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Water-harvesting polymer coatings for plant leaves†

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Climate change-induced water scarcity threatens global plant life and agricultural productivity. Here, we present a novel atmospheric water harvesting (AWH) coating designed to alleviate heat and dry stress potentially. This polymer coating utilizes block copolymers carrying catechol-anchoring groups, specifically poly(dopamine methacrylamide) (PDOMA), to adhere to plant leaves. As a hydrophilic block, either poly((oligoethylene glycol) methacrylate) (POEGMA) or the thermoresponsive block poly(*N*-isopropylacrylamide) (PNIPAM) was used, which can adsorb water from the air during cooler periods in its hydrophilic state. As the temperature increases above the lower critical solution temperature (LCST) of PNIPAM, the polymer transitions to a hydrophobic state, releasing the captured water to the leaf surface. We synthesized PNIPAM-*b*-PDOMA copolymers via RAFT polymerization and confirmed their composition (IR, ¹H NMR and ¹H DOSY NMR spectroscopy) with a cloud point temperature of 33 ± 1 °C. The coatings were applied to model substrates (SiO₂, polyethylene) and corn leaves. Compared to uncoated controls, coated substrates demonstrated a substantial increase in water uptake from humid air, absorbing up to 50 wt% of the coating's weight. The coating's adherence and thermoresponsive behavior were confirmed on corn leaves through contact angle measurements, showing a shift from hydrophilic (29 ± 3°) below the LCST to hydrophobic (80 ± 2°) above the LCST, closer to the native, hydrophobic leaf (110 ± 10°). Crucially, photosynthesis induction experiments revealed that the coating did not negatively impact the plant's natural photosynthetic processes. This study establishes a promising copolymer platform for developing AWH coatings to support plants in the face of increasing drought conditions.

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1. Introduction

Climate change brings undue stress to plants due to extreme weather conditions, such as heat waves, storms, droughts, *etc.*¹ Higher average temperatures in summer² as well as longer and more common heatwaves create increased dry-stress for plants and influence crop yield or contribute to forest dieback.³ Several studies have demonstrated negative impact of climate change on plant growth over the past 50 years.⁴ The yield trends of crops predict shortages for 2050 to feed the increasing world population.⁵ For example, corn is one of the major crops (~1.2 billion metric tonnes¹⁸) produced worldwide,

which is known to be sensitive to water stress resulting in decreased production rates.³ Active measures to support plants against heat-stress are urgently needed.

Generally, plants can have two types of stress: biotic and abiotic. Biotic stress comes from biological sources such as pests or fungi.⁶ Abiotic stress is caused by physical parameters such as temperature, droughts, or floods.⁷ These stress factors can negatively impact the development and quality of plants and crops.⁸ Specifically, we look at alleviating stress caused by water scarcity. Water scarcity limits crop growth initially in the gas exchange and thus photosynthesis. Prolonged and intense dry-stress results in low nutrient transport in the plant.

A promising method to cope with dry-stress could be the harvesting of water from the atmosphere. To apply such a system on plants, there are several requirements to be met, which include low energy consumption, easy applicability, robustness, and stability.⁹ Current atmospheric water harvesting (AWH) systems, which are not applied on plants, tend to fall short of these requirements. Today's systems include metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), crystalline, porous structures containing inorganic coordination centers, and organic linkers.¹⁰ For example, Kim *et al.*¹¹ synthesized a

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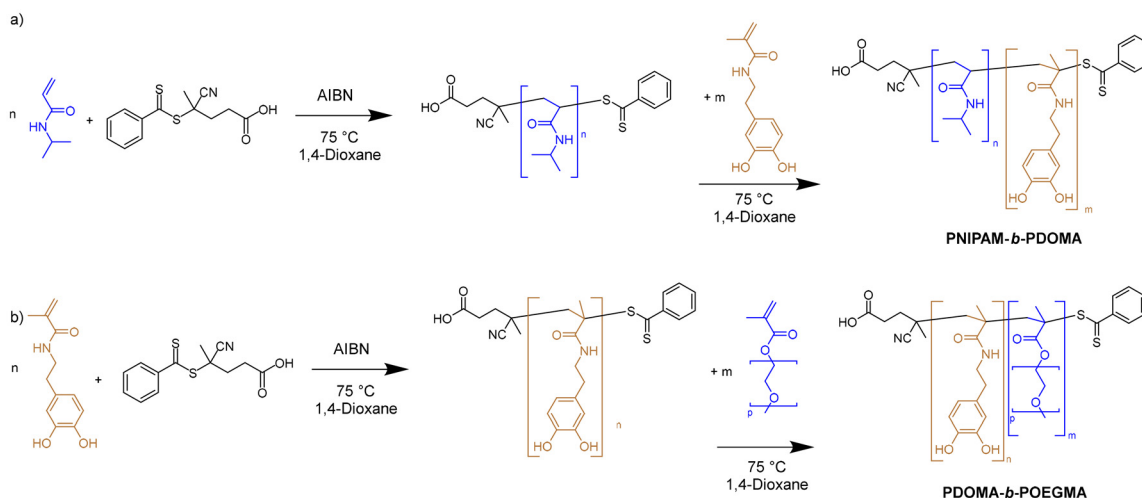
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ing its ability to continue supporting photosynthesis. We believe that the direct coating of living plant leaves can be an active measure against dry-stress in future agriculture and horticulture.

To confirm the chain extension of PNIPAM after DOMA addition, ^1H DOSY NMR was conducted (Fig. S3†).²¹ From the DOSY spectrum, we concluded that both the resonances of DOMA and NIPAM monomers exhibited a similar diffusion coefficient, indicating successful chain extension and the formation of a block copolymer. Through turbidity measurements, the cloud point of the copolymer was determined to be

The diagram illustrates the synthesis and application of the poly(amide-imine) coating. On the left, the chemical structures of 2,4-dihydroxybenzoic acid and N-(2-hydroxyethyl)maleimide are shown reacting to form a polymer. The polymer is then applied as a coating to silicon or polyethylene surfaces and corn leaves. The coating is shown as a layer of orange polymer chains with blue cross-links, protecting the underlying surface.

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Scheme 2 Synthesis of block copolymers: (a) synthesis of PNIPAM-*b*-PDOMA and (b) PDOMA-*b*-POEGMA by sequential RAFT polymerization.

33.1 ± 0.9 °C in distilled water (Fig. S5†), which is in the range of 30–40 °C of PNIPAM copolymers.¹⁷

The block copolymers were deposited on different substrates. First, silicon substrates were coated with 120 μL of a 2 wt% solution of the respective block copolymer in ethanol (drop-cast from a glass pipette). After drop-casting and evaporation of the solvent, a coating of 900 ± 30 nm for PNIPAM-*b*-PDOMA and 650 ± 50 nm for PDOMA-*b*-POEGMA was obtained as determined from AFM in the tapping mode (Fig. S6†). As plant leaves have hydrophobic surfaces with waxy cuticles, we investigated the water harvesting abilities of the block copolymer coatings on a PE model substrate. Catechol units had been shown in our previous studies to be capable of anchoring polymers to the very hydrophobic and normally inert surface of PE.²⁰ Contact angle data for the PE coated with PNIPAM-*b*-PDOMA are $82 \pm 10^\circ$ for the uncoated substrate and $45 \pm 7^\circ$ for the coated substrate, clearly indicating increased hydrophilicity. The coated PE substrates were placed overnight in a glass chamber through which a 100% RH airflow is blown (Fig. S7†). The adsorbed water is measured by weighing the substrates before and after their time in the chamber. The uncoated substrate collected almost no water, *i.e.* a value of 2.2 ± 2.0 mg was measured (condensation of water was observed on the hydrophilic glass chamber but not on the bare hydrophobic PE substrates). In contrast, the PE substrate coated with PNIPAM-*b*-PDOMA showed an increased water uptake of 26.9 ± 6.6 mg. This behavior was maintained over at least five repetitive measurements without degradation of the coating performance, which are plotted in Fig. S8.† The coated PE also collected *ca.* 1.5 mL of excess water, which was dripping from the coating during the experiment into the petri-dish below, which was not observed for the uncoated PE substrate. This confirms that the coating can harvest water from air. If we assume 1.5 mL per 25 cm² per 15 hours, we get $0.004 \text{ mL h}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ for the coating. Assuming 8 hours of low temperature, *i.e.* hydrophilic state of the coating, per day and 500 cm² surface area

per corn leaf at 18 leaves per plant, we obtain *ca.* 16 mL of water harvested per leaf and *ca.* 290 mL per plant during a humid night. While the number is obtained from an ideal situation of 100% RH in a closed system, it does give a useful indication towards the potential of the material.

For the deposition of the coating on leaves, the method and concentration are the same as used for the silicon wafers for AFM step-height measurements. The first step was to characterize the leaves and the coating using FTIR (Fig. 1). The spectra correspond to uncoated (top) and coated (middle) leaves, as well as the coating (bottom). From Fig. 1 it is apparent that the spectrum of the coated leaves shows both vibrations of the polymer and the components of the leaf.

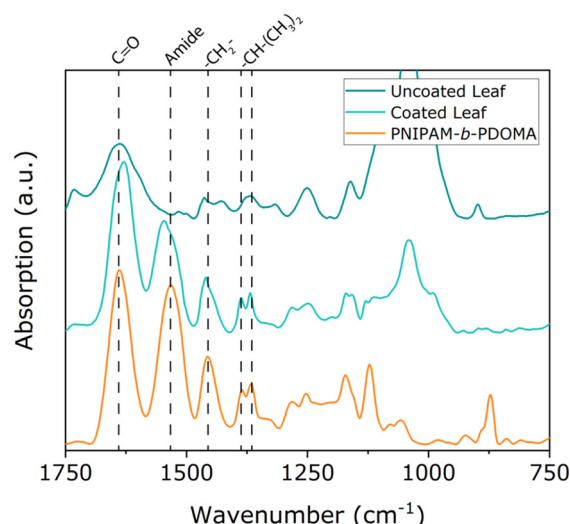


Fig. 1 FTIR absorbance spectra of uncoated (top) and coated (middle) leaves, as well as the coating itself (bottom). Note the composite nature of the spectrum of the coated leaf, showing peaks from the leaf itself, but also the presence of peaks characteristic of the coating.



Briefly, we see peaks at 1640 cm^{-1} corresponding to the C=O bond absorbances, at 1530 cm^{-1} corresponding to the amide absorbances, and at 1450 cm^{-1} corresponding to the hydrocarbon/alkane absorbances, and the $1390\text{--}1360\text{ cm}^{-1}$ double peak corresponding to the isopropyl group absorbances of NIPAM.

An important feature of the envisioned coating is rain fastness. To achieve adhesion to the leaf, we used PDOMA as an anchoring block. To confirm the adhesive capacity of these DOMA units to the leaf surface against rain, we compared the block-copolymer's adhesion with that of a homopolymer of PNIPAM on a leaf. Two leaves were coated with the respective polymers, and we performed static contact angle (SCA) measurements before and after washing with water (Fig. 2) without changing the temperature. The contact angles on plant leaves should be regarded only roughly due to the inherent roughness and inhomogeneity of the leaves. In Fig. 2A and B, we find relatively low and high contact angles, respectively, for a PNIPAM coating, without DOMA. This indicates uneven surface coverage due to the poor wetting behavior of the homopolymer. After extensive washing, see Fig. 2C, only higher contact angles can be measured. When DOMA is included in the polymer, low contact angles are obtained, even after washing with water. This means that the addition of DOMA units in the polymer structure supports adhesion, but its presence is also crucial to keep the coating in place.

At room temperature PNIPAM-*b*-PDOMA should be hydrophilic, as its temperature is below its LCST, vs. the hydrophobic leaf on which the coating is placed. Another set of SCA measurements are given in Fig. 3. From left to right, we show the contact angle of leaves without coating, with coating under



Fig. 3 Water contact angle measurements of corn leaves: left: bare corn leaf at room temperature, middle and right: PNIPAM-*b*-PDOMA-coated corn leaves below and above the cloud point temperature of PNIPAM, resulting in a hydrophilic or hydrophobic coating.

LCST and with coating above LCST. Simply put, it demonstrates the thermoresponsive behavior of the copolymer. Below its LCST of $32\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$, the polymer coating shows hydrophilic behavior and when the temperature is increased to above $32\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$, it shows hydrophobic behavior instead. This behavior is switchable and does not impact coating stability. We note that quantitative CA data are not provided due to the significant error related to the leaf's roughness.

The same contact angle measurements were also performed on PDOMA-*b*-POEGMA coated leaves, which are shown in Fig. S9.† However, the contact angles did not change upon changing the temperature: $43^{\circ} \pm 18^{\circ}$ at room temperature and $46 \pm 12^{\circ}$ at $50\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$. During these measurements, we found that water droplets washed away the PDOMA-*b*-POEGMA coating. Most likely, the volume/mass fraction of POEGMA compared to PDOMA in the block copolymer was too high for efficient



Fig. 2 Contact angle photographs of a PNIPAM coating (A–C) and a PNIPAM-*b*-PDOMA coating (bottom row). The PNIPAM coating could be removed easily by washing with water (C). The copolymer coating showed clear hydrophilic behavior at room temperature before and after washing (D and E).



coating adhesion by the catechol groups. Simple characterization of the interference of the coating with natural processes of the leaf was performed by coating the top side of the leaves with the copolymer and comparing it with a clean leaf and one coated with grease. The silicon grease coating, normally on both sides, is commonly used as a reference for interference in natural leaf behavior as it infiltrates the stomata and prevents normal transpiration from taking place.²² Nonetheless, the top side of the grease-coated leaf showed the first signs of wilting (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 presents a comparative analysis of leaves coated with the synthesized copolymer *versus* a control group coated with silicon grease. Visual observation over a 10 day period revealed the onset of wilting in the grease-coated leaves, indicated by browning along the leaf edges. Conversely, leaves treated with the copolymer exhibited no signs of wilting, suggesting that the coating does not impede normal leaf function. To corroborate this initial assessment, a comprehensive characterization of the photosynthetic process was conducted. To assess the impact of the copolymer coating on leaf photosynthesis, we conducted photosynthetic induction experiments. Leaves were transitioned from sub-saturating to saturating irradiance levels, triggering rubisco activation and stomatal opening, thereby maximizing photosynthetic activity. This protocol was performed twice: initially on uncoated leaves and subsequently on leaves coated with either the copolymer or a control substance (ethanol, the polymer solvent). Photosystem II quantum yield (Y_{II}), an indicator of linear electron transport in photosynthesis, was monitored throughout the experiment (Fig. 5). Initial induction responses were similar across all leaves. However, application of the copolymer, ethanol, or silicon grease resulted in a transient decrease in Y_{II} (Fig. 5, black arrow), followed by recovery within 20–30 minutes. Subsequent inductions exhibited slightly lower Y_{II} values for all treatments, including the ethanol control. The acute, transient decrease in Y_{II} post-application was consistent across all treatments, suggesting that this effect was primarily attributable to

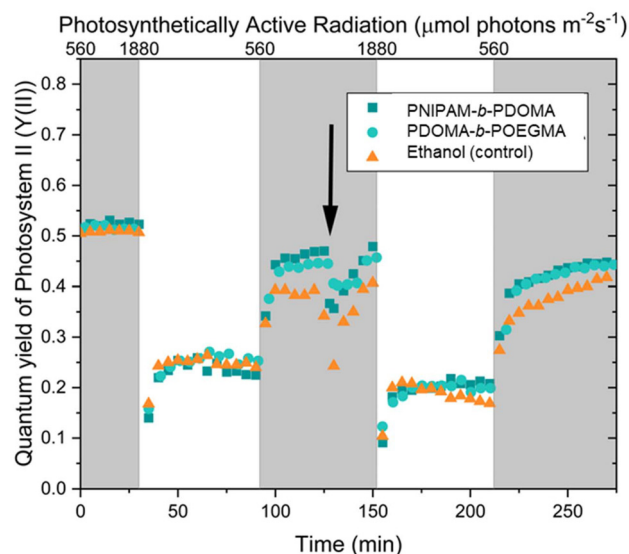


Fig. 5 Repeated photosynthetic induction on maize leaves that are coated with the polymers or sprayed with an ethanol control. The quantum yield of photosystem II (Y_{II}) is a measure for the amount of linear electron transport for photosynthesis. Blue–red light of two intensities were used for the induction: 560 $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$ that was sub-saturating (grey zone) for photosynthesis and 1880 $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$ saturating light (white zone). Application of the polymers and ethanol is marked by the black arrow.

ethanol exposure. Furthermore, the reduced Y_{II} in the secondary induction, observed across all treatments, indicates that this phenomenon was not polymer specific but rather related to either the ethanol application or the prior induction history,²³ potentially involving circadian rhythm influences.²⁴ These findings demonstrate that the copolymer coating does not significantly impede short-term photosynthetic activity in leaves.

3. Conclusion

We have described the synthesis and characterization of a thermoresponsive, bio-inspired adhesive polymer for AWH with a cloud point in water of 33 ± 1 °C. The coating was applied to Si and PE model substrates, which were subsequently characterized for layer thickness as well as water harvesting properties. The coating was able to capture about 50% of its own weight in water. Application on leaves demonstrated that the polymer maintains its thermoresponsive behavior and is capable of adhering to leaves. A PDOMA-*b*-POEGMA reference polymer was also synthesized and analyzed, but it lacked adhesive strength to adhere to leaf surfaces. Finally, photosynthesis induction experiments were also carried out to show that the coating does not harm the plants to which they are applied. The primary influence on the plant's behavior is found to be the ethanol solvent used for application, which should be changed for future experiments. To conclude, the coating can successfully harvest water, $\sim 1 \text{ mg cm}^{-2}$, it has

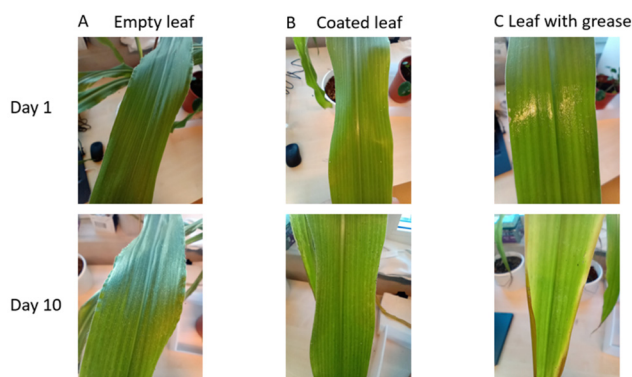


Fig. 4 Photographs of corn plant leaves without coating (A), with coating (B), and coated with grease (C) at different points in time. The coated and uncoated leaves show similar green coloring, indicating that the leaf is still healthy, even after 10 days. The grease-coated leaf shows signs of dying, with the onset of brown edges on the leaf.

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Thereafter, saturating pulses were applied every 5 minutes to measure $Y(\text{II})$. $Y(\text{II})$ was calculated according to formula (2).

$$Y(\text{II}) = \frac{F'_m - F_s}{F'_m} \quad (2)$$

where F'_m is the maximum fluorescence measured during a saturating pulse in the presence of actinic light and F_s is the minimum fluorescence measured in the presence of actinic light. After 30 minutes, the intensity of the actinic light was switched to 1880 $\mu\text{mol photons per m}^2 \text{ per s}$ at the leaf level for 60 minutes to observe photosynthetic induction. Thereafter the actinic light was switched back to 580 $\mu\text{mol photons per m}^2 \text{ per s}$ and after 30 minutes, the polymer or control was applied by slow pipetting close to the leaf surface. After application, a 30 minute period of 580 $\mu\text{mol photons per m}^2 \text{ per s}$ was followed by another 60 minute period of 1880 $\mu\text{mol photons per m}^2 \text{ per s}$ to observe photosynthetic induction in the presence of the polymer or control. Finally, a 60 minute period of 580 $\mu\text{mol photons per m}^2 \text{ per s}$ of actinic light was used to follow the recovery after high light intensity treatment in the presence of the polymer or control. All experiments were started at 11:00 in the morning to prevent large diurnal effects on the measurements.

Data availability

The data supporting this article have been included as part of the ESI.†

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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