



Global patterns of leaf nutrient resorption in herbaceous plants

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32 **Abstract.** Nutrient resorption plays an important role in plant ecology because it
33 plays a key role in nutrient conservation strategies of plants. However, our current
34 knowledge about the patterns of nutrient resorption among herbaceous species at a
35 global scale is still inadequate. Here, we present a meta-analysis using a global dataset
36 of nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) resorption efficiency spanning 521 observations
37 and 248 herbaceous species. This analysis shows that the N resorption efficiency
38 (NRE) and P resorption efficiency (PRE) across all herbaceous plant groups are 54.7%
39 and 64.5%, respectively. Across all species, NRE, PRE and N:P resorption ratios
40 (NRE:PRE) vary statistically significantly at a global scale, i.e., NRE, PRE and
41 NRE:PRE increase with increasing latitude but decrease with increasing mean annual
42 temperature (MAT) and mean annual precipitation (MAP). For different functional
43 groups, similar patterns of NRE, PRE and NRE:PRE with respect to latitude, MAT
44 and MAP are observed. Our study are very important complementary to global-scale
45 studies of nutrient resorption and also can inform attempts to model biogeochemical
46 cycling at a global scale.

47

48 **Key words:** global scale, nutrient resorption, latitude, temperature and precipitation,
49 herbaceous species

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52 **1 Introduction**

53 Nutrient resorption, that is, internal nutrient recycling is recognized as most important
54 mechanisms of nutrient conservation that permits plants to re-use nutrients directly
55 and reduces a dependence on external nutrient supplies especially in nutrient-poor
56 environment (Aerts, 1996; Aerts and Chapin, 1999). This conservation mechanism
57 can affect many ecosystem processes such as plant competition, nutrient uptake,
58 reproduction, and carbon cycling (Killingbeck, 1996; Berg and McClaugherty, 2008;
59 Richardson et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2013). Thus, a quantitative understanding the
60 nutrient resorption patterns of plants would offer insights into plant nutrient
61 limitations (Güsewell, 2004; Richardson et al., 2008), possibly the different response
62 of plants to multiple global changes (Yuan and Chen, 2009a; Reed et al., 2012) and
63 nutrient cycling (Aerts and Chapin, 1999; Chapin et al., 2011).

64 Nutrients such as nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) are the main nutrients most
65 frequently restricting plant growth and production globally (Chapin, 1980; Güsewell,
66 2004), the resorption of N and P are paramount importance to plant nutrient
67 conservation (Killingbeck, 1996; Kobe et al., 2005). N and P resorption are often
68 presented as two important indices of internal nutrient recycling in plants, resorption
69 efficiency of N (NRE) and P (PRE), which defined as the proportional resorbed of N
70 and P during leaves senescence: $NRE \text{ or } PRE = [(N \text{ or } P \text{ in green leaves} - N \text{ or } P \text{ in}$
71 $\text{senesced leaves}) / N \text{ or } P \text{ in green leaves}] \times 100\%$ (Killingbeck, 1996; Kobe et al.,
72 2005; Yuan and Chen, 2009a).

73 Significant increase in atmospheric greenhouse gases levels contribute to global



74 warming with significant local and regional changes in precipitation regimes (IPCC,
75 2007). Such great changes in temperature and precipitation have a significant impact
76 not only on nutrient element cycling in those regions where plant growth and
77 development tend to be limited by nutrient availability (Hungate et al., 2003; Austin et
78 al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2004), but also on soil nutrient availability and plant nutrient
79 status (Vitousek, 2004; Yuan et al., 2006; Yuan and Chen, 2009a). Given that changes
80 in these climatic factors can influence the N and P in green (Reich and Oleksyn, 2004;
81 Wright et al., 2004; Chen et al., 2013) and senesced leaves (Read et al., 2003; Parton
82 et al., 2007; Ge et al., 2016), the NRE and PRE may also change with these climatic
83 factors. It is therefore imperative to acquire more information about the NRE and PRE
84 responses to global environmental factors and to predict these responses in light of
85 future climate changes (Gordon and Jackson, 2000; De Frenne et al., 2013; Brant and
86 Chen, 2015).

87 Currently, it is well known that the N and P contents of leaves also exhibit distinct
88 biogeographic patterns (Han et al., 2005; Niklas et al., 2007; Yuan and Chen., 2009b;
89 Vergutz et al., 2012; Kang et al., 2010; Ge et al., 2016). Indeed, there is sufficient
90 evidence to conclude that NRE and PRE also differ in response to ecological variables
91 such as mean annual temperature and rainfall (Richardson et al., 2005; Yuan and Chen,
92 2009a; Vergutz et al., 2012; Tang et al., 2013). In particular, most meta-analyses at a
93 global and regional level have shown that NRE and PRE are related to latitude, mean
94 annual temperature (MAT), and mean annual precipitation (MAP)(Yuan and Chen,
95 2009a; Vergutz et al., 2012; Tang et al., 2013). For example, Yuan and Chen (2009a)



96 found that within different plant functional groups (trees, shrubs, broadleaf species,
97 and conifers), NRE and PRE have opposite trends with respect to MAT and MAP and
98 with latitude, i.e., NRE decreases with increasing MAT and MAP but increases with
99 respect to latitude, whereas PRE increases with respect to MAT and MAP but
100 decreases with latitude. These trends are consistent with the results reported by Tang
101 et al., (2013) in Eastern China for woody plants. In contrast, Vergutz et al., (2012)
102 reveal that both NRE and PRE decrease with MAT and MAP and increase with
103 respect to latitude at a global level. Although great progress has been made on the
104 relationships between NRE and PRE and ambient climatic factors at the local (Wright
105 and Westoby, 2003; Tully et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2017), regional (Tang et al., 2013;
106 Kang et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2016) and global scales (Kobe et al., 2005; Yuan et al.,
107 2009b; Vergutz et al., 2012), such mixed findings present an obstacle to modelling
108 global biogeochemical cycling. In particular, most meta-analyses have reported global
109 trends of nutrient resorption for woody plants, with little data pertaining to herbaceous
110 plants (Vergutz et al., 2012). This gap in our knowledge is particularly important
111 because perennial grasses also play a substantial role in a range of global-scale
112 processes, including productivity and nutrient cycling and limitation, and an
113 understanding nutrient-resorption characteristics of these species has significant
114 global change implication (Hobbie, 1992; Knops et al., 2002; Zhou et al., 2006).
115 Therefore, additional studies of herbaceous plants on the global scale are badly
116 needed.

117 For this purpose, we assembled a global database from published studies to explore



(1) variations in NRE and PRE across a diverse spectrum herbaceous species, and (2) identify how NRE, PRE and N:P ratios of resorption efficiency (NRE:PRE) vary as a function of latitude, MAT, and MAP. We also investigated whether there is a global pattern of NRE, PRE and NRE:PRE with respect to latitude, MAT, and MAP and, if so, whether it differed between different functional species groups (i.e., graminoids vs. forbs and monocots vs. eudicots).

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Data collection

A global meta-analysis was conducted using published data for NRE and PRE (see Appendix S1 in Supporting Information). To ensure data comparability, we used data from papers in which the authors specifically indicated that leaf litter samples came from newly fallen leaves that fell naturally or from freshly filled litter-traps. Further, we excluded data from leguminous plants (N-fixing species), plants grown under greenhouse conditions, and from fertilized plants. We used the Global Gazetteer Version 2.2 (<http://www.fallingrain.com/world/>) and WorldClim 1.4 database (<http://www.worldclim.org/>) to determine latitude, longitude, altitude, temperature and precipitation data (a global dataset with spatial resolution of *c.* 1 km²) if this information was missing in the original paper. In total, 521 observations were collected encompassing 248 herbaceous species from 55 studies. Across this global data set, sites ranged from 0 to 4756m in altitude, from -9 to 27°C in MAT, and from 7.3 to 4000 mm year⁻¹ in MAP. Accordingly, the dataset broadly covered most of the range of MAT and MAP occupied by the majority of herbaceous species and thus permitted a detailed global level of analysis not previously possible.



141 **2.2 Data analysis**

142 The mean values of NRE and PRE between functional species groups (i.e.,
 143 graminoids vs. forbs and monocots vs. eudicots) were assessed using one-way
 144 analysis of variance (ANOVA) and least-significant difference (LSD) *post-hoc*
 145 analyses when effects were significant. Data for NRE, PRE, and NRE:PRE ratios
 146 were log₁₀-transformed before analysis in order to meet assumptions of normality and
 147 homogeneity of variances. Multiple regression analysis was used to identify the
 148 effects of latitude, MAT, and MAP on NRE, PRE and NRE:PRE. The combined
 149 effects of functional type, phylogeny (monocots versus eudicots), and MAT and MAP
 150 on NRE, PRE, and NRE:PRE were determined using analysis of variance. General
 151 linear model (GLM) was also used to examine if the responses of NRE, PRE, and
 152 NRE:PRE to MAT and MAP differed between different functional species groups. All
 153 statistical analyses were performed using R for Window version 3.1.0 statistical
 154 software (R Core Team 2014).

155 **3 Results**

156 For the pooled data, the mean NRE and PRE were 54.7% ($n = 521$, $SD = 0.73\%$) and
 157 64.5% ($n = 360$, $SD = 0.79\%$), respectively. NRE and PRE differed significantly
 158 between the two functional groups. Forbs had lower NRE and PRE (52.8% and 61.2%)
 159 than graminoids (57.3% and 68.4%) ($P < 0.05$), whereas monocots had higher NRE
 160 and PRE (55.8% and 67%) than eudicots (52.9% and 61.3%) ($P < 0.05$) (Fig. 1).

161 NRE, PRE, and NRE:PRE manifested statistically significant trends with altitude,
 162 MAT, and MAP. For the pooled data, NRE, PRE, and NRE:PRE were positively
 163 correlated with latitude and negatively correlated with both MAT and MAP ($P <$



0.0001) (Table S1). Latitude, MAT, and MAP respectively accounted for 6%, 4%, and 5% of the variation observed in NRE, 8%, 6%, and 6% of variation observed in PRE, and 4%, 4% and 2% of variation observed in NRE:PRE. MAT, MAP, and latitude collectively explained 11-19% of the variation observed in NRE, PRE, and NRE:PRE (Table 1). Functional type and climatic data collectively explained 10%, 16% and 7% of global variation observed in NRE, PRE, and NRE:PRE (Table 2).

Similar patterns of NRE, PRE, and NRE:PRE with respect to latitude, MAT, and MAP were observed for the two life-form groups (forbs vs. graminoids) and for the two phylogenetic groups (monocots vs. eudicots) (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). Although there were differences between regression slopes between forbs and graminoids and between monocots and eudicots (Table 3), the responses of NRE, PRE, and NRE:PRE to MAT and MAP were qualitatively similar.

4 Discussion

4.1 Functional traits and differences in NRE and PRE at the global level

We evaluated leaf NRE and PRE in herbaceous species using a global dataset. The mean values of NRE and PRE across all the herbaceous species are 54.7% and 64.5%, respectively. These values are only slightly higher than values reported by Aerts, (1996) based on a comparatively few data for only herbaceous species at a global scale (i.e., 50% and 57%, respectively), but lower than values reported by Jiang et al., (2012) for 18 herbaceous species in the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau (i.e., 65.2% and 67.4%). However, these values are markedly higher than those reported for woody plants by Yuan et al., (2009a) (i.e., 47% and 54%, respectively, at a global level) or by Tang et al., (2013) (i.e., 49% and 51%, respectively, at the regional scale). Nutrient



187 resorption efficiency of herbaceous species show obviously higher values than the
 188 values of woody species. The relatively higher nutrient resorption efficiency has been
 189 interpreted to indicate that non-woody species are more well adapted to nutrient stress
 190 through high internal N and P recycling (Norris and Reich, 2009; Freschet et al.,
 191 2010).

192 Additionally, NRE and PRE differ significantly between graminoids and forbs at a
 193 global scale. Both NRE and PRE are significantly higher in the former functional type
 194 compared to forbs (Fig. 1). This finding is consistent with previous observations
 195 (Aerts, 1996; Jiang et al., 2012) and has been interpreted to indicate that graminoids
 196 have a competitive advantage over forbs, which provides additional evidence that
 197 productivity, foliar nutrient allocation, and leaf biomass may lead to the higher
 198 nutrient reabsorption in graminoids compared to forbs (Aerts and Berendse, 1989).
 199 Likewise, monocots have higher NRE and PRE compared to eudicots (Fig. 1).
 200 However, in this context, it is important to note that the data for monocots are biased
 201 because approximately one half of all of the monocots in our data set are graminoids,
 202 further investigations are warranted to be conclusive.

203 **4.2 Climatic variations in NRE and PRE at the global level**

204 This study presents the first global-scale analyses on how nutrient resorption of N and
 205 P differentially vary with environmental variables across a broad spectrum of
 206 herbaceous species. Based on this worldwide level of analysis, both NRE and PRE
 207 increase with latitude and decrease with MAT and MAP across all herbaceous species.
 208 Plants from tropical habitats (higher temperatures) have lower NRE and PRE,
 209 whereas plants from high-latitude habitats (lower-temperatures) have higher NRE and



210 PRE. These trends hold true for each of the two functional types as well as when the
211 data are pooled (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

212 In terms of NRE, the trends reported here are similar to those of Yuan and Chen,
213 (2009a) and Tang et al., (2013) who found that NRE increased with increasing latitude
214 but decreased with increasing MAT and MAP across woody species. Collectively,
215 these findings support the idea that plants growing at low latitudes, or in areas with
216 high precipitation or temperature are on average more P-limited and would be
217 expected to have lower NRE (Austin and Vitousek, 1998; Aerts and Chapin, 1999;
218 Sterner and Elser, 2002; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004; Santiago et al., 2005). Our results
219 are also supported by findings from common-garden experiments (Oyarzabal et al.,
220 2007), which report a negative relationship between NRE and both MAT and MAP.
221 However, the trends we observed differ from those reported by Aerts et al., (2007),
222 who found that controlled temperature and precipitation treatment had little or no
223 effect on NRE in a high-latitude subarctic peatland. This inconsistency can be
224 attributed to the fact that Aerts et al., (2007) used short-term temperature and
225 precipitation manipulations on a single plant community, whereas our study examined
226 different plant communities across large environmental gradients.

227 Regarding the NRE pattern reported here, our results are in accordance with the
228 global patterns observed across species by Vergutz et al., (2012) and the regional
229 patterns observed for a single species by Sun et al., (2015). In turn, it is the opposite
230 of that reported by Yuan and Chen, (2009a) and by Tang et al., (2013), who observed
231 that PRE is negatively correlated with latitude and positively correlated with MAT



232 and MAP for woody species. The opposite patterns of PRE in woody and herbaceous
233 species could reflect different plant growth form conservation strategies in responses
234 to climatic differences. It is generally agreed that NRE and PRE patterns are
235 influenced significantly by soil nutrient availability, which can affect plant
236 conservation strategies including nutrient resorption (Oleksyn et al., 2003, Yuan et al.,
237 2005). Previous studies have shown that the effects of temperature and precipitation
238 can lead to limited P in tropical soils, which are generally regarded as older and
239 offering low P availability (Reich and Oleksyn, 2004; Vitousek, 2004). Consequently,
240 it is generally believed that plants growing in tropical soils are more likely to have
241 higher PRE than plants growing in temperate soils (Vitousek, 1984; Aerts, 1996; Yuan
242 and Chen, 2015). However, the climatic patterns of PRE reported here do not manifest
243 this trend. We attribute this to the considerable heterogeneity in tropical soil nutrient
244 conditions and availability (Richter and Babbar, 1991; Reed et al., 2012) that vary
245 across large temporal and spatial scales (Hedin et al., 2009). Unfortunately, data
246 recording this variability are currently unavailable. Further studies are required to
247 resolve this apparent paradox.

248 The NRE and PRE reported here may also reflect the nutrient conservation
249 strategies of herbaceous species growing at high latitudes with low MAT and MAP.
250 Cold temperatures and drought are known to inhibit the nutrient uptake of roots and
251 thus constrain the metabolic activity of herbaceous plants (Sun et al., 2015).
252 Herbaceous species require some adaptive nutrient conservation strategies to reduce
253 their dependence on the supply of soil nutrients (e.g., rapid growth, high leaf nutrient



254 contents, and an accelerated life history, Adler et al., 2014) that can collectively
255 reduce N and P acquisition by roots and their associated ectomycorrhiza (Lambers et
256 al., 2008). In turn, the relatively high degradation capacity of nutrient (Tsujii et al.,
257 2017) would encourage high NRE and PRE as an adaptation.

258 **4.3 Climatic variations in NRE:PRE at the global level**

259 The patterns of NRE:PRE reported here differs from those reported by Sun et al.,
260 (2015), who found that NRE : PRE has no significant correlation with either latitude
261 or MAP and only a very weak statistical relationship with MAT. The difference
262 between the findings of Sun et al., (2015) and ours may be explained by the fact that
263 Sun et al., (2015) focused on only a single species at a regional scale, whereas our
264 results reflect interspecific variation at a global scale. In contrast, our findings are
265 consistent with the global patterns observed for woody species by Reed et al., (2012)
266 and by Han et al., (2013), who report that NRE:PRE increases with latitude and
267 decreases with MAT and MAP. The NRE:PRE pattern we observe provides indirect
268 evidence indicating that plants growing in the tropics with higher MAT and MAP are
269 more frequently P limited, whereas plants growing in higher latitudes with lower
270 MAT and MAP are often N limited (Austin and Vitousek, 1998; Sterner and Elser,
271 2002; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004). Because nutrient availability can strongly influence
272 nutrient resorption (Pugnaire and Chapin, 1993). NRE is generally expected to be
273 higher (and PRE lower) at higher latitude compared to the tropics. However, the PRE
274 pattern reported here is not consistent with this expectation. As noted, we speculate
275 that the acclimation responses of herbaceous species to soil nutrient availability and
276 the heterogeneity of tropical soil nutrient content help to explain this apparent



277 contradiction.

278

279 **5 Conclusion**

280 Our analyses indicate that, when viewed at a worldwide level, more than half of all

281 leaf N and P is resorbed during senescence in herbaceous species at a global level.

282 Nevertheless, N and P resorption efficiencies and their ratios manifest discernable

283 significant biogeographic patterns. Specifically, NRE, PRE, and NRE:PRE are

284 positively correlated with latitude and negatively correlated with MAT and MAP.

285 These patterns hold for two functional types (graminoids and forbs) and for

286 phylogenetic groups (monocots and eudicots), indicating that they are sensitive to

287 functional or phylogenetic traits. These trends can inform attempts to model potential

288 changes in ecosystem dynamics in response to changing climate and attempts to

289 model biogeochemical cycling at a global scale.

290

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295

296 **Author contributions**

297 The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

298

299 **Competing interests**

300 The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

301

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503 Figure Legends

504 Fig. 1. Mean nitrogen resorption efficiency (NRE) and phosphorus resorption

505 efficiency (PRE) for functional types (forbs, F versus graminoids, G) and

506 phylogenetic groups (monocots, M versus eudicots, E). Different letters (a and b)

507 indicate significant differences at the 0.05 level. Error bars are standard errors. The

508 number of observations is given within each bar.

509 Fig. 2. Nutrient resorption efficiencies (NRE and PRE) and nutrient resorption

510 efficiency ratio (NRE:PRE) in relation to latitude ($^{\circ}$), mean annual temperature

511 (MAT, $^{\circ}\text{C}$), and mean annual precipitation (MAP, mm). Red and blue circles represent

512 data points for graminoids and forbs, respectively. The coefficients of determination

513 (r^2) and P are provided in each panel for graminoids (the first line) and forbs (the

514 second line).

515 Fig. 3. Nutrient resorption efficiencies (NRE and PRE) and nutrient resorption

516 efficiency ratio (NRE:PRE) in relation to latitude ($^{\circ}$), mean annual temperature

517 (MAT, $^{\circ}\text{C}$), and mean annual precipitation (MAP, mm). Red and blue circles represent

518 data points for monocots and eudicots, respectively. The coefficients of determination

519 (r^2) and P are shown in each panel for eudicots (the first line) and monocots (the

520 second line).

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528 Table 1 Multiple regression analyses of nitrogen resorption efficiency (NRE),
 529 phosphorus resorption efficiency (PRE), and their ratio (NRE:PRE) in relation to
 530 latitude, mean annual temperature (MAT, °C) and mean annual precipitation (MAP,
 531 mm).

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Trait	<i>n</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Latitude <i>F</i>	MAT <i>F</i>	MAP <i>F</i>	MAT × MAP <i>F</i>	Latitude × MAT × MAP <i>F</i>
NRE	521	0.106	42.22 ^{***}	1.28 ^{ns}	3.15 [*]	0.33 ^{ns}	4.46 [*]
PRE	360	0.189	39.49 ^{***}	1.63 ^{ns}	0.25 ^{ns}	10.86 ^{**}	26.60 ^{***}
NRE:PRE	357	0.124	11.92 ^{***}	0.96 ^{ns}	4.00 [*]	2.07 ^{ns}	0.01 ^{ns}

533 *n* is sample number. *F* ratios and significance are shown for each of the dependent variables (ns, *P* > 0.05; ^{*}*P* <
 534 0.05; ^{**}*P* < 0.01; ^{***}*P* < 0.001).

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554 Table 2 Results of general linear models of nitrogen resorption efficiency (NRE),
 555 phosphorus resorption efficiency (PRE), and their ratio (NRE:PRE) in relation to
 556 functional type, latitude, mean annual temperature (MAT, °C), and mean annual
 557 precipitation (MAP, mm).

Trait	<i>n</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Phylogeny <i>F</i>	Life-form <i>F</i>	Latitude <i>F</i>	MAT <i>F</i>	MAP <i>F</i>
NRE	521	0.100	5.48 [*]	5.10 ^{***}	26.67 ^{***}	0.95 ^{ns}	3.61 [*]
PRE	360	0.161	0.21 ^{ns}	8.50 ^{***}	30.92 ^{***}	1.84 ^{ns}	0.37 ^{ns}
NRE:PRE	357	0.073	3.73 [*]	2.12 [*]	10.43 ^{**}	1.16 ^{ns}	3.70 [*]

558 *n* is sample number. *F* ratios and significance are shown for each of the dependent variables (ns, *P* > 0.05; ^{*}*P* <
 559 0.05; ^{**}*P* < 0.01; ^{***}*P* < 0.001).

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574 Table 3 Results of general linear models (F -values for model terms and model R^2) of
 575 nitrogen resorption efficiency (NRE), phosphorus resorption efficiency (PRE), and
 576 N:P ratio of resorption efficiency (NRE:PRE) using functional group (FG, life-form)
 577 and phylogeny (ME) as factors and mean annual temperature (MAT) and mean annual
 578 precipitation (MAP) as continuous variables.

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Trait	NRE	PRE	NRE:PRE
FG	3.45**	6.13***	2.71*
MAT	22.46***	31.92***	10.27**
MAP	12.01***	1.92 ^{ns}	2.08 ^{ns}
MAT × MAP	1.20 ^{ns}	12.19***	1.85 ^{ns}
FG × MAT	3.99**	0.75 ^{ns}	1.66 ^{ns}
FG × MAP	2.13 ^{ns}	3.07*	2.18 ^{ns}
FG × MAT × MAP	0.35 ^{ns}	5.62**	3.57*
Model R^2	0.12	0.21	0.11
ME	6.38*	20.75***	5.54*
MAT	22.27***	33.01***	10.00**
MAP	11.90***	1.98 ^{ns}	2.03 ^{ns}
MAT × MAP	0.61	9.27**	1.35 ^{ns}
ME × MAT	6.49*	2.50 ^{ns}	3.72*
ME × MAP	4.79*	13.37***	0.92 ^{ns}
ME × MAT × MAP	2.45 ^{ns}	19.22***	1.76 ^{ns}
Model R^2	0.10	0.22	0.08

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ns, $P > 0.05$; * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$



Fig. 1

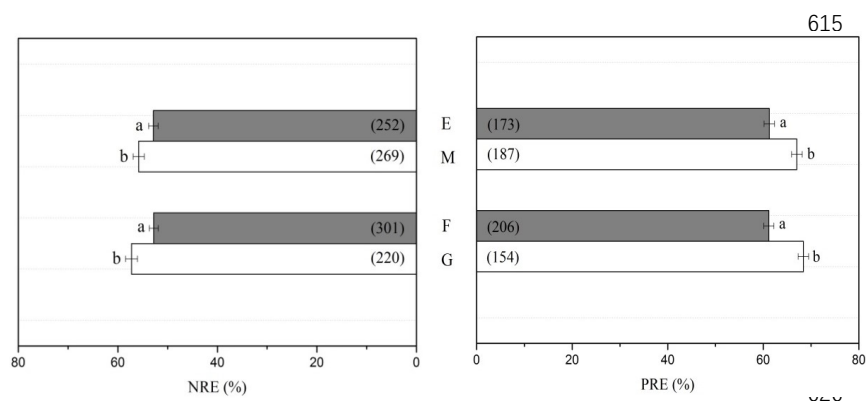




Fig. 2

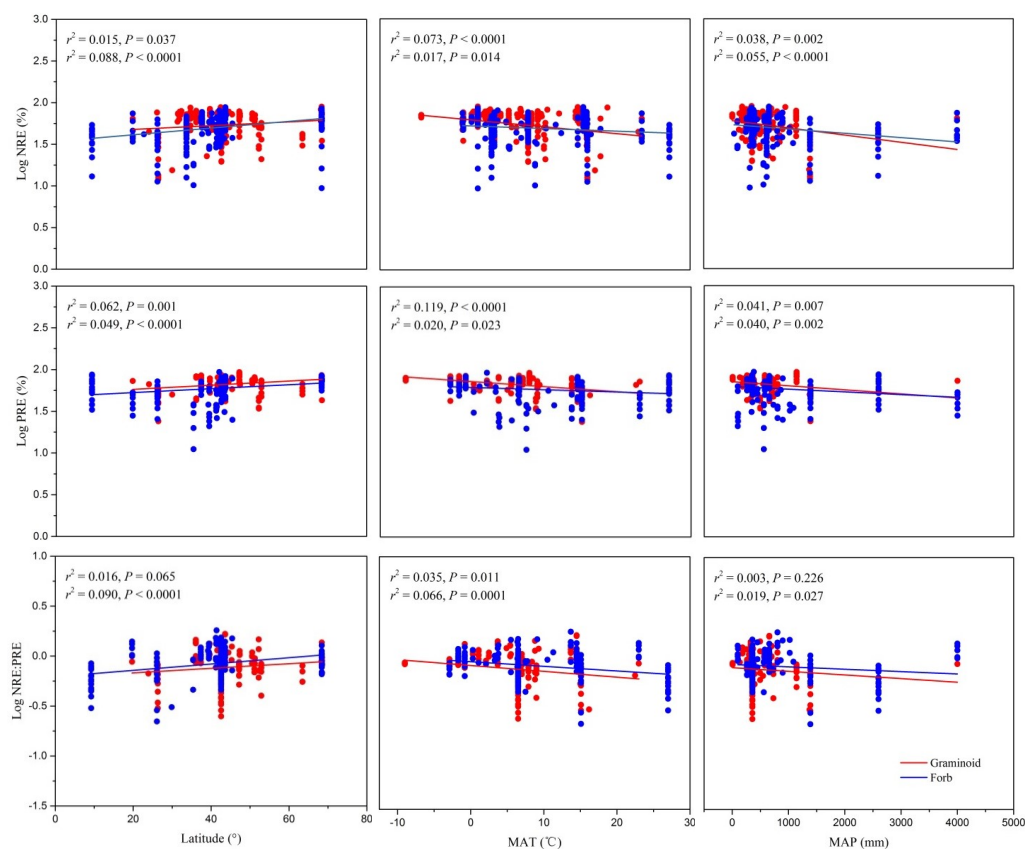




Fig. 3

