

Field plot fertilizer trials are among the most sacred of cows in agronomic research, but the contents of this book make a compelling argument for a more rigorous approach to soil-plant research.

Until very recently, concepts of soil chemistry and soil fertility have been based upon equilibrium chemistry. It has become increasingly clear that the rate of many important chemical and biological reactions in soils is limited by the physical properties of the soil. The soil is not really a well-mixed system. Diffusion and mass transport are the physical mechanisms by which soil solutes move to reacting sites, and these are processes more familiar to the soil physicist than to the soil chemist or biologist. A few soil chemists have been willing to follow the unpopular course, and perhaps among the most intrepid of these has been P. H. Nye, the senior author.

The first part of the book deals with the coupling of the mathematics of diffusion and convection in soils to that of ion uptake in plant roots, with due attention to the myriad of soil chemical reactions. Those processes that depend primarily upon diffusion can be described remarkably well. Where convection becomes important the theories are less satisfying. An important reason for this is that we still lack a coherent model of water uptake by roots, and the nonlinearities in the system make spatial and temporal averaging very risky. Our knowledge of feedback mechanisms in the plant is obviously inadequate. The mineral nutrition of single plants and the movement and uptake of solutes under field conditions, which are considered in the last third of the book, are still in an embryonic stage of development, but there are many promising lines of research.

It is too much to hope that large numbers of expensive and repetitive field plot trials will now be abandoned in favor of deterministic studies, for, as Max Planck wrote in 1936, "An important scientific innovation rarely makes its way by gradually winning over and converting its opponents; it rarely happens that Saul becomes Paul. What does happen is that its opponents gradually die out and that the growing generation is familiarized with the idea from the beginning." Deterministic studies are the wave of the future, and those who are teaching the growing generation will find this an invaluable book, as will all who are doing research in soil science, plant physiology, and terrestrial ecology.

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