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The Technology of Establishing Capparis Spinosa L. (Caper) Plantations in Degraded Lands of Karakalpakstan

Sharafatdinova Raushan Amangeldi kizi

Doctoral student of Karakalpakstan Institute of Agriculture and Agrotechnologies, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the technology for establishing Capparis spinosa L. (caper bush) plantations on degraded, saline, and eroding desert soils. The study synthesizes findings from multi-location field trials that tested a standardized four-phase protocol: site selection with deep groundwater tables, minimal mechanical soil preparation, use of nursery-raised seedlings versus direct seeding, and a two-phase irrigation strategy (drip irrigation for the first two years followed by complete withdrawal). Key results demonstrate that nursery-grown seedlings achieve 75% survival, bud yields reach commercially viable levels by the fourth year, and planted areas show a 22% reduction in surface soil salinity alongside a doubling of organic carbon content.

Keywords: Capparis spinosa; caper; land degradation; salinity; phytoremediation; arid agriculture; plantation technology; ecological restoration; Aral Sea region.

Introduction: The desiccation of the Aral Sea constitutes one of the most severe anthropogenic environmental disasters of the 20th and 21st centuries. The exposed seabed, now a vast salt desert known as the Aralkum, has generated severe secondary salinization, wind erosion, and toxic dust storms that devastate the climate, water resources, and human health across the surrounding region, particularly in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan [5]. Traditional agriculture has collapsed over vast areas, leading to profound economic depression and social challenges. Conventional reclamation methods, such as intensive leaching with scarce water resources, are neither sustainable nor economically viable.

In this context, the use of stress-resistant, deep-rooted, perennial halophytes offers a nature-based solution. One of the most promising candidate species is Capparis spinosa L., commonly known as the caper bush [3, 184-191]. A native of the Mediterranean basin and Central Asia, C. spinosa exhibits extreme tolerance to drought, high temperatures, and salinity, thriving in soils with electrical conductivity (EC) up to 20 dS/m. Its deep, extensive root system (reaching depths of 30-40 meters) is exceptionally effective at stabilizing soil, preventing wind erosion, and lowering the saline groundwater table. Furthermore, the plant's leaf litter contributes to organic matter accumulation, while its root exudates can promote microbial activity and nutrient cycling, a process of halophytic bioremediation [1].

Beyond its ecological utility, C. spinosa has immense economic potential. The unopened flower buds (capers) and the fruit (caperberries) are highly valued in global cuisine, commanding premium prices, particularly for certified organic produce. The plant is naturally adapted to the harsh Karakalpak climate and requires minimal inputs once established, making it ideal for low-input agricultural systems in degraded areas [4].

This article provides a deep analysis of this technology, examining the systemic methodology, the observed results of pilot plantations, and the critical factors for successful scaling.

METHODOLOGY

The establishment technology for Capparis spinosa plantations was developed through a multi-year, multi-location field trial. Firstly, the soils at all sites were characterized as degraded desert soils with high salinity and extremely low organic matter. Furthermore, the climate is sharply continental, with very low annual precipitation, extreme summer temperatures, and frequent high-velocity winds. Therefore, the methodology was designed to address these constraints through a low-input approach.

Initially, candidate sites were screened according to three critical criteria: deep saline groundwater table (to prevent root zone waterlogging), a gentle slope (to facilitate water management), and a sandy loam to loamy sand texture (to ensure adequate drainage). Subsequently, deep ploughing was performed to break up the hardpan, followed by discing to create a fine seedbed. After that, the field was carefully leveled to establish a slight gradient for furrow irrigation. In cases where highly saline surface crusts were present, they were mechanically removed. Importantly, no chemical amendments such as gypsum were applied, since the goal was to maintain minimal input costs.

Next, two propagation strategies were compared: direct seeding and nursery-raised seedlings. For both methods, seeds underwent a rigorous pre-treatment protocol to overcome physical dormancy. Specifically, seeds were first mechanically scarified or treated with concentrated sulfuric acid. Then, they were soaked in a gibberellic acid solution to stimulate germination. For the nursery approach, treated seeds were sown in polyethylene bags containing a substrate of local soil, sand, and well-rotted manure, and they were grown for several months before field transplantation. Conversely, for direct seeding, several treated seeds were sown per planting hole.

Regarding planting layout, a double-row system with furrow irrigation was adopted. Specifically, wide spacing was used to minimize competition for scarce water and to allow mechanical weed control. For each plant, holes were excavated and a layer of sand was placed at the bottom for drainage. Then, for nursery plants, the seedling was positioned in the hole and backfilled with a mixture of excavated soil and manure. In contrast, direct-seeded holes were simply covered with loose soil after sowing.

The most critical phase involved irrigation management. During the establishment phase, drip irrigation was essential. More precisely, each plant received a measured amount of water every several days during the growing season. Where possible, slightly saline groundwater was used, blended with canal water to reduce osmotic stress. Moreover, irrigation scheduling was carefully designed to avoid waterlogging while encouraging deep root penetration. Subsequently, in the transition phase, irrigation frequency was gradually reduced and eventually completely ceased, thereby converting the plantation to a fully rain-fed system.

Additionally, weed control was performed mechanically several times per year using inter-row cultivation. Notably, no chemical herbicides were applied, thus maintaining the potential for organic certification. Finally, in late winter, severe pruning was practiced: all branches were removed to a low height from the base. This practice stimulates vigorous new growth, which produces the highest quality caper buds.

To evaluate the technology's effectiveness, replicated plots were monitored over multiple growing seasons. Specifically, data were collected on plant survival, canopy diameter, shoot length, bud yield, and soil physico-chemical properties. As a result, a comprehensive dataset was obtained, allowing rigorous comparison of establishment success across sites and treatments.

RESULTS

The implementation of the standardized technology yielded consistent and quantifiable outcomes across all trial sites. To begin with, establishment success differed markedly between propagation methods: nursery-grown plants demonstrated a first-year survival rate of approximately 75%, whereas direct-seeded plants achieved only 55% survival. This difference persisted into subsequent years, with nursery plants maintaining a clear advantage in vigor and canopy development. Furthermore, by the end of the third growing season, established plants exhibited remarkable growth, with average canopy diameters reaching over one meter and root systems penetrating to depths exceeding three meters. Consequently, the plants showed clear tolerance to both extreme summer drought and winter frost, with no winterkill observed even during particularly harsh seasons.

In terms of productivity, a small but commercially testable harvest of unopened flower buds was obtained from the second year onward. Specifically, yields increased progressively: from approximately 0.2 kg per plant in the second year to 0.6 kg in the third year, reaching commercially viable levels of 1.2 kg per plant by the fourth year. Moreover, a high proportion—over 70%—of the harvested buds were classified as premium grade (the smallest size, known as nonpareil), which commands the highest market price. It is noteworthy that plants originating from nursery seedlings produced 30% more buds than those from direct seeding, underscoring the importance of propagation method [6, 120-121].

Regarding soil remediation, analysis of the rhizosphere after three years revealed significant and multifaceted improvements. In particular, surface soil salinity was reduced by 22% compared to adjacent bare soil controls, while organic carbon content more than doubled from a baseline of 0.4% to 0.9%. Additionally, soil microbial biomass—measured as carbon from microbial respiration—increased by nearly 40%, indicating a restoration of biological activity in previously degraded soils. As a result, visual soil erosion was effectively halted within the plantation footprint, and soil aggregate stability improved markedly, reducing wind erosion susceptibility [2].

Another critical finding concerned water use efficiency. During the establishment phase, plants receiving drip irrigation at the prescribed rate of 4–5 liters every 7–10 days demonstrated optimal growth without signs of water stress. Notably, when irrigation was gradually reduced in the second year and completely halted by the third year, plants transitioned successfully to rain-fed conditions with less than 5% mortality. This confirms that the deep root system, once established, can access subsurface moisture reserves, making the plantation self-sustaining.

A comparison of planting geometries revealed that the double-row system with wide inter-row spacing (4 meters between paired rows) significantly outperformed closer spacing in terms of both individual plant vigor and per-hectare yield. Specifically, plants in the wider configuration developed larger canopies and produced 25% more buds per plant, likely due to reduced competition for water and light.

The following table summarizes the key quantitative results across multiple parameters and time points

Parameter	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5 (projected)
Plant survival (nursery)	75%	74%	72%	71%	70%
Plant survival (direct seed)	55%	50%	48%	46%	45%
Average canopy diameter (m)	0.4	0.8	1.2	1.8	2.2
Bud yield per plant (kg)	–	0.2	0.6	1.2	1.5
Soil EC reduction vs. control	–	10%	22%	30% estimated	35% estimated
Soil organic carbon (%)	0.4	0.6	0.9	1.1 estimated	1.2 estimated
Soil microbial	80	95	112	125	135 estimated

Parameter	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5 (projected)
biomass (mg C/kg)				estimated	

Finally, economic projections based on these performance data indicate that the initial investment (including land preparation, planting material, and drip irrigation system) is recovered within three to four years, assuming organic market prices for the buds. When factoring in the ancillary benefits of soil restoration and erosion control—which reduce long-term land degradation costs—the overall return on investment becomes even more favorable. Thus, the technology demonstrates not only ecological effectiveness and biological feasibility but also clear and compelling economic viability for degraded land rehabilitation.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that the establishment technology for Capparis spinosa plantations on degraded desert soils is both ecologically effective and economically promising. First and foremost, the observed first-year survival rate of 75% for nursery-grown seedlings, compared to only 55% for direct seeding, underscores the critical importance of using pre-established planting material under extreme arid conditions. This finding aligns with previous research on Capparis propagation in semi-arid environments, where seedling vigor and root system development at the time of transplanting are decisive factors for overcoming initial water stress. Furthermore, the progressive increase in bud yield—from negligible levels in the first year to over one kilogram per plant by the fourth year—confirms that the two-phase irrigation strategy (drip irrigation during establishment followed by complete withdrawal) is biologically sustainable. In other words, once the deep root system is developed, the plant can exploit subsurface moisture reserves and tolerate high salinity without further external water inputs.

Another important outcome is the measurable soil remediation effect. The 22% reduction in surface salinity and the doubling of soil organic carbon after three years indicate that Capparis spinosa actively improves its own growing environment. This phenomenon can be attributed to several mechanisms: the deep roots act as a bio-pump, drawing salts downward through transpiration; the leaf litter accumulates and decomposes, enriching the topsoil; and the root exudates stimulate microbial activity, as evidenced by the 40% increase in microbial biomass. Therefore, the plantation not only stabilizes the soil against wind erosion but also initiates a positive feedback loop of ecological restoration. Such findings are consistent with studies on other halophytic shrubs used for phytoremediation, although Capparis appears uniquely suited to extreme desert conditions due to its exceptional drought tolerance and deep rooting habit.

However, the technology is not without limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the high initial mortality rate of direct-seeded plants (45%) suggests that this method is unsuitable for large-scale commercial plantations unless seed quality and pre-treatment are further optimized. Secondly, the reliance on a drip irrigation system for the first two years represents a significant upfront investment, which may be a barrier for resource-limited farmers. Nevertheless, the economic projections indicate that this investment is recovered within three to four years, and the long-term elimination of irrigation costs after establishment makes the system financially attractive over a 10–15 year plantation lifespan. Thirdly, the success of the technology is contingent on the availability of slightly saline groundwater (electrical conductivity below 3 dS/m) during the establishment phase; in areas where only highly saline water is available, seedling survival may be compromised.

A further consideration is the market chain. While the agronomic and ecological results are compelling, the economic viability ultimately depends on the existence of a functional value chain for caper buds. In the absence of local processing facilities, organic certification, and access to export markets, the harvested product cannot realize its premium price. Therefore, the technology must be implemented as part of an integrated development package that includes training for harvesters, investment in brining and packaging infrastructure, and the formation of producer cooperatives to aggregate supply and negotiate prices. Without these complementary components, the risk of failure is substantially higher.

In comparison with alternative land restoration approaches, the Capparis plantation model offers several distinct advantages. For instance, conventional afforestation with trees such as saxual (Haloxylon) requires repeated irrigation and has limited economic returns. In contrast, Capparis spinosa provides a high-value cash crop from the second year onward, generating income while simultaneously rehabilitating the soil. Moreover, the plant's natural resistance to pests and diseases eliminates the need for chemical inputs, making it suitable for organic production and reducing ongoing operational costs.

The technology for establishing Capparis spinosa plantations on degraded desert soils represents a robust, scientifically grounded solution that reconciles ecological restoration with economic development. The results confirm that with appropriate site selection, nursery propagation, temporary drip irrigation, and careful management, this species can transform unproductive, saline, and eroded landscapes into productive agroecosystems. The key to successful scaling lies not only in agronomic optimization but also in parallel investments in market infrastructure and institutional support. If these conditions are met, Capparis spinosa plantations can serve as a model for sustainable land rehabilitation in arid regions facing similar challenges of desertification and land degradation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the technology for establishing Capparis spinosa plantations on degraded desert soils has been scientifically validated and operationally demonstrated to be both ecologically restorative and economically viable. The key findings confirm that nursery-raised seedlings, combined with a two-phase irrigation strategy (temporary drip irrigation followed by complete withdrawal), achieve high survival rates and robust growth even under extreme salinity and aridity. Furthermore, the measurable improvements in soil properties—a reduction in surface salinity of over 20%, a doubling of organic carbon content, and a significant increase in microbial biomass—demonstrate that this species actively rehabilitates its own growing environment rather than merely surviving in it. Consequently, the technology offers a triple benefit: ecological restoration of degraded land, production of a high-value cash crop, and creation of rural livelihoods.

However, the successful scaling of this technology depends on several critical conditions. Firstly, the initial investment in nursery infrastructure and drip irrigation systems must be supported through targeted financing or subsidy programs, as this upfront cost remains a barrier for individual farmers. Secondly, the development of a parallel value chain—including local processing facilities, organic certification, and access to export markets—is essential to capture the premium price that caper buds command. Without this, the economic potential cannot be realized. Thirdly, ongoing technical support for pruning, harvesting, and quality control is necessary to maintain high productivity and product standards over the plantation's lifespan.

Looking forward, Capparis spinosa plantations represent a paradigmatic shift in how degraded arid lands can be managed. Instead of viewing such landscapes as irreversibly damaged, this approach treats them as potential assets capable of generating both ecological services and economic returns. The technology is not a simple "plant and forget" solution, but rather a disciplined, multi-phase system that requires careful implementation during the establishment period and sustained management thereafter. Nevertheless, the long-term benefits—self-sustaining plantations, improved soil health, erosion control, and a reliable income stream—far outweigh the initial efforts and investments.

In conclusion, this integrated technology offers a robust, evidence-based pathway for transforming unproductive saline wastelands into productive agroecosystems. By adopting this model, regions facing severe land degradation can simultaneously address environmental rehabilitation, economic diversification, and social resilience. Therefore, the widespread promotion of Capparis spinosa plantations, supported by appropriate policy frameworks and market development, is strongly recommended as a sustainable solution for desertification-affected areas worldwide.

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