

**VIRTUAL COTONS, THE FIRSTBORN
OF THE NEXT GENERATION
OF SIMULATION MODEL**

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Abstract

Traditional plant architectural models or ‘visualization models’ propose to visually create realistic three-dimensional plants. The visualization is based on field sampling and the application of an algorithm to standardize the three-dimensional description of a plant. “L-systems” and the “Reference Axis” are two such approaches. Mechanistic or physiologically based models, built using mathematical expressions of the interactions between plant components, propose to describe how a plant functions. They simulate physiologically realistic plants based on estimates of physiological development and growth. Their equations are derived from field experiments. In this study we integrated both modeling paradigms. We used functions and concepts obtained from mechanistic and architectural modeling theories and developed an integrated system. The system was derived from an enhanced ‘mechanistic’ model, GOSSYM, with 3D architectural extensions. We accomplished this by associating growth and development functions with actual locations in three-dimensional space. The resulting model allows vastly improved model output interpretation, use of the model as a surrogate experimental environment and allows better integration of our knowledge about how plants grow into a unique system. The new model, named COTONS, produces “life-like” plants. Now the farmer deals with simulation results analogous to the ones he deals with in a 3-dimensional world. Very importantly, variability is captured and expressed visually. This is the first step for better characterizing production risk in human-based terms. This new model symbolizes crop models for the next century.

Introduction

Worldwide, cotton represents about 50% of the fiber used in the world. Cotton is the fifth row-crop, and in some countries it is the first agricultural resource. Cotton is also

a complex plant. It is a perennial plant with an indeterminate growth habit, but it is cultivated as an annual crop. It develops monopodial structures at the same time as sympodial structures, and it regulates its carrying capacity through fruit abscission. The main stem and the vegetative branches are monopodial structures, which means that the terminal apex produces all internodes. Fruiting branches are sympodial structures. This implies that each internode is produced by an axillary bud, which will be transformed into a fruiting site. Each internode bears a leaf and two axillary buds; thus a cotton ‘tree’ increases its photosynthesis potential by increasing the size of its light captors and by increasing their number through morphogenesis by adding nodes. Fruiting sites can be abscised in response to nutritional stresses. These characteristics are important because there is competition between vegetative development and reproduction within a cotton plant. The number of bolls per plant at harvest will depend on events, which occurred long before boll setting. Square and boll abscission determine this number, but they are dependent on crop development and growth which is under the control of the dynamic states of their environment. Thus, the period where there is interaction and competition between growth and development is relatively important.

The COTONS Model

COTONS is a physiologically detailed simulation model of the growth and the development of the cotton plant. It is based on the GOSSYM model developed at the Crop Simulation Research Unit. Like GOSSYM it includes a plant model and a soil model. Weather information, some cultural practices and genetic characteristics drive the plant model. Plant development is limited by water and nitrogen supply and also by soil water potential status. When the plant grows its shade limits soil water evaporation, but at the same time the plant uptakes water and nitrogen. From GOSSYM, the plant sub-model of COTONS includes two important concepts: “materials balance” and the use of different stresses (N, H₂O, C) to regulate plant growth. The model runs on a daily basis. Each day, the model first calculates carbohydrate supply based on external factors (light, temperature, water supply, etc), plant water status and leaf area. Second, the system calculates the carbohydrate demand for Growth, Respiration and plant Maintenance based again on external factors and plant status. Third, the system partitions the carbohydrate supply to the different organs based on their demand and priority levels with fruit having the highest priority and storage the lowest.

Production of Carbohydrates

COTONS uses canopy characteristics to estimate the proportion of light going through the canopy. Two parts of incident light are identified: the light transmitted directly to the ground which is a function of plant height, plant width and row spacing and the light transmitted to the ground through the canopy which is a function of genetic plant characteristics and the Leaf Area Index. This light

interception model incorporates Beer-Lamber's law to estimate the light intercepted by the canopy. The photosynthesis model takes into account the size of the canopy and its age. The sub-model of carbohydrate production allows the simulation of light competition for plants growing in parallel.

Demand in Carbohydrates

The modeling of carbohydrate demand in COTONS is based on the idea (DeWitt) that "crops have a growth potential when there are no limiting factors such as availability of carbon, nitrogen or water". In the first step, the model estimates potential growth for the different parts of the plant. This is done organ by organ (except for the root) according to the weight and/or area of each organ, its age, and the temperature. These potentials for growth are reduced according to the water status of the plant and the use of growth regulators. In the second step, COTONS uses the adjusted growth potentials to calculate the demand (the sum of the potentials) for carbohydrate and compares it with supply, the sum of net photosynthesis per day, and the available pool of carbohydrate. The demand/supply ratio [0, 1], 'representing carbon stress', is then used for adjustment of growth potentials by plant organ type.

Partitioning of Carbohydrate Supply

The partitioning process links the carbohydrate supply sub-model and the carbohydrate demand sub-model. During each daily time step the partitioning process that drives the yield components and storage, balances the whole system. This process needs information on the plant structure, which is dependent on the morphogenesis sub-model. The plant morphogenesis routine simulates the emergence of organs and the development of these organs, according to the temperature "experienced" by the plant part being considered in the daily time step interval. Stresses experienced by the plant modify that growth and development. The morphogenetic events are estimated from the calculated age of each organ in relation to an age threshold. The temperature "experienced" is used in (usually) quadratic polynomial equations to determine the age thresholds at which the various organs should emerge or change. Nitrogen stress and vegetative stress combined are also used in the calculation of age thresholds. There are two pathways (both are supported and can be invoked from the interface) in the morphogenesis model: the "average plant" path and the "plant population" path. In the plant average it is assumed that one "average plant" represents the crop. In this case the simulation process is deterministic and fruit production per position is the proportion of fruit present at this position in the field. In the "plant population" path, the model simulates 'n' plants growing in parallel with the same environmental condition. The population of plants represents the actual variability observed in commercial fields. This variability is the interaction of a plant phenotypic variability and a competition between plants linked to the phenotypic variability and differences in stand establishment. Plant

variability is modeled by adding stochasticity into the node initiation and abscission processes, and by modeling these two main processes as a queuing system. For example, the probability density function of the node appearance can be fitted with the reciprocal of the normal function. Morphogenesis is modeled as a queuing system with three queues, the first one is the internode elongation, the second is square abscission and the third is for boll abscission. Queue disciplines are different: for internode elongation the discipline is "First In First Out", for abscission processes it is "Last In First Out". The variability linked to plant competition is modeled by adding an emergence sub-model and by growing plants in parallel on an area basis. The emergence model is currently only a function of temperature. It partially takes into account soil humidity, planting depth and other characteristics because the model uses the emergence date indicated by the farmer as the median for emergence distribution.

Morphology, Geometry and Visualization

The use of a crop model by producers and even scientists is difficult. The main reason for this problem is the interface of this kind of system. In crop models both data input and interpretation of the output of the system may seem too abstract or too cumbersome for users. Graphical tools now exists and are available on desktop computers. Thus, it is possible to visualize output as "Virtual Plants" resulting from the simulation and making the simulation more understandable to farmer and scientists. The level of detail simulated by the model facilitated the integration of a visualization tool to COTONS. This visualization is done using an Architectural engine which simulates the sizes of each organ (length, diameter and width), their spatial position, the shape of each organ, and displays all of this information. Each day the plant model of COTONS simulates plant growth and development. COTONS then calls a "Plant Morphology" sub-model which simulates sizes of all organs. It then calls another routine to build the 3D-plant architecture by positioning all the plant organs in 3D space. Finally, a routine displays the results. The morphology sub-model calculates volume and area variables (length and diameter) from dry weights simulated by the plant model. The architectural routine builds the 3-dimensional plant architecture from organ lengths and diameters, the phyllotaxy angles, insertion angles and deviation angles. All these angles are fixed and they are assumed to be variety dependent. An iterative process places each organ, relative to its bearer, in 3D space. Also a shape made from polygons is associated to each organ. The morphology sub-model controls the size of the shape.

Simulating the Cotton Crop With COTONS, Key Results

To initialize and run COTONS the user needs three kinds of inputs: single point descriptors as soil hydrology characteristics, plant density, date of emergence and so on, the driving variables (temperature, solar radiation, rainfall

and wind speed) and the cultural (agronomic practices or technical itineraries) practices. With this information the system is able to simulate the growth of the crop during the crop season. At the end of the simulation the system provides the following outputs: organs mass and number, plant topology, plant status indicators and the variables used. During the simulation the user can visualize the plant growth as shown in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows the visualization at three different days for an average plant corresponding to a crop with high nitrogen fertilization and good water supply. The plant is well developed and the production is localized at the bottom. It is obvious that this kind of output is more accessible for users than a simple listing of tables (which are also available). Figure 2 shows 8 plants growing in parallel as they are simulated by the new system. All the plants are different having different plant heights, numbers of bolls, boll positions, etc. They did not emerge necessarily on the same day, and they had to compete for light interception.

Conclusion

The new COTONS model integrates many features available only individually in other models. For the first time, a mechanistic model associates an architectural engine and a visualization tool and is able to simulate field variability using parallel population processes. COTONS' light interception and photosynthesis sub-models take into account plant and crop structures giving the foundation for a "plant population" model as an alternative to the common "average plant" model approach. With the inclusion of stochasticity and emergence process, COTONS is able to simulate field variability. It will allow management based on more indicators than other cotton models (weights, number of fruiting and vegetative branches, number of bolls by position, distribution of yield, etc.). The visualization tool is really a Producer-Level Decision-Aid system. For example, the visualization of the effects of different management practices will demonstrate the results of alternative practices. COTONS, produces "life-like" plants, and the grower can deal with simulation results analogous to the ones he deals with in a 3-dimensional world. Now dry weights, nitrogen stress, water stress, etc correspond to the daily reality of the grower so that he/she is able to understand and accept recommendations provided by the system. Finally Virtual Plants are an ideal training tool. COTONS can be used to teach growers and students optimal cultural practices, sampling and monitoring techniques, and the overall complexity, interactions and feedback associated with agricultural production.

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Figure 1: Visualization at three different days of a plant average for a crop with high nitrogen fertilization and good water supply.

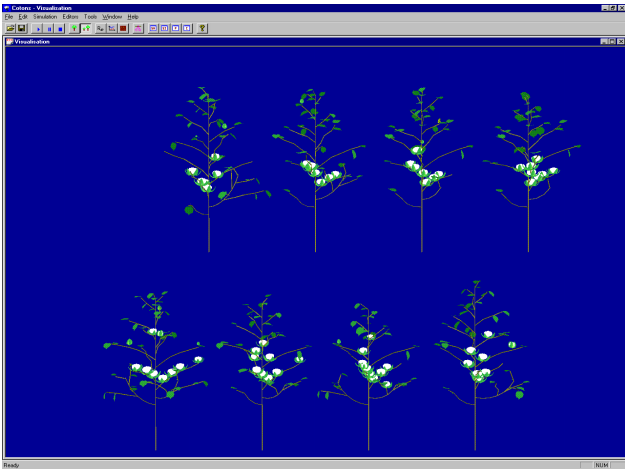


Figure 2: Visualization of 8 plants growing in parallel