

FANTASTIC METALS & WHERE TO PHYT THEM

Assessing the Potential of Metal Accumulation in Edible Garden Plants



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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2021

DECLARATION

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Annie McDonald, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Life Science, Faculty of Science at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Date: 21/05/2021

ABSTRACT

Land contamination is a major threat to global food security. Heavy metals are ubiquitous contaminants contributing to agricultural land degradation across the globe. Their potential to cause serious harm to ecosystems and human health has led to the development of innovative remediation technologies. Harnessing the natural uptake ability of plants, phytoremediation offers an environmentally friendly, and cost-efficient method of remediating heavy metals from soils. Among known phytoremediators, many are plants with edible tissues, which can be deployed on degraded sites to promote decontamination.

However, plants that accumulate high quantities of heavy metals into their edible tissues are a risk to food safety. With urban gardens in Sydney and Melbourne exceeding Australia's Health Investigation Guideline level for heavy metals in residential soils, this thesis investigates the potential of edible plants in remediating legacy soil contamination in Australian environments and evaluates the associated risks of these species to food safety.

A database analysis of edible phytoremediator plants from the literature identified a research gap of edible species tested under Australian environmental conditions. This study was followed by a germination experiment investigating single and multi-metal contaminant effects on the germination of eight commercially important crop species. Carrots were the only species able to germinate under complex multi-metal conditions inferring a greater risk to food safety if they continue to grow and accumulate metals *in situ*. In a controlled glasshouse experiment, mature root vegetable plants (i.e., carrots and radishes) posed the greatest risk to food safety, while common beans were found to accumulate appreciable concentrations of lead into brown leaf tissues compared to green leaves. These results

present a possible avenue for the application of common beans as phytoindicators in lead-contaminated environments. Leafy herbs presented greater risk in a real-world investigation of homegrown produce from residences in North Sydney, NSW. In addition, a landmark field garden trailed on the heritage-listed White Bay Power Station, NSW, showed potential for phytoremediation using edible plants as a non-invasive, long-term strategy for contaminated industrial sites.

The work presented in this thesis advances knowledge of the potential for edible plant phytoremediators to be used in Australian contexts with consideration of the associated risks to food safety. This research identifies crop species that pose lower or greater health risks based on edible tissue accumulation patterns. These findings inform species selection for the mitigation of risks to urban gardeners as well as providing candidates for future applications of phytoremediation in Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wait, who said never meet your heroes? I didn't just meet mine, I had the incredible fortune to be taken under her wing as her student. Megan's passion for science and teaching is infectious and I'm awed by her generosity, optimism, and spunk. Unlike other celebrities, I've got your autograph (on all the forms you've had to sign). Seriously though, you are an incredible supervisor. I am forever grateful to you for your mentorship, friendship and support of this work which went above and beyond. It has opened doors and made this achievement possible. I have learned so much from you over the years, both professionally and personally. I'm so stoked to be privy to your wisdom. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking me on, guiding me, and helping me grow as a scientist and a human.

I owe a lot of gratitude to co-superstar Brad for his invaluable feedback, contributions, and discussions on nitty gritty aspects of my research. It was through your guidance that I developed my statistical skills and pushed myself technically to think deeply about my data. Plus, a side thank you for the gentle introduction to R and graciously letting me bug you every single semester to fill out the same stipend reference.

Very special thanks to Daniel Krix for your wizardry statistical and chart contributions to parts of this research.

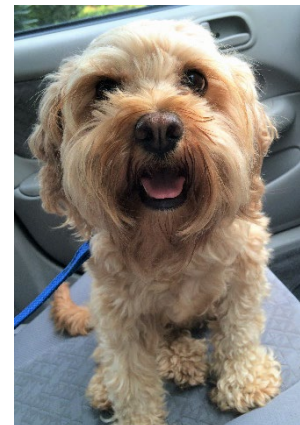
I wish to acknowledge the School of Life Sciences, Faculty of Science for financial support for my research including travel funds to present at the ESA19 conference.

To the incredibly hardworking and talented technical staff Sue Fenech, Gemma Armstrong, Helen Price and Rachel Keeys, thank you so much for your help; often dropping what you were doing to assist me. It also made my day chatting about your artistic talents.

A special thank you to analytical magician Helen Price who spent countless hours schooling me in ICP-MS and MP-AES analysis and sample prep. Helen is *priceless* for good banter and has a characteristic tough love approach “Glass is evil. Put it on a T-shirt” – so I did. I thank you not just for your gobsmacking scientific expertise but also your patience in teaching me, as well as introducing me to the wonderful sport of Bouldering. Helen is a machine whisperer and I’ve unconfirmed suspicions that she herself may be a machine...

HUGE thanks to my brother Angus for our frequent coffee chats at the Startup Hub (you shouted way more than your fair share 谢谢弟弟), and older brother David for regularly asking how Uni was going but once admitting that he wasn’t really interested – also fair. Love ya both.

3 borks for my best companion and confidant, Copper. Despite being a dog, Cop is tertiary qualified by proxy after supporting her human not just through high school, but a Bachelors degree and now a PhD. Most insistent on sitting within a 5m radius, under my desk, or first class (my lap), Cop has learned that Copper is essential to human health. She knows we’re not just talking about the heavy metal.



Copper the Dog

Thanks to my lab buddy Kieran Young who made fumbling through countless mistakes that much easier. “You just do it ay? You just drink lots of water and do it.”

Shoutout to my very good friend Philippa Alvarez for research chats, zooming through the pandemic, and sharing artistic and philosophical interests. “A seed scientist and a comedian walk into a silent meditation retreat? Just when 2020 couldn’t get any weirder.”

– Megan. Likewise, Ichia Chen for your friendship and chats about PhD puddles together. Pip and Ichia’s magnificent scientific achievements inspired me a great deal.

Speaking of badass lady academics, thanks to Katherine Whitworth for PhD pep talks and what she called ‘unsolicited advice’ as well as providing valuable feedback on parts of my thesis. Thanks to Alex Pulkownik for lending me her thesis. A hearty thanks to the numerous research volunteers who helped me process a mountain of samples and/or made an appearance on my podcast ‘HDR *what*’; Julia Fyvie-Neill, Liv Schmidt, Lisa Danzey, Miranda Crossley, Nicola Huber-Smith, Elisabeth Morley, Jagmeet Brar, Rebecca Cohen, Amelia Pezzano, and Jules Kidstan-Lattari. Y’all are ‘chop & chat’ superstars.

Cheers to my ukulele for accompanying me in research presentations including its ‘instrumental’ role in winning the 2019 International Visualise Your Thesis competition.

Thanks to UTS Football WAAB team (the best team ever and innovators of Bruise Day Tuesday), the Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) 2020 KCD cast, and What She Said Comedy for warmly welcoming me into your shenanigans to keep me grooving outside of research. Credit to my friends June, Kien, Dakota and Kieran H. for supporting me through tough times with frank chats and banter. I loved that you repeatedly asked, “How’s Uni going?” or “How long do you have left?” – My answer was always “Yes.”

Finally, I’m blessed with absolutely extraordinary parents who have cheered me on all the way through my education. I can’t thank you both enough for your unwavering love and encouragement. Your support has meant so much to me and I dedicate this thesis to you.

PREFACE

All research presented here was completed for my PhD thesis.

A version of Chapter 3 has been published in the *Australian Journal of Crop Science*.

A version of Chapter 3 was also presented as a poster at the 2019 Ecological Society of Australia's annual conference in Launceston.

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