

***Leucaena leucocephala* (Lam.) De Wit. as an alternative fodder resource in Mediterranean agroforestry systems**

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3 1 ***Leucaena leucocephala* (Lam.) De Wit. as an alternative fodder resource in Mediterranean**  
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31 17 **Abstract**

32 18 *Leucaena leucocephala* is worldwide used for wood production, reforestation and for feeding  
33 19 livestock. To assess the potential use of *Leucaena* for animal nutrition, we analysed the composition  
34 20 of methanolic extracts of leaf samples of two sicilian varieties, also determining the presence of  
35 21 mimosine, toxic for animals.  
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24 **Key words:** animal nutrition, fodder legume, HPLC, toxicity, woody species

## 25 Introduction

26 In the Mediterranean, the reduction in the coming decades of forage resources, both in quantity and  
27 quality, is expected (Ergon et al. 2018). Indeed, the combination of increased temperatures and  
28 reduced rainfall due to climate change could seriously lower soil water availability, with detrimental  
29 effects on carbon and nutrient balance in plants (Chang et al. 2017; Obermeier et al. 2018). One  
30 expected consequence is the seasonal shift towards winter by Mediterranean plants to reach more  
31 favourable ecological conditions (Rapacz et al. 2014), especially reducing fodder availability in  
32 summer. To overcome this shortage, different strategies could be employed, such as the use of  
33 different species or the identification of genotypes more resistant and adapted to the rapidly  
34 changing environmental conditions and increasing drought events (Dono et al. 2016; Dalzell 2019).  
35 For instance, Komainda et al. (2019) compared the productivity of different forage legumes to  
36 identify the most drought-tolerant species, while suggesting the replacement of the less drought-  
37 tolerant ones. *Leucaena leucocephala* (Lam.) de Wit (Fabaceae) (hereinafter *Leucaena*), native to  
38 southern Mexico and Central America, is one of the most widely used trees in agroforestry systems,  
39 in fast-growing plantations, for restoration of degraded lands and for forage production throughout  
40 tropical and subtropical latitudes (Bageel et al. 2020). *Leucaena* may be cultivated under a wide  
41 range of rainfall conditions (750-1,800 mm of annual amount) and may withstand up to six months  
42 of drought periods (Binggeli et al. 1998). The high resistance to biotic damage and abiotic stresses  
43 makes *Leucaena* a promising species for Mediterranean areas. Moreover, due to fast-growing traits  
44 and high resistance to frequent coppicing, *Leucaena* is an ideal candidate for wood and biomass  
45 production (National Research Council 1980), capable of reaching very high yields in intensive  
46 cultivation systems, and promising results have been recently achieved also in Mediterranean  
47 conditions (Fernández et al. 2020). It is also appreciated by livestock for high palatability and high  
48 nutritive value of foliage (Garcia et al. 1996). However, the species holds two main shortcomings: a  
49 high invasive potential (Wolfe and Van Bloem 2012) and the presence of antinutritional factors in  
50 leaves. However, the invasiveness seems to be restricted to the shrub-like subspecies ‘common  
51 leucaena’ (*Leucaena leucocephala* (Lam.) de Wit subsp. *leucocephala*), while not affecting the tree-  
52 like subspecies ‘giant leucaena’ (*Leucaena leucocephala* subsp. *glabrata* (Rose) S. Zárte) (Bageel  
53 et al. 2020). Conversely, the major barrier for a wider use of the species is the high leaf content of  
54 mimosine, a non-protein amino acid whose degradation products (i.e. isomers of hydroxypyridone  
55 or DHP) are toxic to herbivores, mostly ruminants, and can cause alopecia, loss of appetite,  
56 salivation, reproduction issues and reduced productivity (Halliday et al. 2013). Up to now,  
57 *Leucaena* has been mostly used in tropical and sub-tropical systems, while being rarely tested under  
58 Mediterranean conditions. With this contribution, we preliminarily assessed the potentialities of

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3 59 *Leucaena* for fodder production in Mediterranean agroforestry systems. Particularly, we quantified  
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5 60 the mimosine content and we performed qualitative analyses (to assess the nutritive value of leaves)  
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7 61 in two varieties occurring in Sicily (Hawaii and Perù), also testing leaf samples obtained from both  
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9 62 varieties and subject to oven drying.

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## 11 64 **Materials and Methods**

### 12 65 *Plant material*

13 66 Plant material was collected from mature *Leucaena* individuals belonging to cultivars Hawaii and  
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15 67 Perù, as previously identified (Badalamenti et al. 2020). Fresh leaves were stored and air-dried  
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17 68 before analyses. Moreover, we analysed leaf samples composed of both varieties and oven-dried for  
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19 69 48 h (hereinafter Mixed/Dry). Five mature individuals per cultivar were considered and leaves were  
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21 70 collected from different branches in each selected plant. All the analyses were carried out at the  
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23 71 STeBiCeF Department, University of Palermo.

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### 25 73 *Sample preparation*

26 74 The plant matrices were firstly subject to methanol extraction to remove chlorophylls and other  
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28 75 possible interfering substances and exploiting the poor solubility of mimosine in this organic  
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30 76 solvent. The resulting plant matrices were then subject to water extraction to perform the  
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32 77 quantitative assessment of mimosine content, as well as the qualitative characterization of the polar  
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34 78 fraction.

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### 36 80 *Quantification of mimosine content*

37 81 Mimosine content was quantified using first colorimetric method and UV-Vis spectroscopy (UV)  
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39 82 and then High Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) and MS-TOF.

40 83 For the first method, we considered as reference the calibration curve of the stock solution of L-  
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42 84 mimosine (by diluting 5.12 mg of “L-Mimosine from Koa hoale seeds” (Sigma-Aldrich®) in 10 ml  
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44 85 of H<sub>2</sub>O), which was obtained by adding 1 ml 0.1 N HCl and 0.4 ml FeCl<sub>3</sub> (0.5%) to different  
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46 86 concentrations of the stock solution (1, 5, 10, 25, 50 µg ml<sup>-1</sup>). The quantification of mimosine  
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48 87 content via UV analysis was performed in a Win Aspect spectrophotometer, analyzing the  
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50 88 absorbance at  $\lambda = 535$  nm (Ilham et al. 2015). Mimosine content is reported as g Kg<sup>-1</sup> of leaf dry  
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52 89 matter.

53 90 To obtain a more reliable estimate of leaf mimosine content, we also performed an HPLC-MS-TOF  
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55 91 analysis. The calibration curve to mimosine has been performed with the standard solution of  
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57 92 mimosine at 1, 5, 10, 20, 25, 50 µg ml<sup>-1</sup>. The HPLC analysis was carried out in an Agilent

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3 93 Technologies 1260 apparatus, using HPLC Column ZORBAX Extend C18. The resulting spectra  
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5 94 were then analyzed by means of the specific data analysis and processing program Agilent  
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7 95 MassHunter qualitative.

#### 8 96 9 10 97 *Qualitative analysis*

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12 98 The methanolic and aqueous extracts as previously described were also analyzed by HPLC/MS  
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14 99 analyses (High Performance Liquid Chromatography coupled to Mass Spectrometry) in reverse  
15 100 phase, and conducted either in negative and positive ion mode, supported by Agilent MassHunter  
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17 101 Qualitative Analysis software B.06.00. This analysis was performed to characterize the amino  
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19 102 acidic, polyphenolic and glycidic components of *Leucaena* foliar tissue.

#### 20 103 21 22 104 *Statistical analysis*

23  
24 105 A one-way ANOVA was carried out to determine the effect of *Leucaena* variety (Hawaii, Perù and  
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26 106 mixed/dry ST) on mimosine content, as well as the effect of different methods to quantify mimosine  
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28 107 content (colorimetric and HPLC). Significance was determined at the 95% level of confidence.  
29 108 Before performing ANOVA, normality and homogeneity of variance of data were verified.  
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31 109 Statistical analysis was performed using Systat Software, Inc. 2009 (version no. 13.00.05, San Jose,  
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33 110 CA, USA).

### 34 111 35 36 112 **Results and discussion**

#### 37 38 113 *Mimosine content*

39 114 A number of methods have been employed to reduce the adverse effects of mimosine on animal  
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41 115 health such as the inoculation with *Synergistes jonesii*, a rumen bacterium capable of degrading  
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43 116 toxic substances in not-harmful products (Klieve et al. 2002; Shelton et al. 2019), or physical  
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45 117 treatments (ensiling, heating, ecc.) to reduce leaf mimosine content. Regardless of method, the  
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47 118 lower the mimosine content in *Leucaena* leaves is the lower the potential toxic effects for animal  
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49 119 health are. Hence, the search for low mimosine varieties is still ongoing and worthy to be pursued.  
50 120 The concentration of mimosine in plant tissues depends on plant traits (tissue age, plant organ, etc.),  
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52 121 as well as on environmental conditions, such as light, soil pH and salts concentrations in soils  
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54 122 (Vestena et al. 2001; Ghosh and Samiran 2007; Honda and Borthakur 2019). As mimosine content  
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56 123 is higher in younger organs, shoots and individuals, as well as in more stressful conditions, it is  
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58 124 suspected to play an evolutionary role, for instance as a defence against herbivores (Honda and  
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60 125 Borthakur 2019). The toxic effect depends on the effective quantity of mimosine taken with the  
60 126 diet, which, in turn, depends on its concentration in plant tissues, which is affected by variety and

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3 127 plant portion. Xuan et al. (2006) reported that mimosine content was higher in young leaves and  
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5 128 mature seeds than in xylem and mature leaves, where it ranged from 0.11% to 0.47%, respectively.  
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7 129 In effect, the lower concentration of mimosine in mature plants is a common observation (Vestena  
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9 130 et al. 2001; Xuan et al. 2006; Zayed et al. 2014; Honda and Borthakur 2019). In our experiment, we  
10 131 found quite low mimosine content in leaves. The percentage on a dry matter basis ranged from  
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12 132 1.1% to 1.5% and from 0.9% to 1.0% in the Hawaii and Perù varieties, with UV and HPLC  
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14 133 analyses, respectively. However, with both methods, the mixed and dry treatment significantly  
15 134 reduced mimosine content (0.4-0.7 %;  $p < 0.05$ ) (**Fig. 1**). Our results confirm the positive effect of  
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17 135 heating on lowering the concentration of this toxic substance and reducing its toxic effects on  
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19 136 livestock (Halliday et al. 2013; Honda and Borthakur 2019). We sampled dried leaves in mature  
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21 137 individuals, conditions that further contributed to the low mimosine content found in our study. We  
22 138 also found a significantly lower mimosine content ( $p < 0.05$ ) via HPLC analysis than via the  
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24 139 traditional colorimetric method, further proving the higher selectivity of more advanced techniques.  
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26 140 Regardless of the method, we found very low values compared with those more commonly found in  
27 141 literature, where mimosine content generally accounted for more than 2% of total dry matter, even  
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29 142 reaching up to 8-12% (Soedarjo and Borthakur 1996; Vestena et al. 2001; Garcia et al. 2008;  
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31 143 Barros-Rodríguez et al. 2014; Bageel et al. 2020). However, results in line with ours were found in  
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33 144 four *Leucaena* varieties in Japan, where mature leaves had a mimosine content of about 0.5% (Xuan  
34 145 et al. 2006). The cultivar K8 showed a low mimosine content also in Brazil (Soltan et al. 2017),  
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36 146 with percentages ranging from 0.2% to 1.5%.

### 39 148 *Qualitative analysis*

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41 149 Overall, 67 different metabolites were detected in *Leucaena* leaf tissues via HPLC/MS analyses  
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43 150 (**Fig. 2, Table S1**). Polyphenols are one of the more representative phytochemicals found in  
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45 151 *Leucaena* leaves. Thirty-two phenolic compounds were detected (about 48% of total compounds),  
46 152 with flavones accounting for the largest part, and it is well known that they are particularly  
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48 153 beneficial for ruminant health (Jiang et al. 2016). They are important plant secondary metabolites  
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50 154 with anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidative properties and a primary protective function against  
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52 155 photodamage and as a chemical defense against herbivores and pathogens (Olagaray and Bradford  
53 156 2019; Acet 2020). In accordance to Xu et al. (2018), the most abundant polyphenols in *Leucaena*  
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55 157 leaves were quercetin-3-O- $\alpha$ -rhamnopyranoside, quercetin, geraldone, apigenin, kaempferol,  
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57 158 kaempferol-3-O- $\alpha$ -rhamnopyranoside and myristicin. In addition, we detected 10 amino acids,  
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59 159 including three essential amino acids (leucine, phenylalanine and tryptophan) (Karau and Grayson  
60 160 2014). The high protein (22-28% of dry matter) and  $\beta$ -carotene content, making *Leucaena*

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3 161 comparable to alfaalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.) (Garcia et al. 1996; González-García et al. 2009), is  
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5 162 accompanied by a well balanced amino acidic composition, including essential amino acids (Ter  
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7 163 Meulen et al. 1979), suggesting that *Leucaena* could be a good alternative forage both for ruminant  
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9 164 and non ruminant livestock. *Leucaena leucocephala* holds many positive traits as a multipurpose  
10 165 tree in Mediterranean agroforestry systems, and it seems to be worthy of interest for feeding  
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12 166 livestock in the inner and/or marginal Mediterranean regions, where inadequate nutritional supplies  
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14 167 are one of the major issues for animal nutrition (Bianchetto et al. 2015; Papanastasis et al. 2008).  
15 168 Indeed, the low productivity of animals is not infrequently attributable to the low nitrogen and high  
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17 169 fiber content of local plants and crop residues that form the most common food base on local  
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19 170 traditional farms. Hence, the integration of the ordinary diet with woody forage resources has been  
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21 171 viewed as a possible way to alleviate the nutritional deficiencies of basic diets (Papanastasis et al.  
22 172 1997). In Mediterranean contexts, one relevant advantage of *Leucaena* is the persistence of foliage  
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24 173 during summer, which is the most critical phase for Mediterranean plants and fodder resources.  
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26 174 However, woody species may also contain antinutritional factors (e.g., tannins or toxic compounds)  
27 175 in plant tissues, which have to be carefully assessed before deciding to introduce a new species in  
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29 176 the diet. Based on this study, we deem that *Leucaena* could represent a promising fodder resource  
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31 177 for feeding livestock in Mediterranean areas, possessing high nutritive and protein foliage (Honda et  
32 178 al. 2019), with a very low mimosine content, as well as being a low-demanding and easily  
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34 179 cultivated species, with a good potential for wood and biomass production in agroforestry systems.  
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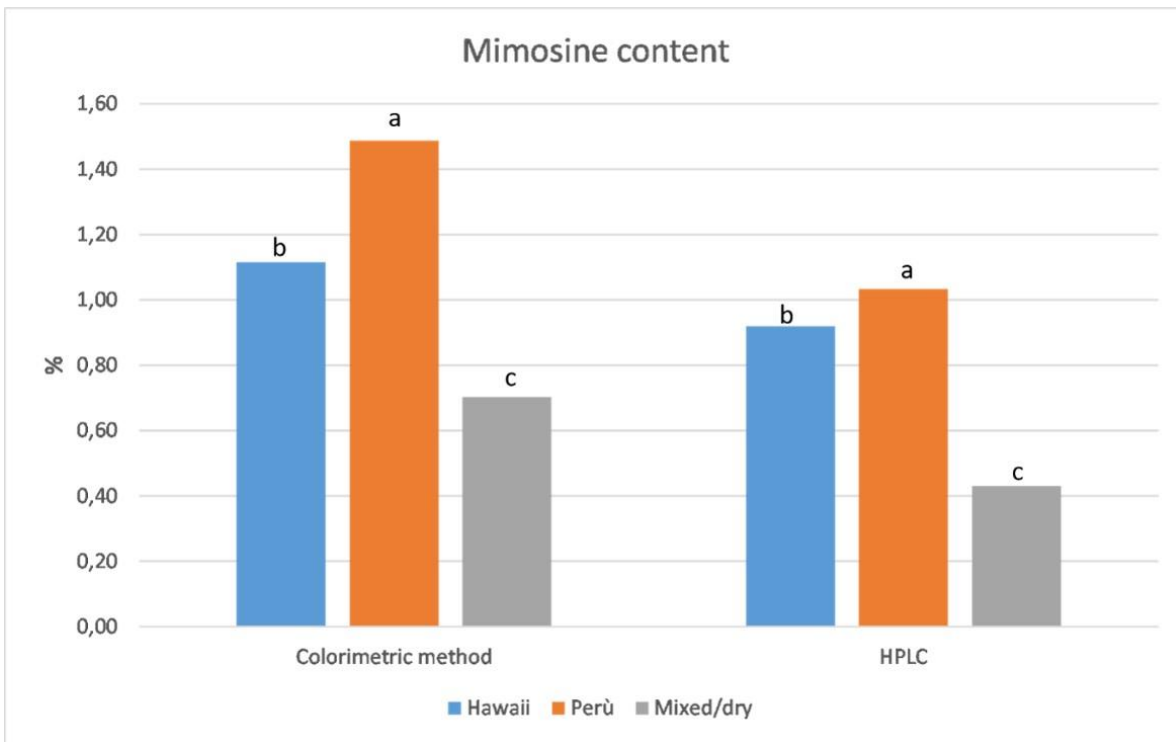
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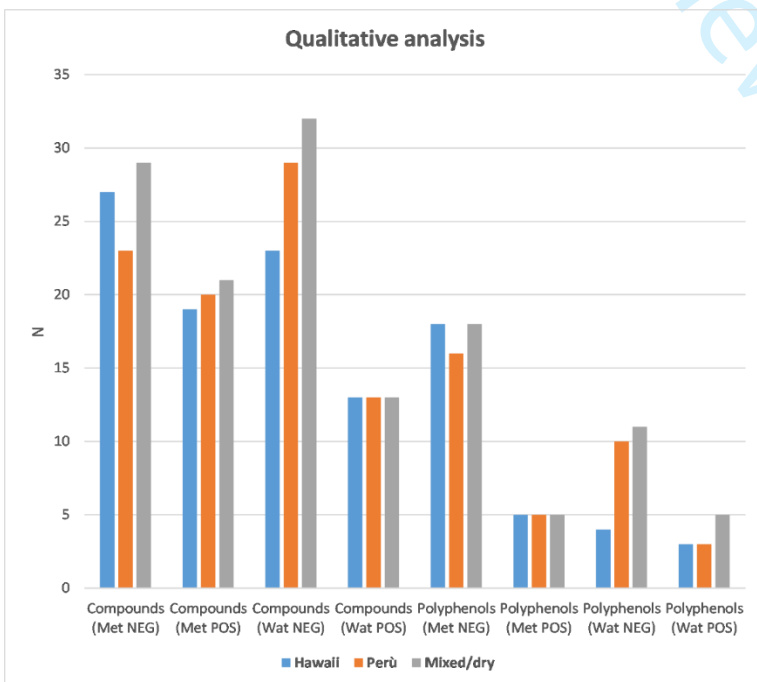
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285 **Figures**

287 **Figure 1**



291 **Figure 2**



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294 **Figure captions**

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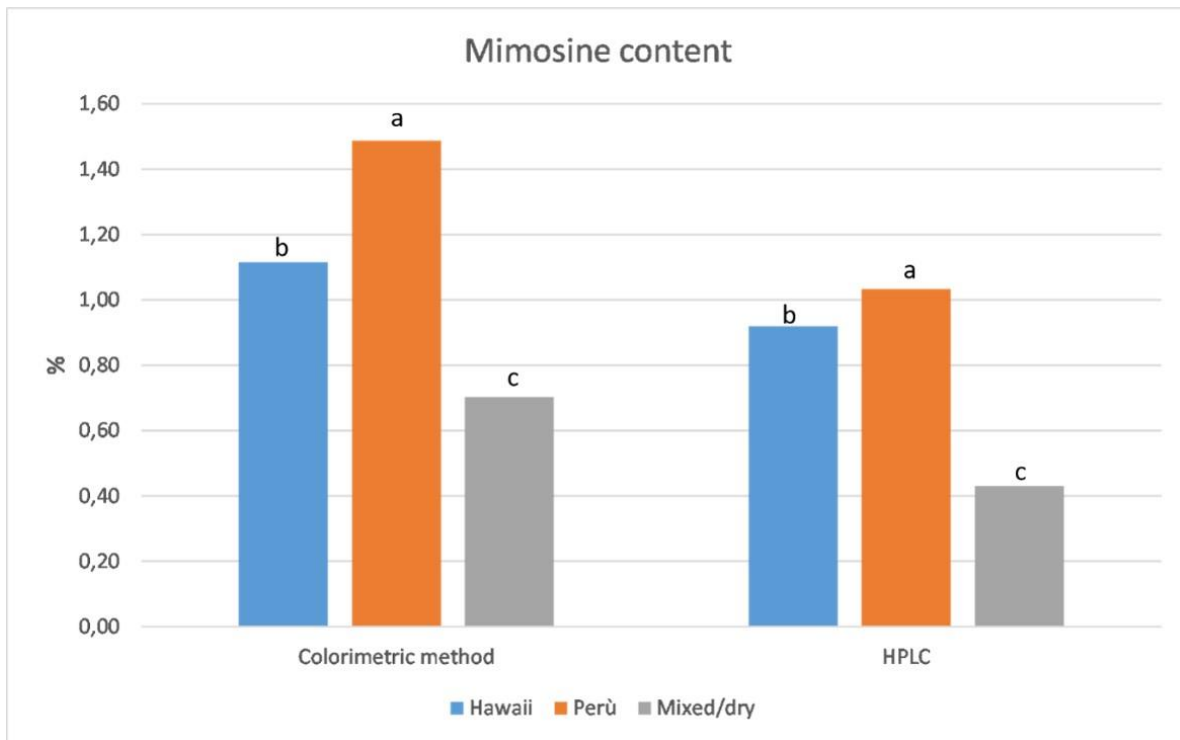
296 **Figure 1** Mimosine content in *Leucaena* leaves sorted by variety and according to the quantification  
297 method (colorimetric or HPLC). Means with different letters are significantly different at  $P < 0.05$ ,  
298 after Tukey's HSD range test.

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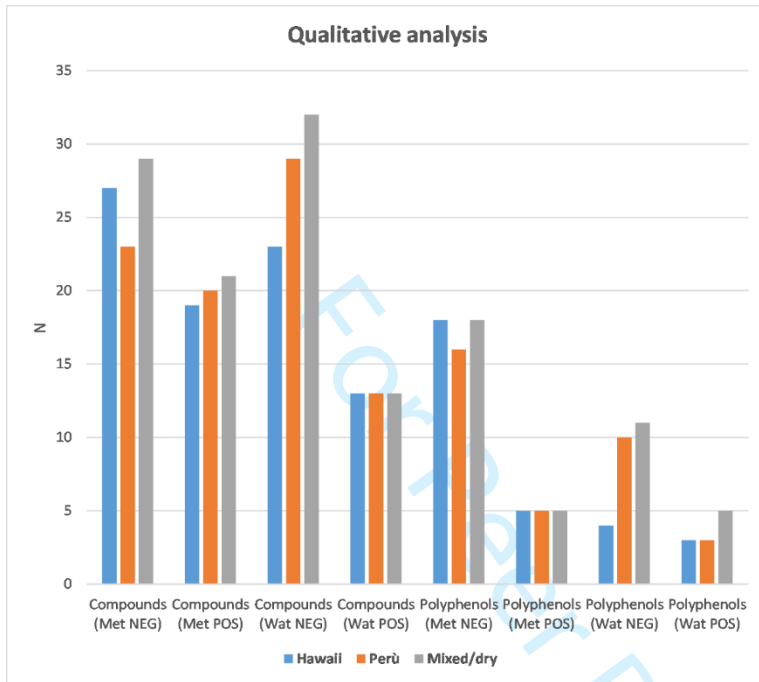
300 **Figure 2** Results of qualitative analysis in *Leucaena* leaves sorted by variety and according to the  
301 different extraction methods (Methane or Water). Met = Methanolic extract, Wat = Water extract,  
302 NEG = Negative, POS = Positive.

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**Figure 1** Mimosine content in *Leucaena* leaves sorted by variety and according to the quantification method (colorimetric or HPLC). Means with different letters are significantly different at  $P < 0.05$ , after Tukey's HSD range test



**Figure 2** Results of qualitative analysis in *Leucaena* leaves sorted by variety and according to the different extraction methods (Methane or Water). Met = Methanolic extract, Wat = Water extract, NEG = Negative, POS = Positive



**Table S1** Composition of water and methanolic extracts. H = Hawaii, Pe = Perù, MD = Mixed/Dry, P = Present; \*non essential amino acids

Compound	Mass (M-H+) Positive mode	Mass Negative mode	Retention time (minutes)	H Water extract	Pe Water extract	MD Water extract	H Metanolic extract	Pe Methanolic extract	MD Methanolic extract
<b>Carbohydrates</b>									
Gluconic acid		195,0467	3,43	P	P	P			
Disaccharides [M+FA]		387,1075	3,46				P	P	P
Arabinose		149,0446	3,57				P	P	P
Aldaric acid (C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>10</sub> O <sub>8</sub> )		209,0262	3,59	P	P	P			
Pentose (C <sub>5</sub> H <sub>10</sub> O <sub>5</sub> )		149,0447	3,94	P	P	P			
Aldaric acid (C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>10</sub> O <sub>8</sub> )		209,0262	4,17	P	P	P			
Aldopentose		149,0569	4,24	P	P	P			
<b>Amino acids</b>									
Asparagine*	133,0615	131,0462	3,12				P	P	P
Mimosine*	199,0726	197,0559	3,15	P	P	P	P	P	P
Glutamine*	147,0771		3,16				P	P	P
Allysine*	146,0822		3,25	P	P	P	P	P	P
Proline*	116,0711		3,35				P	P	P
Pipecolic acid*	130,0869		3,58	P	P	P	P	P	P
Phenylalanine	166,0871		4,28				P	P	P
Tetrahydropicolinate*	172,0602		4,86				P	P	P
Leucine	132,1023		5,11	P	P		P	P	P
Tryptophan	205,0985		15,61				P	P	P
<b>Other</b>									
Deaminated isomer of mimosine (C <sub>8</sub> H <sub>9</sub> O <sub>4</sub> )	184,0619		4,23	P	P	P			
Rabelomycin		337,0741	4,94	P		P			
Fludarabine	286,0945		5,24	P	P	P			
Anthraquinone	404,1223		5,39	P	P	P			
Rabelomycin		337,07	5,40				P		P

1										
2	Citroside A C <sub>19</sub> H <sub>30</sub> O <sub>8</sub>	409,1843	421,1613	22,96				P	P	P
3	[M+Na]									
4	Artomunoxantrione		443,11	27,70	P	P	P			
5	Silybin		481,1128	32,42				P		P
6	<b>Alkaloids</b>									
7	Choline	104,1071		2,83				P	P	P
8	Nipecotic acid	130,0868		5,40				P	P	P
9	<b>Carboxylic acids</b>									
10										
11	Malic acid		133,012	4,36	P		P			
12	Citric acid		191,0192	4,44	P	P	P	P	P	P
13	α-Ketoglutaric acid		145,0136	5,83	P	P	P			
14	Hydroxy glutarate		147,0295	6,30		P	P			
15	Succinic acid		117,0188	6,38	P	P	P			
16	Maleic acid		115,0037	6,56	P		P			
17	Fumaric acid		115,0036	6,71	P	P	P			
18	Hydroxybutyric acid		103,0400	6,98			P			
19	<b>Phenols</b>									
20										
21	Gallic acid		169,0133	8,78			P			
22	Quinic acid		191,0547	12,07	P	P	P			
23	Caffeoyl glucarate		371,0577	16,74		P	P			
24	isomer									
25	Gallic acid 3-O-(6-galloylglucoside)		483,0757	19,42				P	P	P
26	Caffeoyl glucuronide		355,0628	19,49		P	P			
27	Caffeoyl glucuronide		355,0628	19,89		P	P			
28	isomer									
29	Caffeoyl glucuronide		355,0628	20,15		P	P			
30	isomer									
31	Caffeoyl-hydroxycitric acid		369,0423	20,73	P	P	P			
32	Catechin		325,0478	20,80				P		P
33	Chlorogenic acid		353,085	20,93		P	P			
34	Caffeoyl glucuronide		355,0628	21,86	P	P	P			
35	isomer									
36	Caffeoyl-hydroxycitric acid		369,0423	23,67	P	P	P			
37	Epicatechin		289,0702	23,70				P		P
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2	Epigallocatechin	459,1054	457,0741	24,70					P
3	gallate								
4	Mirecitrine 3-		625,1373	27,44			P	P	P
5	rutinoside								
6	Rutin	611,1659	609,1395	28,97	P	P	P	P	P
7	Myristicin	465,1067	463,0752	29,41			P	P	P
8	Vicenin 2		593,1453	29,91			P	P	P
9	Apigenin	271,0644	269,0429	30,32	P	P	P		
10	Quercetin 3	435,0786	445,41	30,45			P	P	P
11	arabinoside								
12	Quercetin 3	435,08	445,4000	30,61			P	P	
13	arabinoside								
14	Quercitrin	449,1113	447,0909	30,66	P	P	P	P	P
15	Apigenin	271,0625	269,0434	31,75		P	P	P	P
16	Kaempferol 7-		417,0803	31,79			P	P	P
17	xyloside								
18	Quercitrin	191,02		31,92	P	P			
19	Kaempferol-		431,0959	32,03			P	P	P
20	3-O- $\alpha$ -								
21	rhamnopyranoside								
22	Geraldone	285,0793	283,0615	32,35			P	P	P
23	7,4'-		253,0495	34,09			P	P	P
24	Dihydroxyflavone								
25	Apigenin glucuronide		465,1159	36,18			P	P	P
26	methyl								
27	Cyanidin		285,0396	36,92			P	P	P
28	Quercetin-3-O- $\alpha$ -		301,0337	37,32			P	P	P
29	rhamnopyranoside								
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