are converted to nitrates and hydrogen ions. The hydrogen ions that are left over following uptake of nitrates by crops or after nitrate leaching increase the soil acidity [102]. Removal of crop residue, also accelerates soil acidification. Excessive reduction of pH leads to increased solubility of soil-bound aluminum; thus, soil acidification generally leads to aluminum (Al) toxicity [101]. Aluminum toxicity, in turn, leads to deficiencies in phosphorus, calcium, magnesium, and potassium cations and contributes to impaired root growth.

Current strategies to alleviate soil acidification include liming, application of crop residue, and use of industrial products; however, these methods have several disadvantages. Liming material, for example, elicits a disproportionately strong effect on top surface soils in comparison with lower layers. This method is also costly, due to the high transportation costs of liming material [102,103]. Application of industrial products can lead to heavy metal toxicity [104]. Similarly, excessive application of organic material may lead to both heavy metal accumulation and eutrophication, the latter resulting from augmented concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus [22,105]. Hence, biochar, which is naturally alkaline, is a potential solution to the problem of soil acidity.

Various studies have validated the effectiveness of BC in reducing soil acidity [106–108], and a linear correlation of biochar alkalinity with the resulting soil pH has been established [101]. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that increased pH buffering capacity of BC-amended soils is due to a BC-derived increase in cation exchange capacity [111]. The carbonates and oxides of cations

such as Ca, K, Mg, Na and Si formed during pyrolysis are known to react with dissolved Al and hydrogen ions in soil, leading to increased soil pH and decreased Al uptake by the plants [112]. Previous meta-analyses and individual studies have concluded that, in imparting increased buffering capacity, BC amendment can increase the soil pH by >2.0 units [109]. Not surprisingly, the original feedstock material plays a key role in determining the final pH of BC. For example, BC generated from manure has higher alkalinity, pH buffering capacity, and propensity for alleviation of Al toxicity, compared to crop residue-derived BC. Thus, the former would be more suitable for extremely acidic soils [110]. Soils exhibiting Al toxicity could be reclaimed via BC amendment, the ash content of which would precipitate Al^{3+} to less toxic $Al(OH)_3$ and $Al(OH)_4$ [113]. Furthermore, carboxyl and other organic functional groups on the BC surface would provide additional sites for Al^{3+} binding [113]. Functional groups such as COO^- and O^- also contribute to alkalinity of biochar through reaction with free H^+ ions [23,114].

In soil, H^+ is produced through aerobic conversion of ammonia to nitrate. Experimental results have demonstrated that BC amendment leads to decreased soil nitrification through adsorption of NH_3 and NH_4 onto the BC surface. Soil amendment with wheat straw-derived BC (500°C) led to reduced nitrification in cadmium contaminated Ferralsol soil by decreasing soil acidity (Table 2) [115]. Similarly, amendment with pig manure-derived BC (300°C) resulted in decreased soil acidification and increased cation exchange capacity [116,117], and crop residue-derived BC (500°C) lead to improved rice growth, yield, and soil nutrient availability in acidified soil [118]. Collectively, information from the literature has established that carbon content, nutrient availability and alkalinity is highest when BC is generated from manure feedstock, intermediate when generated from crop residue feedstock, lowest when generated from woody plants-based feedstock (Table 2). Finally, biochar produced at higher temperature has higher pH and might be more suitable for countering soil acidity.

Table 2. Selected recent studies documenting the impact of biochar on acidified soils.

Exp. type	Soil type	BC feedstock	Pyrolysis temperature (°C)	Effect of biochar amendment	Country	Reference
Lab	Ultisols	Crop residue	400	Decreased soil pH and the increased in exchangeable acidity and pH buffering capacity	China	[101]
Lab	Ferralsol	Crop residue	450	Inhibited nitrification and acidification of Cd contaminated soils.	China	[115]
Lab	Sandy	Pig manure and poultry litter	300	Decreased soil acidification and increased cation exchange capacity	Poland	[116]

Lab	Ultisols	Crop residue	400	Increased soil pH buffering capacity and increased the resistance of soils to re-acidification.	China	[119]
	Oxisol					
Lab	Ultisols	Crop residue	400	Increased soil pH, neutralized soil acidity, increased soil pH buffering capacity and increased resistance of soils to re-acidification	China	[120]
Lab	Not Reported	Crop residue	500	Biochar significantly promoted rice growth and the yield increased in acidified soil.	China	[118]
Lab	Oxisols	Crop residue	N/A	Alleviated soil acidification	China	[121]
Lab	Loamy sand	Sewage sludge	300	Reduced soil acidification	Poland	[122]

3. Biochemical properties

3.1. Soil organic matter (SOM)

Soil organic matter (SOM) comprises the total organic carbon in a soil and is the main determinant of overall soil fertility. SOM components consist of plant residue, animal waste, microbial populations, and active and stable organic matter in soil. SOM contributes to soil fertility by serving as a nutrient source for crops and microbes, causes soil aggregation, and improves water retention and nutrient exchange. It also helps to reduce soil compaction and surface crusting. It has been reported that the impact of biochar on SOM depends on the following variables [123–125]:

1. Type of biomass used for production of BC
2. Pyrolysis temperature
3. Pre-existing SOM levels in the soil

Amending soils with biochar often results in alterations in C cycling and mineralization, and this effect is known as 'priming'. Previous studies have reported both positive and negative effects of priming. Grass-derived BC produced at lower temperatures (250°C and 400°C) resulted in *positive* priming resulting in increased C mineralization. However, BC produced at higher temperatures (525°C and 600°C) from hardwood resulted in *negative* priming [124]. It was hypothesized that negative priming resulted from the organic matter binding to the biochar and thereby becoming unavailable to microbial and enzymatic action.

Analogous results were observed in a study that showed that crop residue-derived biochar produced at lower temperature (300°C - 550°C) generally resulted in positive priming when applied to arable and fallow soils; however, in the case of grassland soils the effect was negative [123]. In another study, which aimed to analyze the short-term effect of biochar on SOM, BC produced from

woody feedstocks at lower temperatures (350°C) had greater positive priming during 0-13 days of biochar application both in low and high pH clay loam soil [126]. The extent of positive priming was reduced for low and high pH clay loam soil when BC produced at higher temperature (700°C) was used. The addition of fresh labile substrate, such as rye grass, to BC produced at both high and low temperatures further increased priming and mineralization [126]. If the goal is to sequester carbon, rapid mineralization caused in conjunction with low temperature-derived BC results in carbon loss, necessitating BC reapplication. Application of high temperature-derived BC can also be used to reduce the priming effect and aid in carbon sequestration.

Addition of 3% (w/w) BC prepared from forest residues at 550°C has been reported to delay the decomposition of SOM and reduce N mineralization when added to acidic red loam soil [127]. However, some studies did not find BC to contribute to SOM decomposition [128,129]. A reduction in priming, and a 16% reduction of SOM decomposition, was reported when crop residue-derived BC pyrolyzed via gasification at 1200°C was added to sandy loam soil [130]. The reduction may be due to a shift in the preference of the microbial community for biochar as a C source [131]. There have been various studies in which BC produced at lower temperature ranging from 450°C - 550°C stimulated positive priming when added to sandy loam (Table 3). Overall, BC promoted increases in C sequestration, organic carbon retention, SOM, mineralization, phosphorous and potassium content, and plant biomass [132–135]. Conversely, one study reported a decrease in soil microbial biomass and SOM mineralization when crop residue-derived BC (450°C) was applied to sandy loam soil [136].

Table 3. Selected recent studies summarizing the effect of biochar on soil organic matter (SOM).

Exp. type	Soil type	BC feedstock	Pyrolysis temperature (°C)	Effect of biochar amendment	Country	Reference
Lab	Acidic red loam	Forest residue	550	Decomposition of SOC declined and reduced mineralization of SOM	China	[127]
Field	Sandy loam	Crop residue	Gasification at 1200	Reduced SOM degradation by 16%.	Italy	[130]
Lab	Podzol Antric	Woody biomass	550	Increased the SOM mineralization.	Russia	[137]
Field	Sandy	Crop residue	350	Increased soil organic matter and N	Tunisia	[138]
			450	Decreased organic matter and N content		
Field	N/A	Sewage sludge biochar	Not Reported	SOM are increased	Brazil	[132]

Field	Plaggic Anthrosols	Crop residue	350	Positive priming	Russia	[133]
Field	Silt loams	Woody biomass	900	Increased soil organic matter, soil pH, phosphorus, potassium, sulfur, and the shoot and root biomass of wheat.	USA	[134]
Field	Sandy loam	Crop residue	450 to 500	Decrease of SOM mineralization, reduce soil microbial biomass	Spain	[136]
Lab	Sandy loam	Woody biomass	450	Increased organic carbon retention and promoted carbon sequestration	UK	[135]
Field	Sandy loam	Crop residue	360	SOC increased after biochar application but did not contribute to soil aggregation.	China	[39]
Lab	Sandy loam	Crop residue	600	Significantly increased SOM, microbial respiration and microbial biomass.	Iran	[139]

3.2. Microbial activity

Considerable emphasis has been placed on the topic of microbial dynamics in agricultural systems and their role in crop productivity. The health and diversity of soil microbial populations as a function of agro-ecosystem wellbeing has diverse implications for water use efficiency, soil structure and stability, nutrient cycling, disease resistance, and eventual crop productivity [140,141]. While other organic amendments are only stable for relatively short periods in the soil environment, BC is more stable and remains in the soil for hundreds to thousands of years, as it is not easily degraded, and could support soil microbial communities for an extended period of time with reduced inputs [62].

The diverse and specific physiochemical characteristics of BC that influence soil microbial composition are increased labile carbon, pH, surface area for colonization, and water content in amended soils. BC addition induces remodeling of the microbial diversity and community structure of the soil; however, the changes are highly variable and dependent on the individual soil properties [142,143]. It was reported that low pyrolysis temperature BCs (>350°C) harbor a greater number of organic residues and are commonly characterized by lower pH. In contrast, at high temperatures

(<600°C) the abundance of organic moieties contributes to the production of a higher pH BC. It was concluded that pyrolysis temperature (and the BC-related characteristics associated with temperature) is the single most important factor that determines how the microbial communities are influenced [144]. Overall there is a consensus that BCs foster the growth and maintenance of soil microbial communities [91,145–147].

3.2.1. Fungi

In terms of their abundance and diversity, both beneficial [148–150] and detrimental [91,151–153] effects of BC on fungal communities have been reported. In comparison to bacteria, fungi respond differently to organic and inorganic treatments. Soil bacteria act as better indicators of soil fertility than soil fungi [154]. The mechanisms for improved fungal diversity and abundance appear to be correlated more with the physical micro-structure of BC and the recalcitrant organic carbon than other factors. This was demonstrated in a study where corn straw BC (500°C) derived aqueous extractable substances, organic extractable substances, and the remaining solid BC were tested [155]. It has been hypothesized that BC addition preferably fosters bacterial communities over fungal communities. The bacteria may starve the fungi of C and therefore outcompete them [151].

It was demonstrated that fungal diversity was lowered in soybean and rice straw BC (500°C) soils compared to controls although individual order, family, genus, and species level fungal communities were affected differently [156]. These outcomes could be a result of the “unbalanced competition” theory. This theory describes the phenomena of saprotrophs exponentially increasing their abundance due to the easily mineralizable carbon found in BC therefore leading to an overall decrease of other fungal groups and potentially suppressing their abundance and diversity [157]. Other speculations underlying decreased fungal diversity and population include the high levels of organic compounds, mineral elements, and higher soil pH due to BC amendment [158].

3.2.2. Bacteria

The microbial community consisting of bacteria tend to respond positively to BC, as several studies have reported a significant increase in abundance, diversity, after BC application, especially in the rhizosphere soil [158–161]. For example, an increase in specific bacterial families and species such as phosphorous solubilizing [162], nitrifiers [163], and N-fixing and denitrifiers [164] was reported with *Malus pumila* woodchip BC (500°C), *Eucalyptus saligna* hardwood BC (550°C), and sugar maple wood BC (400°C) soil amendment, respectively. Additional studies found only modest or no differences [136,155,164,165]. The change in the composition of bacterial communities after incorporation of BC in soil is highly dependent on the preexisting bacterial community, soil type, and overall BC characteristics.

Generally, the gram-negative bacterial community are favored in the nutrient-enriched BC-amended soils and initially predominate the soil environment since they perform specific and narrow functions. They outcompete gram-positive bacteria that rely on recalcitrant C as their main energy source. Gram-positive bacteria become the dominant bacteria type over time due to BC's ability to form stable aggregates with soil organic matter (SOM) [144]. Utilizing sugarcane-derived BC (450°C), it was found that bacterial populations increased significantly while fungal populations were significantly reduced in heavy-metal contaminated soils. This was possibly due to the enhanced heavy metal immobilization by the BC addition, although other factors may have contributed to the

observations [158]. Similar results with wood (fir, cedar) BC (450°C-550°C) indicated a significant shift towards a bacteria-dominated microbial community in a short-term study (3 months) and was attributed to the increased release of labile C from the BC or stable SOM-BC aggregates [91]. A study utilizing bamboo BC (500°C) provided further support for the concept that bacteria are more sensitive to BC compared to the fungal community, mostly due to increased pH with increasing BC addition [166]. These results indicate that alkaline conditions due to BC amendment (liming effect) favor and promote bacterial growth and may inhibit fungal growth.

The high complexity of BC-soil interactions and microbial community dynamics leaves many 'gray areas' in this field that require further investigation. However, assessing the long-term effects of BC-amended soils and microbial population diversity and activity are highly recommended for future studies. Research has indicated that the BC surface and pores can be inundated with plant exudates and dead cells, inorganic and organic complexes, and larger soil microorganisms. These factors may reduce the total available space for microbial colonization of aged BCs over time [167].

3.3. Abiotic and biotic stressors

3.3.1. Heavy Metals

Soil contamination with organic and inorganic toxins increases environmental and agricultural risks and poses a threat to both plants and humans. Efforts to develop remediation processes that bind the contaminants, limit their mobility and bioavailability, and foster improved soil health are ongoing. Currently, organic materials such as charcoal, soot, kerogen and activated carbon are used as amendments for limiting and reducing the bioavailability of multiple soil contaminants [168,169]. The organic contaminants have been shown to sorb preferentially to the carbonaceous fractions present in soil, limiting their bioavailability [170]. BC has also been shown to reduce the bioavailability of heavy metal contaminants. Several studies analyzed the effect of BC amendment on soils contaminated with heavy metals such as arsenic, cadmium (Cd), copper (Cu), nickel (Ni), lead (Pb), and zinc (Zn) [171–173]. The high surface area of BCs results in more effective contaminant binding; however, one of the recent meta-analysis pointed out that the pyrolysis temperature at which a given BC is produced influences its remediation efficiency and type of contaminant that can be removed [171]. A majority of studies tested the effect of BC on Cd pollution and concluded that the higher BC surface area had a smaller effect on Cd bioavailability [171]. The BCs produced at lower temperatures (300°C-500°C) have higher density of functional groups, while BC produced at higher temperatures results in larger surface area and lower density of functional group. Another study revealed that BC produced from wheat straw at 450°C, with a higher density of functional groups, was more effective in treating Cd and Pd contaminated soil [174]. However, BC produced at higher temperature is also more alkaline and results in immobilization of heavy metals in acidic soil via the liming effect. The addition of rice and wheat straw-derived BC in soils contaminated with Pb, Cu, Cd and Zn led to reduced mobility and bioavailability of the heavy metals, resulting in increased yields and decreased enrichment of heavy metals in the tested plants [172]. Biochar is also used for remediation of soil from contaminated sites due to rapid industrialization. It has been recently demonstrated that BC derived from pine wood was able to reduce bioavailability of Cd, Pb and Zn in metalloid-contaminated soils at a smelting site and promoted plant growth [175]. Biochar derived from hardwood (600°C) was shown to be effective in reducing Ni and Zn by 83% - 93% in a historically polluted site in the United Kingdom [175].

The effect of sewage sludge BC pyrolyzed at 330°C - 500°C on alleviating heavy metal toxicity was evaluated. It was observed that with the increase in pyrolysis temperature, the availability of heavy metal in tropical soils was decreased [176]. This might be due to the increased pH, pore size, and surface area in the BC produced at higher temperatures leading to the formation of carbonates, sulfates, phosphates, and metal hydroxides [176]. Due to the reduction in the bioavailability of heavy metal cations, maize yields increased in BC-amended soil in comparison to NPK fertilized soil [176]. Irrigation with untreated wastewater leads to the accumulation of lead, cadmium, zinc, and iron, which can be taken up by plants or leach into ground water, adversely affecting plant growth and human health. In a recent study, the effect of plantain peel-derived biochar (450°C - 500°C) on potato yield was studied in sandy soil irrigated with wastewater [177]. This BC regime resulted in adsorption of soil Cd and Zn and reduction of the Cd level by 69% and 33% in tuber flesh [177].

A summary of selected studies reporting the effect of BC on alleviation of heavy metal toxicity is presented in Table 4. Most of the listed studies were carried out in pots. Therefore, large scale field studies are required to understand the interaction between a particular biochar, soil type, and contaminant. To use biochar for soil remediation, the specific soil and biochar properties must be taken into consideration. Some studies show that certain BC amendment results in high heavy metal immobilization. However, if the mechanism of immobilization is only physical adsorption or cation exchange, these BC may not be suitable for long-term remediation due to weakly bound metals. BCs that immobilize heavy metals through precipitation or complex formation should be used for long term remediation.

Table 4. Selected recent studies reporting the effect of BCs derived from various feedstocks on heavy metal remediation in different type of soils.

Exp. type	Soil type	BC feedstock	Pyrolysis temperature (°C)	Effect of biochar amendment	Country	Reference
Lab	N/A	Wood, Bamboo, Rice straw and Walnut shell	500	Reduced Zn, Cd, Cu, Pb solubility	China	[178]
Lab	Aridisols	Woodchip-derived biochar	300	Reduced extractable Cd, Pd, Ni and Cu. Improved antioxidant enzyme activity. Increased rapeseed fresh shoot biomass, fresh root biomass, total chlorophyll, total pigments, carotenoids, and lycopene concentration	Pakistan	[179]

Lab	Sandy loam soil	Wood derived biochar	350–500	Reduction in the accumulation of Cu and Zn in Spinach	Pakistan	[180]
Lab	N/A	Switchgrass and poultry litter	700	Decreased the Zn, Cd and Pb bio- accessibility	USA	[181]
Lab	Paddy soil	Wheat straw	450	Reduced soil Cd bioavailability	China	[182]
Lab	Clay soil	Corn cob biochar	600	Reduced lead leaching	China	[183]
Lab	N/A	Wheat straw	350 - 650	Lower temperature BC led to increased Zn (II) and Cd (II) immobilization acidic condition and higher temperature BC led to increased Zn (II) and Cd (II) immobilization alkaline condition.	China	[184]
Lab	N/A	Manure	500	Promoted Zn and Cd precipitation and reduced total Cd and Zn concentrations in switchgrass shoots and roots	USA	[185]
		Poultry litter	500			
		Lodgepole pine	500-700	Reduced Zn concentration in roots.		
Lab	N/A	Rice husk biochar	550	Decreased leaching of Cd, Cu, Pb and Zn	South Korea	[186]
		Maple leaf biochar				
Lab	Stagnic Phaeozem	Pine wood	N/A	Decreased heavy metal accumulation in above ground parts of <i>Hordeum vulgare</i>	Russia	[187]

3.3.2. Salt

Salt stress is known to negatively affect soil properties, plant development, and crop productivity due to disturbed soil structure, soil organic matter, microbial activity, and C:N ratio. Salt stress causes oxidative stress in plants, down-regulating antioxidant enzyme activity [188]. Due to excessive salinization, the sodium ions bind to cation exchange sites in soil causing poor crop growth and yields. Although saline soil can be reclaimed by washing or excessively irrigating with

water to remove excessive salts, it is neither economically nor physically feasible for large fields [189]. On the other hand, sodic soils require treatment with other cations such as calcium to remove excess sodium from cation exchange sites followed by leaching of sodium [189]. The application of organic amendments such as manure or compost has been shown to improve soil fertility by reducing salt stress. In saline soil, the organic amendment improves soil porosity leading to leaching of excess salt. In sodic soil, organic amendments might help by improving the physical characteristics of soil, such as triggering cation exchange with the calcium present in organic amendment and Na present in soil.

Several studies have reported the positive impact of BC on the nutrient status, conductivity and improved physical and chemical properties of soil. The variable amount of plant nutrients present in the BC can compensate for the nutrient deficiency and improve fertility of saline soils. For example, sodification raises soil pH thereby limiting the bioavailability of P. In such soils, BC can act as a P source and improve its availability aiding plant growth [190].

It has been demonstrated that the mixture of hardwood and softwood biochar produced at 500°C, when mixed with sandy loam soil and irrigated with a saline solution, improved the yield of potato, maize and wheat [191–193]. It was also shown that BC was able to reduce the Na⁺/K⁺ ratio in xylem sap of wheat and potato and reduced Na concentration in maize xylem [193]. When BC produced from wheat straw (350°C - 550°C) was combined with poultry manure, and incorporated into aquic soils, a decrease in Na uptake was observed leading to increased biomass in maize and an increase of yield in wheat [190,194]. Similarly, rice straw-derived BC (600°C) alleviated salt stress in paddy soil. There was a significant reduction in bulk density, electrical conductivity, exchangeable Na, and exchangeable chlorine ions in the soil, creating favorable conditions for rice seedling growth [195]. A selection of recent reports in which BC addition was reported to alleviate salt stress are summarized in Table 4.

A majority of the reports support the role of BC in improving soil health, plant growth and biological properties of soil. It has been reported that BC adsorbs Na salt and improves plant growth; however, salt-affected land is only considered reclaimed if the Na salts are removed. Therefore, repeated application of BC might have negative consequences in a case where increased accumulation of Na-salt bound BC aggravates the salinization problem [189]. There is a need for a better understanding of how different BCs interact with different types of salt-affected soils prior to prescription of any recommendations.

Table 5. Selected recent studies reporting the effect of biochar on salt stressed soils.

Exp. type	Soil type	BC feedstock	Pyrolysis temperature (°C)	Effect of biochar amendment	Country	Reference
Lab	Loam clay	Rice straw	300 - 600	Reduced bulk density, electrical conductivity, exchangeable Na ⁺ and Cl ⁻ . Reduced salt accumulation in rice seedlings.	China	[195]

Field	Not Reported	Citrus wood	N/A	Improved plant growth and productivity. Improved nutrient concentration in soil, dehydration tolerance and water retention.	Egypt	[196]
Lab	Coastal soil	Wood chips	600	Improved photosynthetic performance and alleviated oxidative damage and salt stress.	China	[197]
Lab	Sandy clay loam	Rice straw	450	Mitigated oxidative and salt stress. Reduced Cd and Na concentration in plant.	Pakistan	[198]
Lab	N/A	Maple residues	560	Improved plant growth and xylem structure. Reduced salinity and plant stress hormones.	Iran	[199]
Lab	N/A	Rice straw	300	Increased seed germination rates of cowpea. Increased photosynthetic efficiency and photosynthetic pigments.	Egypt	200

3.3.3. Biotic Stress

Several recent reports have emerged showing BC to aid plants in countering biotic stresses. It has been suggested that BC-mediated nutrient retention, adsorption, pH adjustment and increased water holding provides plants with the capacity to respond to pathogens and to counter the effect of toxic metabolites generated by plants [201].

The severity of gray mold, powdery mildew and anthracnose on strawberry plants was evaluated in the presence of 3% (w/w) citrus-derived BC (450°C). It was observed that greenhouse waste-derived biochar when mixed with coconut fiber: peat reduced the severity of gray mold after disease challenge by 74% in mature strawberry plants and by 53% in young strawberry plantlets. Post-disease challenge anthracnose severity was reduced by 39% - 49% and powdery mildew severity by 68% [202]. Both citrus wood and greenhouse waste-derived BC reduced gray mold severity as well. It was observed that BC application induced the expression of genes related to the systematic acquired resistance and induced systemic pathways, which might have contributed to the reduction

in disease severity [202]. The ability of biochar to absorb pathogenic cell wall-degrading enzymes and toxic metabolites produced by soil pathogen *Fusarium oxysporum* was also tested with tomato seedlings [201]. The tomato seedlings were treated with 3% BC produced from eucalyptus wood chips and greenhouse pepper plant waste pyrolyzed at 350°C and 600°C. It was observed that seedlings exposed to enzymes from *Fusarium oxysporum* and toxic metabolites without BC developed severe disease-like symptoms whereas those symptoms were significantly reduced in the seedlings grown with BC amendment [201]. The exact mechanism of interaction with BC is still unclear; however, it was observed that a majority of the fungal enzymes that were immobilized by BC through adsorption were deactivated [201]. A commercial scale study conducted over a period of 3 years tested the effect of BC on growth and disease resistance in *Capsicum annuum* L. (sweet pepper) [203]. Pepper seedlings were planted in four combinations of sandy soil amended with biochars produced from greenhouse pepper plant waste and eucalyptus chips. During the first year of growth, it was observed that greenhouse waste-derived BC (450°C) reduced severity of powdery mildew by almost 50% 168 days post-planting in comparison with controls. In the second year of the study, the greenhouse waste BC (350°C and 450°C), showed the highest pepper yield compared to the other treatments and the control [203], in addition to significant reduction in powdery mildew severity. The incidence of plants affected by broad leaf mite was also reduced when amended with greenhouse waste BC. A comparable trend was observed in the third-year trial. Powdery mildew severity was reduced by 25% in both greenhouse waste and eucalyptus wood chip-derived BC after 160 days of growth [203]. Biochars produced from greenhouse waste (350°C) and eucalyptus chips (600°C) was shown to be effective in suppressing crown and root rot in tomato caused by *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *radicis lycopersici* [204]. The application of greenhouse waste BC at 0.5%, 1% and 3% reduced disease severity by 72%. The eucalyptus chip BC also reduced disease severity by 44% compared to the control plants [204]. There are also some reports where no significant effect of BC on soil borne pathogen suppression was observed [205–207].

The number of studies exploring the role of BC in pathogen suppression are significantly less than other organic amendments such as compost, peat and crop residue. Hence, additional studies are needed in order to understand the mechanism behind the ability of biochar to suppress pathogens and to be able to prescribe biochar regimens as safe and effective amendment strategies for improvement of plant resistance to soil-borne pathogens.

4. Impact of Biochar on Crop Production

Increasing crop yields to feed a burgeoning population is a daunting task in the face of a myriad abiotic and biotic challenges including reduction of arable farmlands, increased plant stressors due to changing climate [208–210]. These issues are especially important in organic production systems where the average crop yields are 5% - 34% lower compared to conventional farming [211–214]. The use of biochar in soil remediation can be a useful strategy, especially in degraded soils [215,216]. Furthermore, the potential to significantly reduce the organic yield gap through better fertilization regimes has been proposed, suggesting an expanded role for nutrient-rich biochars [217].

A meta-analysis of BC effects on plant productivity concluded that BC use holds promise as a method to increase crop yields and could further promote ecosystem services and carbon storage [87,218–220]. It was noted that increased soil N, P, K, reduction of soil acidity due to the liming effect of BC, and improved water relations contributed to various soil and crop responses. In this

review, a comprehensive literature search was performed with terms “biochar crop productivity yield” for the years 2017-2019 and parsed for minimal criteria (BC feedstock source, pyrolysis temp, retention time, and soil type). The results of the literature search are summarized in Table 6. The first 330 entries were reviewed with 155 examined for the criteria and 18 were finally selected that fit the minimal criteria.

Table 6. Impact of BC on Crop productivity summarized from a comprehensive literature search.

Crop Productivity				Country, Exp. type, Length	Soil Type	BC Feedstock	Pyrolysis Temp °C, Residence Time, Applicatio n Rate	Reference
<i>Crop Tested</i>	<i>Productivity</i>	<i>Beneficial</i>	<i>Detrimental</i>					
Rice (<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.) & Wheat (<i>Triticum</i> ssp.)	Not affected	BC amendment increased the soil water holding capacity, soil nutrients and SOC	Short term effects and BC alone did not increase yields	China	Hydragric Anthrosol, sandy	Wheat straw	350 - 550	[162]
				Field Study			2-3 hours	
				Long-term, 6 years			20 and 40 t/ha ⁻¹	
Lettuce (<i>Lactuca sativa</i>)	For both soils, BC rates of 20 & 30 t/ha ⁻¹ significantly increased above ground biomass	Effective fertilizer for lettuce production at least for two growing cycles	Biosolid BC could increase harmful soil elements such as heavy metals	Ethiopia	Silty loam and sandy loam	Fecal matter	450	[221]
				Greenhouse pot study			1 hour	
				Short-term ≤ 1 year			10, 20 and 30 t/ha ⁻¹	

Cauliflower (<i>Brassica oleracea</i> , cv. 'Desire')	No significant improvement in crop yield	No negative effects to crop productivity or soil quality	Soil moisture, and bulk density not effected by BC additions	Australia	Ferralsol	Woody Eucalyptus 'Blue Mallee'	550	[222]
Pea (<i>Pisum sativum</i> , cv. 'Ashton')				Field Study			30 minutes	
Broccoli 'Ironman'				Short-term, 1 year			10 t/ha-1	
Radish (<i>Raphanus sativus</i> L. cv. French Breakfast)	Increased yields in second year	Reduced bulk density and increased porosity, moisture content, soil pH	No effect on first year growth	Nigeria	Alfisol or Luvisol	Local hardwoods (<i>Parkia biglosa</i> , <i>Khaya senegalensis</i> , <i>Prosopis africana</i> and <i>Terminalia glaucescens</i>)	580	[49]
			Field Study	24 hours				
			Long-term, 2 years	25 and 50 t/ha-1				
Cherry tomato (<i>Solanum lycopersicum</i>)	Bamboo BC increased tomato yields	Both BC's Improved tomato quality with increased total sugars	Rice husk BC did not improve Total N %	Japan	Clay loamy	Rice husk and Bamboo	500	[223]
			Greenhouse pot study	1 hour				
			Short-term ≤ 1 year	2% and 5%				
Potatoes (<i>Solanum tuberosum</i> L., cv. 'Russet Burbank')	No significant differences in yield	BC increased soil CEC	BC had no effect on leaf greenness rate or photo system activity	Canada	Sandy	Green plantain peels	450 - 500	[224]
			Field Study	18-25 min				
			Long-term, 2 years	13.5 t/ha-1 (1% w/w)				

Tomato & Maize (<i>Zea mays</i>)	BC does not have a significant long-term effect on yield	Increased K+, Ca ²⁺ , and PO ₄ -P in the soil in year 2	Delayed nutrient availability from BC and short-lived effects	USA	Rincon silty clay loam	Walnut shells	900	[225]
				<i>Field Study</i>			1-2 hours	
				Long-term, 4 years			10 t/ha-1	
Winter wheat (cv. 'Xiaoyan no. 22')	Low levels (1%,2%) of BC had a positive effect on wheat yields	Total nitrogen and SOC increased with BC applications	Under drought conditions, BC addition decreased the availability of nutrients	China	Silty-clay	Apple wood	450	[226]
				<i>Outdoor pot study</i>			8 hours	
				Short-term ≤ 1 year			1, 2, 4, and 6% w/w	
Maize	BC and fertilizer led to a significant increase in maize yield	BC improved soil water holding capacity	BC alone had no effect on maize yields	Nigeria	Sandy clay loam	Maize cobs	500	[227]
				<i>Field Study</i>			1 hour	
				Short-term ≤ 1 year			20 t/ha-1	
Chinese cabbage (<i>Brassica rapa</i>)	BC significantly improved crop yields	BC increased soil pH and CEC	BC did not affect the soil bulk density and porosity	South Korea	Loamy	Barley straw	400	[228]
				<i>Field Study</i>			1 hour	
				Short-term ≤ 1 year			10 t/ha-1	
Crop Productivity (cont.)				Country, Experiment Type, Length	Soil Type	Feedstock	Pyrolysis Temp °C, Residence Time, Application Rate	Reference

<i>Crop Tested</i>	<i>Productivity</i>	<i>Positives</i>	<i>Negatives</i>					
Chrysanthemum (<i>Glebionis coronaria</i> , cv. 'Crown Daisy')	3% BC significantly decreased yields	BC increased WHC and SOM	Higher BC application reduced plant productivity	China	Pedocals, silt-clay	Peanut shells	350	[229]
				Greenhouse			3 hours	
Leaf lettuce	No effect			Short-term ≤ 1 year			0%, 1.5%, 3%, and 5% (w/w), = to 0, 37.5, 75 and 125 t/ha-1 in the field	
Wheat (cv. 'Yecora Rojo')	300 °C BC with NPK increased yields	Increased soil water retention and decreased bulk density	BC alone decreased yields with BC produced at higher temp° (400, 500, 600 °C)	Saudi Arabia	Loamy sand	Date palm tree residues	300, 400, 500, and 600	[230]
				Greenhouse			4 hours	
				Short-term ≤ 1 year			8 t/ha-1	
Rice (cv. 'Naveen')	Increased grain yield up to 24%	Increased total organic C in soils	Microbial carbon use efficiency decreased due BC addition	India	Sandy clay loam	Rice husk	350	[231]
				Field Study			6 hours	
				Long-term, 3 years			0.5, 1, 2, 4, 8, 10 t/ha-1	
Maize (cv. 'hybrid LG 6030')	Increased corn yields	Increased P levels during the two years of cultivation	BC was unable to supply the necessary K for further crop production	Brazil	Red-Yellow Latosol with clayey texture	Sewage sludge	300 and 500	[232]
				Field Study			30 minutes	
				Long-term, 2 years			15 Mg/ha-1	

Okra (<i>Abelmoschus esculentus</i> L., cv. 'OH-397')	Increased okra yields vs controls	Significant increase in SOC and microbial activity	Lower benefit cost ratios for BC compared to controls	India	Inceptisol with sandy loam texture	Mixed local hardwoods	450	[233]
				Field Study			4 hours	
				Long-term, 2 years			5 t/ha-1	
Beans	Bean yields were significantly reduced with BC application	Increased germination rate in BC amended soils	Significant decreases in some macro and micro nutrients	USA	Krome loamy	<i>Melaleuca quinqueneria</i> (Broad-leaved paperbark) hardwood	350	[234]
				Greenhouse			7 hours	
				Short-term ≤ 1 year			2% and 5%	
Sunflower (<i>Helianthus annuus</i> L., cv. 'Embrapa 122/V2000')	Sunflower seed and oil yield declined	Increased levels of most soil minerals and total carbon levels	Nitrogen levels in leaves and the nitrogen uptake of the entire plant decreased with biochar application	Japan	Dark red soil, Typic Hapludals	Sugarcane bagasse and sunflower residues	500 - 600	[235]
				Field Study			1 hour	
				Short-term ≤ 1 year			1%	
Spring barley (<i>Hordeum vulgare</i> L.)	Increased yields with BC + NPK	Increased soil water status in BC amended soils in first year; increased soil carbon status	BC only decreased yields for both crops compared to control NPK plants	Austria	sandy-loamy-silt; calcareous	Hardwood	550	[236]
				Field Study			2 hours	
Sunflower	No difference vs controls			Long-term, 2 years	Chernozem on loess		72 t/ha-1	

In terms of productivity alone, a majority of the studies reported a beneficial impact of BC on crop yields [49,221,223,226–228,230–233]. Experimental plants included lettuce, cabbage, radish, tomato, wheat, rice, maize, and okra. Soils were amended with BC derived from major feedstock

sources such as hardwood, manure, and crop residues. Positive results from this mixture of plants and biochars indicates a theoretical system to 'mix and match' crop with BC for optimal productivity. Interestingly, none of the studies included perennial plant species in the experimental design. That is another area where the impact of BC remains to be assessed.

Due to the range of tested soil conditions, many factors altered by BC amendment were implicated in reported yield gains. For instance, lettuce yields were positively influenced with 20 and 30 t/ha⁻¹ fecal-derived BC (450°C) [221]. Mineral-enriched BC proved to be an effective fertilizer for two growing cycles in the greenhouse pot study. Additional experiments in greenhouses with leafy crops proved that significant yield increases are possible with BC soil amendment [237,238]. Two studies with wheat showed increased yields as a result of soils amended with 1% - 2% apple wood-derived BC (450°C) due to increased nitrogen levels [226] and increased soil water retention with 8 t/ha⁻¹ date palm tree residue-derived BC (300-600°C) [230]. The increase in soil organic carbon and the stimulatory effect on microbial communities raised rice yields in soil amended with rice husk BC (350°C) [231], and okra yields amended with hardwood-derived BC (450°C) [233]. In addition to reporting increases in yields, these studies also discussed the limitations of field applications of BC.

BC contains key plant nutrients, although at a low level as demonstrated by several studies, and may have led to the lack of a complete plant nutrient profile in the soils to obtain a desirable increase in yields [223]. Multiple studies reported mixed results in terms of crop production [229,236] or described no effect [162,222,224,225]. Soil nutrient content and CEC were improved with BC amendment but were short-lived and resulted in comparable crop productivity compared to controls in studies with rice and wheat growing in wheat straw BC (350°C - 550°C) [162], potatoes with green plantain peel-derived BC (450°C - 500°C) [224], and tomatoes and maize with walnut shell-derived BC (900 °C) [225]. Growth of Spring barley and sunflowers was tested with hardwood-derived BC (550°C) at 72 tha⁻¹. The treatments increased barley yields but had no effect on sunflower productivity [236]. The BC-only amendment did increase soil water status and carbon levels; however, increased barley productivity was noted only when BC was mixed with NPK compared to NPK only controls. While increased water holding capacity and soil carbon levels with peanut shell-derived BC (350°C) were also reported [229], these alterations did not lead to any effect on lettuce yields.

Undesirable effects on crop productivity following BC soil amendment were also reported in two of the studies [234,235]. Although beans demonstrated an increased rate of germination in BC amended soils, their yields were significantly reduced with hardwood BC (350°C) application at 2% and 5% [234]. Other studies with legumes reported a gain in yield when grown in BC amended soils. The yields of mash bean improved with sugarcane bagasse BC (350°C), with and without chemical fertilizer, due to increased SOC, total N, and decreased bulk density. Importantly, nitrogen fixation increased by 83% in the biochar-only treatment due to higher nodule numbers [239]. Additionally, fava bean growth with wheat straw-derived BC (500°C) amendment applied at a 2.5% w/w rate in addition to saltwater irrigation led to significantly increased dry seed yield compared to controls, which was mainly attributed to the high salt sorption capacity of BC [240]. The higher nutrient content in the crop residue-derived BCs reported above may have helped elevate yields compared to controls while the already nutrient poor hardwood-derived BC may have reduced bean yields. While BC can be a source of nutrients, the complex interactions in the soil environment may have reduced the capacity of available nutrients in the soils inflicting significant yield losses [241]. Additional studies are required to develop a more comprehensive model of BC effect on legume production.

Other factors potentially responsible for lower productivity include soil nutrient deficiencies found with sugarcane bagasse and sunflower-derived BC (500°C - 600°C) amended soils [235]. As a result of decreased nitrogen uptake with increasing BC application, sunflower seed and oil yield saw a significant decrease. The 1% field application of the BCs may have increased specific communities of bacteria and enhanced certain enzyme activity such as urease, an important enzyme in soil nitrogen status, as reported by a field study with addition of sugarcane bagasse biochar (SCBC) [158]. However, fungal communities suffered due to SCBC addition and final yields of *Brassica chinensis* L. (pak choi) were reduced compared to controls. It was found that a 4% application rate of SCBC supported normal plant growth and increased sugar and cane yields [242]. The SOC, soil-water related properties, and nutrient levels were enhanced by SCBC leading to increased plant productivity. Further research is needed to identify BCs appropriate for specific plant species and initial soil characteristics for improved plant growth and development.

Although crop responses were generally positive, the high variability within the listed studies makes it difficult to draw any broad conclusions except that the type and application rate of BC will require customization. The benefits of BC application mainly consist of increased water holding potential, better nutrient cycling, and increased soil carbon reserves. This may lead to no effect or only minimally increasing yields in the short term, but further testing in the field should illuminate the effects of long-term BC amendment on crop yields. Other regions of industrial agriculture and tropical environments may show a more pronounced BC effect and may be better at exploiting the advantages of BC. BC application in marginal soils will likely lead to increased crop productivity by increasing the overall soil fertility through pH and CEC adjustments, better water retention, and increased microbial activity [243,244]. Nevertheless, considerable caution should be observed when using extremely heavy rates of BC. The elevated risk of heavy metal contamination due to feedstocks rich in accumulated metals or other phytotoxic compounds could decrease crop productivity with increasing BC applications [245,246].

The overall conclusion is that BC application is favorable for improving crop productivity sustainably. Certain agricultural systems require different inputs to achieve higher crop yields and designing BC to meet those specific needs could lead to optimized production methods and products.

4. Future Opportunities

Analysis of the published literature supports the role of BC as one of the many viable solutions to soil-related challenges of food production in the face of persistent global issues. While it is not a panacea, the humble porous carbon-composed BC has the ability to physically, biologically and chemically alter soil properties, which has multifarious consequences. There is an opportunity for carbon sequestration and establishing carbon negative cycles with the expanded use of BC. Countering deteriorating soil health due to industrial agriculture, BC amendment can help support higher crop productivity and contribute to improving global food security. The overall impact of BC can be increased by its application on highly weathered and marginal soils that are characterized by depleted nutrients levels, reduced water retention, and lack of competent soil structure.

Future climate models indicate that water stress will be a key driver of reduced crop productivity. BC has been shown to improve soil water holding capacity, making it a potential candidate for alleviating water stress [247–249]. Finding the right permutation of BC feedstock, application rate, and crop variety are vital for improving agricultural production and reducing the related carbon

footprint. Initial progress in understanding the effects of BC use has led to the efforts of producing 'designer biochars' which promise to exploit the positive properties and dampen negative effects mainly through feedstock selection but also through chemical, physical, or natural alterations of the BC [87,250–252].

Various studies and published meta-analyses on BC have pointed out the benefits of BC soil amendment; however, there are still several areas that require attention and resolution. Important aspects that affect crop productivity include feedstock sources, various BC production methods, initial soil characteristics, crop variety, and experimental conditions. Others have also reported irregular effects of BC on crop productivity due to these variables [253]. Since it is an irreversible decision to amend soils with BC, the various impacts of augmenting soils are important considerations before conducting field applications [254].

Several articles were not included in the comprehensive literature review due to the omission of key variables that are critical for assessing the overall impact of BC studies. Standardizing BC experiments is vitally important to hypothesis testing, and replicating studies to move the research field forward. All future BC articles should include meticulous descriptions of biochar feedstock sources, pyrolysis temperature, and retention time. Not covered in this review, but still significant, are the various economic factors to be considered before undertaking any large-scale BC applications including: production or acquisition of BC, shipping and transporting, and the time and labor required for field application [233,255]. Additionally, the lack of consistent responses of microbial communities to BC amendment highlights a knowledge gap regarding the mechanism by which microbes interact with BC. BC has the potential to decrease the bioavailability and efficiency of some herbicides, which is yet another variable that needs consideration [256]. Areas needing further investigation include:

- Biomes underrepresented in the current biochar-associated literature, such as forests and perennial crops (the vast majority of BC studies are directed towards temperate and tropical areas);
- Effects of biochar on non-model crop species (present studies primarily focus on model organisms such as tomato, maize, rice, and wheat);
- Assessment of biochar-amended soil microbial activity through deep meta-genomics approaches;
- Longer-term experiments to understand characteristics of 'aged' BC to assess its temporally evolving properties in soils;
- Development of cost-effective ways to minimize environmental impacts by incorporating organic fertilizer amendments such as BC.

Knowledge generated from the above-mentioned areas of investigation is expected to enable the large-scale utilization of biochars in agriculture, a step towards establishing carbon negative ecosystems.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization – AD, E.T. and R.G.; Resources - A.D.; Writing—review and editing - E.T., R.G., A.D.; Supervision - A.D.; Funding acquisition - A.D.

Funding: This work was supported in part by USDA-NIFA Hatch Grant WNP00011 to AD.

Acknowledgements: The authors thank Dr. Seanna Hewitt, Karen Adams and Dr. Richard Sharpe for their critical reading of the manuscript and their feedback.

Conflicts of Interest: AD serves as a consultant for AgEnergy Solutions – a biochar production startup company based in Spokane, WA, USA. AgEnergy Solutions had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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