



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI SALERNO

Department of Industrial Engineering

Master's degree in food engineering

Study of a biodegradable, compost-based seedpot

Thesis in
Transport Phenomena

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Ai ciottoli di tutto il mondo, alla loro solidarietà e fratellanza.

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Table of content

Table of content.....	I
Table of figures.....	V
Table of tables.....	IX
Abstract.....	XI
Introduction	1
1.1 Overview on the Italian agricultural sector _____	2
1.1.1 The growing number of containers	2
1.1.2 Most common commercial containers	4
1.1.3 The problems of plastic containers	7
1.2 What is compost? _____	8
1.2.1 Industrial composting	9
1.2.2 Domestic composting	10
1.2.3 Limiting aspect in the use of compost	10
1.3 State of art _____	12
1.4 Objectives _____	16
Materials and methods	17
2.1 Materials _____	18
2.1.1 Compost	18
2.2 Equipment and applications _____	18
2.2.1 Dryer	18

2.2.2 Pneumatic press	19
2.2.3 Texture analyzer	20
2.3 Methods _____	21
2.3.1 Preparation of dough for pots	21
2.3.2 Moulding process	22
2.3.3 Drying process	23
2.3.4 Compression tests	25
2.3.5 Substrate electrical conductivity test	27
Modelling.....	29
3.1 Physics of the system _____	30
3.1.1 Assumptions	30
3.2 The geometry _____	31
3.3 Material properties _____	32
3.4 Equations used in the model _____	33
3.4.1 Equations of motion	33
3.4.2 The heat energy equation	35
3.4.3 The material transport equations	36
3.5 Boundary condition (BC) _____	37
3.5.1 BC for motion field	37
3.5.2 BC for heat transfer	38
3.5.3 BC for material transport	39
3.6 Model implementation _____	41
Results and discussion	49
4.1 Compression test results _____	50
4.2 Substrate conductivity (EC) test results _____	53
4.3 Experimental data collection _____	55
4.3.1 Temperature profiles	55
4.3.2 Pot mass profile	55
4.3.3 Pot moisture profile	57

4.4 Model optimization by comparison with experimental data _____	58
4.5 Model distribution variables _____	62
4.5.1 Temperature profile	62
4.5.2 Liquid water Concentration Profile	64
4.5.3 Vapor in air concentration Profile	66
4.5.4 Profile of turbulent kinematic viscosity	66
4.5.4 Profile of the total thermal conductivity	68
4.5.5 Profile of the total diffusivity	68
4.6 Optimization of drying process _____	70
Conclusion.....	73
References _____	76

Table of figures

Figure 1. Farmer performing a transplantation.....	3
Figure 2. Classic Polypropylene (PP) seed pot.....	4
Figure 3. Classic polystyrene foam (PS) seed pot.....	4
Figure 4. Bio-pots classification [6].	5
Figure 5. Rice hull pots manufactured by <i>Summit Plastic Co.</i> (Ohio, USA), that are based on ground rice hulls with a binder to produce a solid pot.	6
Figure 6. Paper-based pots manufactured by <i>Western Pulp Products</i> (Oregon, USA) which are made of recycled paper (more than 74%, with at least 37% post-consumer recycled) and pressed wood pulp.	6
Figure 7. Classic 12-box peat seed pot.....	6
Figure 8. Commercial biodegradable pots and trays based on industrial and agriculture waste [4].	7
Figure 9. Label "compostabile CIC" [12].	9
Figure 10. Electrical conductivity of composts obtained from various plant wastes [9].....	11
Figure 11. Pot produced by Schettini et al. [15].....	12
Figure 12. Name and composition of all prepared biocomposites [5].....	13
Figure 13. Compression test on pot in manure and sawdust [16].....	14
Figure 14. Seedpots in Sadepan and MaterBi®[17].	14
Figure 15. BioPot from corn husk composite film [18].....	15
Figure 16. TerrAmore's brand[19].	18
Figure 17. Fluid-bed dryer TG 200 [20].....	18
Figure 18. The Pneumatic press manufactured by F.lli Alfano S.r.l.	19
Figure 19. TA.XT Plus texture analyzer, Stable Micro Systems Ltd [21]	20
Figure 20. Dough placed in plastic jar to create pre-moulded cylindrical shape.	22
Figure 21. Press during the moulding process.....	22

Figure 22. Drying of pot.	23
Figure 23. Pot during the drying process with the three thermocouples inserted.	23
Figure 24. Upper part, wall and bottom highlighted on the pot section	24
Figure 25. Finished pot after moulding and drying process (in this picture the pot is filled with peat).	24
Figure 26. An example of stress-strain curve for ductile material [22].....	25
Figure 27. 3D-printed PLA support required for compression tests.	26
Figure 28. Pot and support position during compression tests.	27
Figure 29. The grey rectangle represents the dryer while the blue piece is the pot.	31
Figure 30. 3D geometry of the dryer-pot system created with COMSOL.	31
Figure 31. 2D representation of the system geometry; the symmetry axis $r=0$ is highlighted in red.....	37
Figure 32. Boundary conditions for turbulent flow.	41
Figure 33. Walls affected by "No slip" conditions.	41
Figure 34. In blue the air inlet section	42
Figure 35. In blue the air outlet section	42
Figure 36. Boundary condition for "Heat transfer in Solid and Fluids"	43
Figure 37. Thermal conductivity of air implemented in COMSOL.	43
Figure 38. In blue the thermally insulated wall	44
Figure 39. Evaporation affects the entire domain highlighted.	44
Figure 40. In blue the domain regarding the "Transport of diluted species (liquid water)"	45
Figure 41. In blue the domain regarding the "Transport of diluted species (vapor)"	45
Figure 42. Boundary condition for "Transport of diluted species (liquid water)"	45
Figure 43. "If function" for liquid water flow	46
Figure 44. Boundary condition for "Transport of diluted species (vapor)	46
Figure 45. Option "turbulent mixing" selected on COMSOL.	46
Figure 46. In blue the Wall selected for "No flux" condition.....	47
Figure 47. "If function" for vapor flow.	47
Figure 48. Stress-strain diagram for Pot_1, Pot_2 and the Pot_3.....	50
Figure 49. Stress-strain diagram for Pot_4, Pot_5 and the Pot_6.....	51

Figure 50. Young Module (E) against average RH Pot.....	52
Figure 51. Trend of electrical conductivity (EC) of a peat placed in the pot over 27 days.....	53
Figure 52. The temperature profiles of the pot over time, during the drying phase.	55
Figure 53. Pot mass profile.....	56
Figure 54. Water lost in pot during drying.	56
Figure 55. Moisture profiles	57
Figure 56. In the graphs (a), (b) and (c) it is possible to see the temperature profiles over the time in the different parts of the pot, in black dots the experimental data and in green curves the model predictions.....	59
Figure 57. In graphs (a), (b) and (c) can be seen the trend of water concentration at the three points in the pot, while in figure (d) can be seen the decrease of water content in the pot; in black dots the experimental data and in green curves the model predictions.....	61
Figure 58. Temperature profile at time 0 minutes.	62
Figure 59. Temperature profile at time 30 minutes	63
Figure 60. Temperature profile at time 60 minutes	63
Figure 61. RH pot at time 0 minutes.....	64
Figure 62. RH pot a time 30 minutes.....	64
Figure 63. RH pot at time 60 minutes.....	65
Figure 64. Vapor concentration profile at 20 minutes.....	66
Figure 65. Profile of turbulent kinematic viscosity	67
Figure 66. Profile of total thermal conductivity	68
Figure 67. Profile of total diffusivity.....	69
Figure 68. In graphs (a), (b) and (c) can be seen the three simulations done at different temperatures for the three velocities.	71

Table of tables

Table 1. Pot composition	21
Table 2. Pot properties [9]	32
Table 3. Constants used for turbulence modelling.	34

Abstract

This work aims to improve the process of producing biodegradable pots from compost. In the first prototyping phase, there was the study of the formulation and composition of the pot dough, while in the second phase involves the improvement of the moulding and drying process. In this thesis project, the focus is on the second part in particular, a careful analysis of the transport phenomena during the pot drying process was carried out with the subsequent construction of a model implemented in COMSOL Multiphysics®. The model was subsequently validated thanks to experimental data collected during the process about temperature, humidity, and mass.

The drying process is certainly one of the most energy-intensive process steps, so with the aim of optimising time and costs, several simulations were carried out with the model by modifying process parameters, such as temperature and air flow rate, to understand their influence on process efficiency.

In addition to the process, tests were also carried out on the finished pots, in particular compression tests at various moisture content to assess its mechanical strength, and tests on the electrical conductivity of the substrate contained in the pots.

Mechanical tests show that even a 5% decrease in water content can more than doubled young's modulus (E) and the final pot moisture should be around 12-14%, while conductivity tests showed that critical values are not reached for most crops in 27 days.

Chapter one

Introduction

In this chapter the main containers used in agriculture will be presented, listing their advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, the state of the art will be described as regards the bio-containers and the objectives of the following work.

Chapter five

Conclusion

In This chapter summarizes what was carried out during the thesis work and are reported the relevant conclusions.

The objective of this work was to develop a biodegradable pot using compost and other by-products such as plant waste as material to offer the container market an alternative that would help reduce the plastic problem. After the study of the dough to make the pots, which was done prior to this study, the following work was concerned with studying all the subsequent stages, first and foremost, the most energy-intensive stage, i.e., drying.

For this reason, a model was developed to simulate this process. A study was made of the motion field using the k-omega model, heat transport and the diffusion of liquid water and vapor. This model was implemented on COMSOL Multiphysics®, where it will be possible to solve all the material and energy balances easily even when changing properties and boundary conditions. During the drying process, a series of data on temperatures, humidity and the mass of water lost were collected, thanks to which it was possible to validate the work. Once the model was validated, it was used to perform several simulations using different temperatures and air flow rates.

In the second part of this work, tests were conducted on the finished product. Mechanical tests were carried out, which showed the strong dependence of the pot resistance on the water content. In fact, at an average moisture content of 9.5% and 14.5%, the Young modulus was 26 MPa and 11 MPa, respectively. The electrical conductivity tests showed a maximum value of 1.82 mS/cm for the substrate, which is below the critical values for many cultures.

Thanks to the mechanical tests, it was possible to identify a final moisture content of the pot that corresponds to 12%-14%, while the elaboration of the model allows an optimisation of the process time because having set this final moisture point to be reached, it was seen with simulations that using air at 60 °C and an inlet velocity of 7 m/s it is possible to dry the pot in 90 minutes while with the same time and initial conditions the humidity is still 22%.

In conclusion, the validated model will allow the optimisation of the drying process during the design phase of the large-scale plant, thanks to the possibility of quickly simulating the process by changing the variables, while the mechanical and electrical conductivity tests were able to respectively identify the final moisture content of the pot and its non-toxicity for crops.

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