SUNSHINE AGRICULTURE
e-Newsletter

ISSN (E): 2583 – 0821

Sun. Agri.:e- Newsletter, (2026) *6*(8), 09-16

Article ID: 643

Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)-Based Nitrogen Management

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Available online at
www.sunshineagriculture.vitalbiotech.org

Article History
Received: 25.07.2026
Revised: 01.08.2026
Accepted: 05.08.2026

INTRODUCTION

Nitrogen (N) is one of the most essential nutrients required for plant growth and development. It plays a vital role in chlorophyll formation, photosynthesis, protein synthesis, enzyme activity, and overall crop productivity. However, excessive or insufficient nitrogen application can reduce crop yield, increase production costs, and cause serious environmental problems such as nitrate leaching, groundwater contamination, ammonia volatilization, and greenhouse gas emissions.

Traditional nitrogen fertilizer recommendations are generally based on blanket recommendations that do not consider the actual nitrogen requirement of crops during different growth stages. To overcome this limitation, scientists developed the Leaf Colour Chart (LCC), a simple, low-cost, and farmer-friendly tool that helps determine the real-time nitrogen requirement of crops based on leaf greenness.

Leaf Colour Chart-based nitrogen management is widely recommended in rice and is increasingly being used in wheat, maize, and other cereal crops as an efficient nitrogen management strategy.

Definition

Leaf Colour Chart (LCC) is a simple plastic strip containing different shades of green, ranging from yellowish-green to dark green, used to estimate the nitrogen status of crop plants by comparing the color of crop leaves with the color shades on the chart. It helps farmers apply nitrogen fertilizers only when the crop actually requires them, thereby improving nitrogen use efficiency and reducing fertilizer wastage.

ISSN (E): 2583 – 0821

History of Leaf Colour Chart

The Leaf Colour Chart was first developed by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) to help rice farmers manage nitrogen efficiently under field conditions.

Later, agricultural universities, research institutes, and extension agencies modified and promoted the technology across many Asian countries including India, China, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and the Philippines.

In India, the technology has been extensively promoted by ICAR, State Agricultural Universities, Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), and the Department of Agriculture.

Principle of Leaf Colour Chart

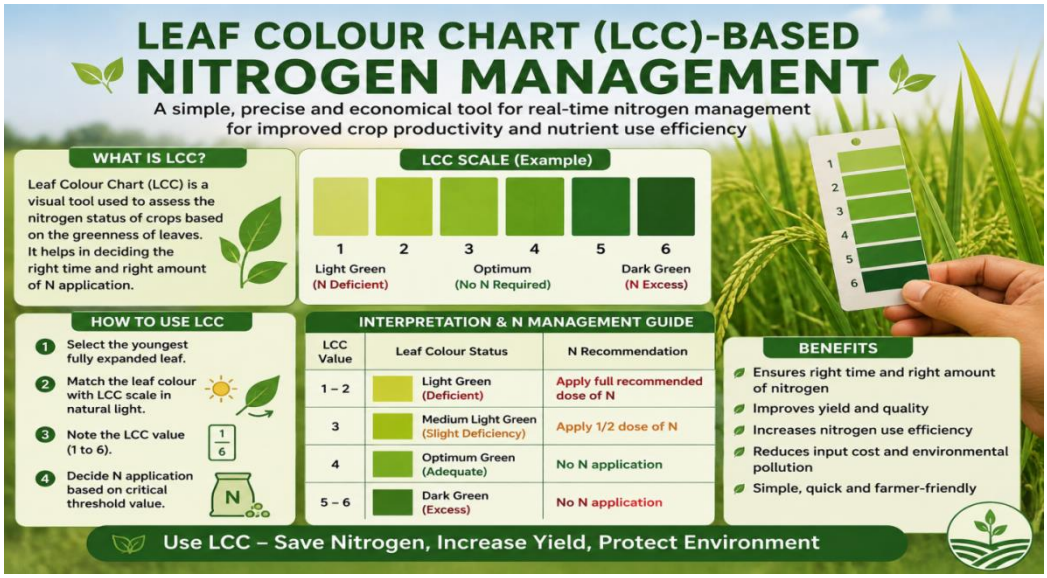
The basic principle of the Leaf Colour Chart is:

- Leaf greenness is directly related to chlorophyll content.
- Chlorophyll content is closely associated with nitrogen concentration in plants.
- Dark green leaves indicate sufficient nitrogen.
- Light green or yellowish leaves indicate nitrogen deficiency.
- Nitrogen fertilizer should be applied only when the leaf color becomes lighter than the critical shade of the LCC.

Structure of Leaf Colour Chart

The **Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)** is a simple, durable, and portable plastic strip designed to assess the nitrogen status of crops by comparing the greenness of leaves. It generally consists of **four, five, or six color panels**, each representing a different shade of green that corresponds to varying levels of chlorophyll and nitrogen content in plant leaves. The shades range from **yellowish green**, indicating severe nitrogen deficiency, to **light green, medium green, dark green,** and **very dark green,** indicating adequate or excess nitrogen. Each color panel is clearly numbered, allowing farmers to make quick and accurate comparisons in the field. Its lightweight, waterproof, and reusable design makes it suitable for repeated use under different field conditions, providing an economical and practical tool for efficient nitrogen management.

Shade	Leaf Colour	Nitrogen Status
1	Yellowish Green	Very Low
2	Light Green	Low
3	Green	Moderate
4	Dark Green	Adequate
5	Darker Green	High
6	Very Dark Green	Excessive



Objectives of LCC-Based Nitrogen Management

Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)-based nitrogen management aims to improve nitrogen use efficiency by applying nitrogen according to actual crop demand. It reduces unnecessary fertilizer application, minimizes nutrient losses, and enhances crop productivity. This approach lowers production costs, improves fertilizer profitability, and promotes sustainable agriculture. LCC-based nitrogen management helps reduce nitrate leaching, greenhouse gas emissions, and environmental pollution while supporting efficient resource utilization and long-term soil health.

Importance of Nitrogen in Crops

Nitrogen is one of the primary macronutrients essential for the healthy growth and development of crops. It is a major constituent of chlorophyll, amino acids, proteins, nucleic acids, and enzymes, making it indispensable for numerous physiological and biochemical processes. Adequate nitrogen nutrition promotes vigorous vegetative growth, improves photosynthesis, enhances crop productivity, and ensures better quality produce. The major functions of nitrogen in crops are described below:

1. Chlorophyll Formation

Nitrogen is a vital component of chlorophyll, the green pigment responsible for capturing sunlight during photosynthesis. Adequate nitrogen increases chlorophyll content, resulting in dark green leaves and enhanced photosynthetic efficiency. This leads to greater production of carbohydrates, which support overall plant growth and yield. Nitrogen-deficient plants exhibit pale green or yellow leaves due to reduced chlorophyll synthesis.

2. Protein Synthesis

Nitrogen is an essential element in amino acids, which are the building blocks of proteins. Proteins are required for cell growth, enzyme activity, hormone production, and various metabolic functions. Adequate nitrogen supply promotes protein synthesis, resulting in vigorous plant growth, improved crop quality, and higher nutritional value, especially in cereal grains.

3. Leaf Development

Nitrogen promotes rapid cell division and cell enlargement, leading to the development of larger, healthier, and greener leaves. A well-developed leaf canopy increases the surface area available for photosynthesis, allowing plants to produce more food for growth and reproductive development. Healthy foliage also improves the plant's ability to intercept sunlight efficiently.

4. Tillering

In cereal crops such as rice, wheat, barley, and oats, nitrogen plays a crucial role in stimulating tiller formation. Adequate nitrogen encourages the production of more productive tillers, which eventually bear grain-bearing panicles or spikes. Increased tillering contributes directly to higher grain yield by increasing the number of productive stems per unit area.

5. Root Development

Balanced nitrogen nutrition supports healthy root growth and branching, enabling plants to explore a larger volume of soil for water and nutrient uptake. A strong root system improves drought tolerance, nutrient absorption, and plant stability. Although excessive nitrogen may reduce root growth, an optimum supply ensures a healthy balance between shoot and root development.

6. Grain Formation

Nitrogen is essential during the reproductive stage for grain development and filling. It supports the synthesis of proteins and carbohydrates that are translocated to developing grains, resulting in better grain size, weight, and quality. Adequate nitrogen also enhances grain protein content, improves market value, and increases overall crop productivity. Proper nitrogen management during grain filling is therefore critical for achieving high yields and superior grain quality.

Need for LCC-Based Nitrogen Management

Conventional nitrogen management practices often lead to inefficient fertilizer use, causing over-application or under-application of nitrogen. Excess nitrogen increases production costs, reduces fertilizer efficiency, promotes crop lodging, and negatively affects crop quality. It also contributes to environmental problems such as nutrient pollution and soil degradation. LCC-based nitrogen management helps determine the actual nitrogen requirement of crops, ensuring timely and precise application for higher productivity, profitability, and sustainable nutrient management.

How to Use the Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)

The Leaf Colour Chart (LCC) is a simple and effective tool used to assess the nitrogen status of crops by comparing the greenness of leaves with standardized color shades. Proper use of the LCC ensures accurate nitrogen recommendations, improves fertilizer use efficiency, and enhances crop productivity. The following steps should be followed while using the Leaf Colour Chart:

Step 1: Select Representative Plants

Choose healthy and representative plants randomly from different locations in the field. Avoid selecting plants from field borders, waterlogged areas, shaded locations, or places affected by pests and diseases, as these may not accurately represent the crop's nitrogen status. Random sampling provides a reliable assessment of the entire field.

Step 2: Select the Correct Leaf

Select the **topmost fully expanded leaf** from each plant for comparison. This leaf best reflects the current nitrogen status because it is actively involved in photosynthesis and responds quickly to changes in nitrogen availability. Avoid using damaged, diseased, or immature leaves.

Step 3: Compare Leaf Colour

Hold the selected leaf next to the Leaf Colour Chart under **natural daylight**, preferably during the morning or late afternoon when light conditions are uniform. Avoid direct sunlight, which can alter the perceived leaf color. Compare the leaf carefully with the color panels and identify the shade that most closely matches the leaf.

Step 4: Compare the Middle Portion of the Leaf

Focus on the **middle portion of the leaf blade** while comparing its color with the chart. The tip and base of the leaf may naturally vary in color and can lead to inaccurate readings. Matching the central portion provides a more consistent and reliable estimate of leaf greenness and nitrogen status.

Step 5: Record Leaf Colour Readings

Take LCC readings from **at least 10 randomly selected plants** across the field. Record the color value for each leaf individually. Sampling several plants minimizes variation caused by soil differences or plant-to-plant variability and improves the accuracy of nitrogen recommendations.

Step 6: Calculate the Average Reading

After recording all observations, calculate the average LCC value or determine whether the majority of leaves fall below the recommended threshold value. This average represents the overall nitrogen status of the crop and serves as the basis for fertilizer application decisions.

Step 7: Make the Nitrogen Application Decision

Compare the average LCC reading with the recommended critical value for the crop. If the average reading is **below the critical LCC threshold** (commonly 4 for most improved rice varieties and 5 for hybrid rice), apply the recommended dose of nitrogen fertilizer immediately. If the reading is equal to or above the threshold, postpone nitrogen application and continue monitoring the crop at regular intervals. This demand-based approach ensures efficient nitrogen use, reduces fertilizer losses, lowers production costs, and minimizes environmental pollution while maintaining optimum crop growth and yield.

Critical LCC Values

Different crops require different threshold values.

Crop	Critical LCC Value
Rice (high-yielding varieties)	4
Hybrid Rice	4–5
Wheat	4
Maize	5
Barley	4

Time of Observation for Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)

The effectiveness of the **Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)** depends greatly on taking observations at the correct crop growth stage and at regular intervals. Monitoring leaf color during the active vegetative stage helps identify nitrogen deficiency before it affects crop growth and yield. The timing of LCC observations varies with different crops and cultivation methods, as described below.

1. Rice (Transplanted Rice)

In transplanted rice, LCC observations should begin **14 days after transplanting (DAT),** when the crop has established well in the field. Thereafter, leaf color should be monitored **every 7–10 days** until the flowering stage. Regular observations allow timely nitrogen application whenever the leaf color falls below the critical LCC value, ensuring optimum crop growth, increased tillering, and higher grain yield while avoiding unnecessary fertilizer use.

2. Direct-Seeded Rice (DSR)

For direct-seeded rice, LCC monitoring should start **21 days after sowing (DAS)** because the crop establishes directly in the field without transplanting. Observations should be taken **once every week** throughout the active vegetative period until flowering. Weekly monitoring helps synchronize nitrogen application with crop demand, improving nitrogen use efficiency and reducing fertilizer losses.

3. Wheat

In wheat, LCC observations should begin from the, which occurs about **20–25 days after sowing** and **Crown Root Initiation (CRI) stage** is considered the most critical stage for nitrogen application. Leaf color should be assessed at regular intervals until the flowering stage. Timely nitrogen application based on LCC readings promotes better tillering, stronger root development, improved spike formation, and higher grain yield.

4. Maize

In maize, LCC observations should commence at the **six-leaf (V6) stage**, when rapid vegetative growth and nitrogen demand begin. Monitoring should continue at regular intervals throughout the **vegetative growth period** until tasseling. Applying nitrogen based on LCC readings during this stage supports vigorous plant growth, better leaf development, improved cob formation, and enhanced grain production.

Nitrogen Recommendation Using Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)

The **Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)** provides a simple and reliable method for deciding when nitrogen fertilizer should be applied based on the crop's actual nitrogen status. In **rice,** if the average LCC reading is **below 4**, apply **20–30 kg nitrogen per hectare**; if the reading is **4 or above**, no nitrogen application is required. In **wheat,** when the LCC value falls **below 4**, apply the recommended dose of nitrogen in split applications. In **maize**, if the LCC reading is **below 5**, nitrogen fertilizer should be applied immediately to meet the crop's high nutrient demand and ensure optimum growth and yield.

Advantages of LCC-Based Nitrogen Management

1. Higher Nitrogen Use Efficiency

The Leaf Colour Chart (LCC) helps apply nitrogen fertilizer only when the crop actually requires it, thereby improving nitrogen use efficiency and reducing nutrient losses.

2. Increased Crop Yield

Timely and balanced nitrogen application ensures healthy plant growth, better photosynthesis, improved tillering, and higher grain yield and quality.

3. Reduced Fertilizer Cost

By avoiding unnecessary nitrogen applications, LCC lowers fertilizer consumption and reduces the overall cost of crop production.

4. Environmental Protection

LCC minimizes excessive nitrogen use, thereby reducing nitrate leaching, ammonia volatilization, greenhouse gas emissions, and environmental pollution.

5. Easy to Use

The Leaf Colour Chart is simple, portable, and farmer-friendly. It does not require technical expertise or sophisticated equipment, making it suitable for farmers of all scales.

6. Low Cost

Compared with laboratory-based nitrogen analysis or advanced diagnostic tools, LCC is inexpensive, reusable, and economically affordable for small and marginal farmers.

7. Immediate Decision Making

LCC provides instant field-based information about the crop's nitrogen status, allowing farmers to make quick and timely fertilizer application decisions.

8. Better Fertilizer Scheduling

Regular monitoring of leaf color helps synchronize nitrogen application with crop demand, resulting in efficient fertilizer scheduling and improved nutrient management.

9. Higher Profitability

Efficient nitrogen management reduces input costs while increasing crop productivity and quality, leading to higher net returns and improved farm income.

10. Suitable for Precision Agriculture

LCC supports site-specific and precision nutrient management by enabling demand-based nitrogen application, improving resource-use efficiency, and promoting sustainable agriculture.

Limitations of Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)

Although the **Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)** is a simple and economical tool for nitrogen management, it has certain limitations. Leaf color assessment is subjective and may vary among observers. Readings are less accurate under cloudy weather or at night. Dust, diseases, or deficiencies of nutrients other than nitrogen can alter leaf greenness and affect accuracy. Different crop varieties may also show natural color variations. Therefore, proper farmer training is essential for reliable LCC-based nitrogen management.

Factors Affecting Leaf Colour Chart (LCC) Readings

The accuracy of **Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)** readings depends on several crop, environmental, and observation-related factors. These factors can influence leaf greenness and may affect nitrogen status assessment.

1. **Variety** Different crop varieties may naturally differ in leaf color, chlorophyll content, and nitrogen requirement, which can influence LCC readings.
2. **Plant Age** Leaf color changes with crop growth stages. Young and older leaves may show different shades, affecting nitrogen assessment.
3. **Light Intensity** Variation in sunlight intensity can change the appearance of leaf color. Observations should be taken under uniform natural light conditions.
4. **Water Stress** Drought or moisture stress can reduce chlorophyll formation and cause leaf yellowing, leading to inaccurate nitrogen estimation.
5. **Leaf Diseases** Diseases and infections may alter leaf color and produce symptoms similar to nitrogen deficiency.
6. **Nutrient Imbalance** Deficiency or excess of nutrients other than nitrogen may affect leaf greenness and interfere with LCC interpretation.
7. **Dust Deposition** Dust or soil particles on leaf surfaces can change leaf appearance and result in incorrect readings.

8. **Time of Observation** Leaf color varies with light conditions and time of day; therefore, readings should preferably be taken during suitable daylight hours.
9. **Observer's Eyesight** Differences in color perception among observers may influence accuracy. Proper training and consistent observation methods improve reliability.

Precautions While Using Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)

Proper precautions are necessary while using the Leaf Colour Chart (LCC) to obtain accurate nitrogen status information. Observations should always be taken under natural daylight and avoided during early morning, late evening, or low-light conditions. Direct sunlight should be avoided during comparison because it may affect leaf color perception. Only healthy and fully developed leaves should be selected, while damaged or diseased leaves should not be compared. The LCC should be kept clean and protected from dust or scratches. Readings should be taken from several randomly selected plants to obtain reliable results. Whenever possible, the same observer should perform measurements to reduce variation in color interpretation.

Integration of LCC with Precision Agriculture

Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)-based nitrogen management can be effectively integrated with modern precision agriculture technologies to improve nutrient management accuracy and sustainability. LCC supports Precision Nutrient Management and Site-Specific Nutrient Management (SSNM) by enabling crop-specific and location-specific nitrogen recommendations. Integration with GPS and GIS technologies helps prepare nutrient variability maps and optimize fertilizer application. Remote sensing and drone-based crop monitoring provide large-scale assessment of crop nitrogen status. Furthermore, IoT-enabled smart farming systems, Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based decision support systems, and mobile advisory applications can automate nitrogen recommendations, improve real-time decision-making, and promote efficient resource utilization in modern agriculture.

Environmental Benefits

Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)-based nitrogen management promotes environmentally sustainable crop production by ensuring efficient and balanced nitrogen application. Since nitrogen is applied according to actual crop demand, unnecessary fertilizer losses are minimized. It helps **reduce nitrate leaching** into groundwater, decreases **ammonia volatilization**, and lowers **nitrous oxide (N_2O) emissions** associated with excessive nitrogen use. LCC-based management protects groundwater quality, reduces eutrophication of water bodies caused by nutrient runoff, conserves natural resources, improves soil health, and promotes sustainable fertilizer use practices.

Economic Benefits

LCC-based nitrogen management provides significant economic advantages to farmers by improving fertilizer efficiency and reducing unnecessary input costs. Demand-based nitrogen application results in **lower fertilizer expenditure**, higher nitrogen recovery efficiency, and improved crop productivity. Balanced nutrient management enhances grain yield, improves fertilizer response, and increases net returns. It also provides a better benefit–cost ratio by reducing wasteful fertilizer applications and lowering labor requirements. Overall, efficient nitrogen management through LCC contributes to higher farm profitability and sustainable income generation.

Role of Extension Services

Agricultural extension agencies play an important role in promoting the adoption of LCC technology among farmers. Extension workers demonstrate LCC use through farmer field demonstrations and training programs. They distribute LCCs through government schemes, promote balanced fertilizer application, and provide technical guidance on nitrogen management. Digital advisory

services and mobile-based recommendations further support farmers in making timely decisions. Farmer Field Schools (FFS) also encourage participatory learning, helping farmers understand the benefits of efficient nitrogen management and sustainable crop production practices.

Future Prospects

The future of LCC-based nitrogen management lies in its integration with advanced digital agriculture technologies. AI-assisted smartphone applications can automatically analyze leaf color and provide instant nitrogen recommendations. Integration with drones, remote sensing, IoT-based nutrient monitoring systems, and cloud-based decision support platforms can improve real-time nutrient management. Machine learning models can help develop site-specific nitrogen scheduling strategies by combining soil, weather, and crop data. Wider adoption of LCC technology under climate-smart and precision farming programs will contribute to efficient resource use, increased productivity, and sustainable agricultural development.

CONCLUSION

Leaf Colour Chart (LCC)-based nitrogen management is an effective, economical, and environmentally sustainable approach to optimizing nitrogen fertilizer application. By assessing leaf greenness as an indicator of crop nitrogen status, farmers can apply nitrogen only when needed, improving nitrogen use efficiency, reducing fertilizer costs, enhancing crop productivity, and minimizing environmental pollution. Its simplicity, affordability, and compatibility with precision agriculture make it a valuable tool for sustainable crop production. Widespread adoption through extension services, digital technologies, and farmer training can further strengthen nutrient management, improve farm profitability, and contribute to resilient and climate-smart agricultural systems.

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