Application of Phase Change Materials (PCM) in Solar Greenhouse Drying Systems

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Abstract. This study explores the integration of Phase Change Materials (PCMs) in solar greenhouse drying systems to enhance thermal stability, extend drying periods, and improve overall efficiency. Solar greenhouse dryers, while sustainable, suffer from temperature fluctuations due to intermittent solar radiation, leading to inconsistent drying quality for agricultural products like fruits, vegetables, and herbs. PCMs, such as paraffin wax or salt hydrates, absorb latent heat during melting and release it during solidification, maintaining optimal drying temperatures (40–60°C) even after sunset.

The methodology involves a review of experimental setups, including PCM-embedded walls, floors, or collectors in greenhouse dryers, combined with simulations using Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) for heat transfer analysis. Key results from literature indicate that PCM integration reduces peak drying temperatures by up to 14.8°C, prolongs efficient operation by 3–7.5 hours, and boosts energy efficiency by 15–41.5% compared to conventional systems. For instance, paraffin-based PCMs in mixed-mode dryers reduced moisture content in peppers by 95% in 30 hours versus 75 hours in open-sun drying.

Challenges include PCM cost, corrosion in inorganic types, and low thermal conductivity, addressed through nano-additives like Al2O3 for 20–50% conductivity enhancement. Conclusions highlight PCMs' potential for sustainable agriculture, with recommendations for hybrid systems combining PCM with photovoltaic-thermal collectors for year-round operation in varying climates. Future work should focus on bio-based PCMs for eco-friendly applications.

Keywords: Phase Change Materials, Solar Greenhouse Dryers, Thermal Energy Storage, Drying Efficiency, Agricultural Products.

R. Rzayev et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Current Problems in Engineering and Applied Sciences (ICCPEAS 2025)*, Advances in Engineering Research 299,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6239-668-5_6

1 Introduction

Solar greenhouse drying systems represent a sustainable alternative to conventional drying methods, leveraging renewable solar energy to preserve agricultural products while minimizing energy costs and environmental impact. However, these systems face challenges such as diurnal temperature variations, which can exceed 20–40°C fluctuations, leading to uneven drying, nutrient loss, and reduced product quality in crops like chili, tomatoes, or medicinal herbs. Globally, post-harvest losses reach 30% in developing regions due to inadequate drying, exacerbating food insecurity. Phase Change Materials (PCMs) offer a promising solution by storing latent heat during phase transitions (e.g., solid-to-liquid), stabilizing temperatures and extending drying into non-sunlight hours. PCMs are classified into organic (e.g., paraffin, fatty acids), inorganic (e.g., salt hydrates), and eutectics, with melting points tailored to 30–80°C for drying applications. Their high energy density (150–300 kJ/kg) surpasses sensible storage media like water or rocks, enabling compact integration in greenhouse walls, floors, or collectors.Literature shows PCMs in solar dryers reduce drying time by 35–60%, improve exergy efficiency to 4.5%, and lower energy consumption by 20–40%. For example, in a PCM-assisted evacuated tube dryer, operation extended by 3 hours post-sunset, with energy savings of 1743 kJ nightly. Hybrid systems with photovoltaic-thermal (PVT) collectors and PCM achieve overall efficiencies up to 90%. The novelty of this work lies in a comprehensive analysis of PCM optimization for greenhouse-specific climates, including nano-enhanced PCMs for better conductivity and bio-based alternatives for sustainability. Objectives include: (1) Reviewing PCM types and integration methods; (2) Evaluating performance via energy/exergy metrics; (3) Proposing models for real-world deployment.

2 Literature Review

Solar greenhouse dryers represent a pivotal advancement in sustainable agricultural processing, harnessing solar energy to dehydrate crops while mitigating the environmental footprint associated with conventional fossil fuel-based drying methods. These systems are particularly advantageous in regions with abundant sunlight, where they facilitate the preservation of perishable goods such as fruits, vegetables, and herbs, thereby reducing post-harvest losses that can exceed 25–35% in developing economies. The operational principles of solar greenhouse dryers involve capturing solar radiation through transparent covers, which heats the internal air and promotes moisture evaporation from the products. However, inherent challenges arise from the intermittent nature of solar input, resulting in substantial temperature variations—often ranging from 15 to 40° C over a diurnal cycle—that compromise drying uniformity, accelerate nutrient degradation, and diminish overall product quality. To counteract these limitations, researchers have increasingly explored thermal energy storage technologies, with phase change materials (PCMs) emerging as a highly effective means to stabilize thermal conditions and prolong drying efficiency beyond daylight hours [1], [2].

Phase change materials function by absorbing latent heat during their transition from solid to liquid phase and releasing it upon solidification, thereby maintaining a near-constant temperature within the optimal drying range of 30–80°C. This thermoregulatory capability distinguishes PCMs from sensible heat storage options like rocks or water, as they offer higher energy density—typically 150–300 kJ/kg—and more compact integration possibilities. Organic PCMs, such as paraffin wax variants like RT44HC or fatty acids including stearic acid, are favored for their chemical stability, lack of corrosiveness, and congruent melting behavior, though they are constrained by relatively low thermal conductivity values of 0.2–0.6 W/m·K, which can impede heat transfer rates. In contrast, inorganic PCMs, exemplified by salt hydrates like calcium chloride hexahydrate ($CaCl_2 \cdot 6H_2O$), boast superior latent heat capacities and affordability but are susceptible to issues such as phase segregation, supercooling, and potential corrosion of containment materials. To address these drawbacks, eutectic mixtures and composite PCMs have been developed, incorporating nano-additives like aluminum oxide (Al_2O_3) or graphene to enhance thermal conductivity by 30–60%, while also tailoring melting points to specific application needs [3], [4].

The integration of PCMs into solar greenhouse dryers typically involves embedding them in structural components such as floors, walls, or solar collectors, where they capture excess daytime heat and release it during periods of low insolation. This approach not only extends the drying window by 3–8 hours but also improves overall system performance. For example, in an indirect solar dryer configuration, paraffin-based PCM has been shown to reduce the drying time for red chilies by approximately 42%, achieving higher moisture removal rates compared to open-sun drying while preserving color and nutritional content. Similarly, in mixed-mode greenhouse setups, nano-enhanced PCMs have demonstrated a reduction in peak internal temperatures by up to 14.5°C, preventing thermal damage to sensitive products like mushrooms and enhancing energy utilization efficiency to 43%. These enhancements are quantified through key performance metrics, including drying time reduction—often 30–65% shorter than conventional methods—and thermal efficiency gains of 15–45%. Exergy efficiency, which accounts for the quality of energy conversion, can reach 5.5% in optimized PCM-assisted systems, reflecting minimized irreversibilities in heat transfer processes [5], [6]

Fundamental equations underpin these evaluations, such as the latent heat storage capacity given by

$$Q = m \cdot L_f \tag{1}$$

where Q denotes the stored energy in kilojoules, m is the mass of the PCM in kilograms, and L_f is the latent heat of fusion in kJ/kg. This formula illustrates how PCM mass directly influences energy buffering, with practical applications requiring optimization to balance cost and performance. Thermal efficiency is expressed as

$$\eta = \frac{Q_{out}}{Q_{in}} \cdot 100\ \% \tag{2}$$

where Q_{out} represents the useful energy for drying and Q_{in} is the incident solar energy, highlighting the role of PCM in maximizing output under variable conditions. Furthermore, exergy efficiency,

$$\psi = \frac{Ex_{out}}{Ex_{in}} \tag{3}$$

incorporates thermodynamic quality through

$$Ex = Q\left(1 - \frac{T_0}{T}\right) \tag{4}$$

T_0 as ambient temperature and T as system temperature in Kelvin, providing a more comprehensive assessment of system sustainability [7]. Advancements in PCM technology have further propelled their adoption in solar drying systems. Nano-additives, such as carbon nanotubes or Al_2O_3 particles, not only boost conductivity but also improve cycling stability, allowing PCMs to withstand over 1500 melt-freeze cycles with minimal degradation. Hybrid configurations that couple PCM with photovoltaic-thermal collectors have achieved overall efficiencies exceeding 80–90%, enabling simultaneous electricity generation and heat storage for year-round operation. Bio-based PCMs, derived from natural sources like coconut oil or beeswax, offer environmentally benign alternatives, reducing reliance on synthetic materials and aligning with sustainable agriculture goals. Recent bibliometric analyses indicate a surge in research output, with over 246 publications on PCM in solar drying between 2006 and 2024, underscoring trends toward absorber plate modifications and encapsulation techniques to enhance heat transfer [8], [9].

Comparative analyses of studies reveal consistent benefits across diverse setups. In one investigation, a PCM-integrated active mixed indirect solar dryer exhibited improved exergy performance and reduced environmental impact, with drying times for tomatoes shortened to 26 hours from 72 hours in non-PCM systems. Another study on greenhouse dryers with PCM storage for vegetables reported 28% energy savings and extended operational hours, particularly beneficial in temperate climates. These findings emphasize PCM's versatility, though variations in results stem from factors like climate, product type, and PCM selection [10].

Despite these strides, research gaps persist that warrant further exploration. Cost-effectiveness remains a barrier, as organic PCMs incur high initial expenses, while inorganic variants necessitate corrosion-resistant encapsulation, potentially increasing system complexity. Climatic adaptability is underexplored, with the majority of studies concentrated in tropical environments, leaving limited insights for colder or variable weather regions where solar intermittency is more pronounced. Long-term stability issues, including degradation after repeated cycles that can diminish latent heat by 10–20%, highlight the need for durable composites. Additionally, design constraints in compact greenhouse structures complicate PCM integration, often requiring innovative containment solutions to avoid space inefficiencies. This study seeks to fill these voids by examining nano-enhanced and bio-based PCMs tailored for colder climates, with an emphasis on cost-optimized designs and empirical validation of long-term performance metrics.

3 Methodology

3.1 Experimental Setup

This study investigates the performance of a solar greenhouse dryer integrated with phase change materials (PCMs) to enhance drying efficiency and thermal stability for mushrooms (Agaricus bisporus), chosen for their sensitivity to temperature fluctuations. The experimental setup consists of a mixed-mode solar greenhouse dryer with a 2.2 m^2 drying chamber, covered by a transparent polycarbonate sheet (transmissivity 0.91). A 1.1 m^2 flat-plate solar collector, constructed with an aluminum absorber plate coated with a selective black coating (absorptivity 0.95), heats the inlet air. PCM modules, containing 14 kg of paraffin wax RT50 (melting point 50°C, latent heat 230 kJ/kg), are embedded in the drying chamber floor within corrosion-resistant stainless steel containers to store thermal energy. A control dryer, identical except for the absence of PCM, serves as a baseline for comparison [11], [12].

The drying chamber accommodates 6.5 kg of mushrooms (initial moisture content 90% wet basis) on perforated stainless steel trays. A 65 W axial fan, powered by a 130 W photovoltaic panel, maintains an airflow rate of 0.028 kg/s to ensure uniform drying. Temperature sensors (K-type thermocouples, accuracy ±0.3°C) and humidity sensors (SHT40, accuracy ±1.8% RH) are positioned at the collector inlet, drying chamber, PCM modules, and outlet, recording data every 12 minutes. A pyranometer (accuracy ±9 W/m^2) measures solar radiation, averaging 630 W/m^2 during experiments conducted in a temperate climate (ambient temperature 10–22°C) [13], [14].

3.2 Experimental Procedure

Experiments were conducted over eight days in October 2025, with each trial spanning 48 hours to capture both daytime and nighttime drying phases. The PCM and control dryers operated simultaneously, drying identical mushroom batches sliced to 4 mm thickness and pre-treated with 0.6% citric acid to prevent oxidation. The PCM was preconditioned to a solid state (16°C) before each trial to ensure consistent initial conditions. Key parameters measured included:

- **Temperature Profiles**: Monitored in the drying chamber, PCM containers, and ambient environment.
- **Moisture Content**: Determined gravimetrically by weighing samples every 4 hours until reaching a target moisture content of 10% (wet basis).
- **Energy Consumption**: Quantified from solar input and fan operation.

Data were collected using a Raspberry Pi-based system and analyzed to assess drying kinetics, energy efficiency, and product quality (color retention and rehydration capacity) [15], [16].

3.3 Numerical Simulation

A computational fluid dynamics (CFD) model was developed using COMSOL Multiphysics to simulate heat and mass transfer within the PCM-integrated dryer. The model incorporates:

- Energy balance:

$$\rho C_p \frac{\partial T}{\partial \mathrm{t}} = \nabla \cdot (k \nabla T) + Q_{\mathrm{PCM}} \tag{5}$$

where (ρ) is density, (C_p) is specific heat, (k) is thermal conductivity, and (Q_{PCM}) represents latent heat release.

- PCM phase transition: Modeled using the apparent heat capacity method, with enthalpy

$$H=h+\beta L_f \tag{6}$$

where (h) is sensible enthalpy, (β) is the liquid fraction (0 to 1), and $L_f = 230$, kJ/kg.

- Moisture transfer: Governed by $\dot{m} = -D\nabla C$,

$\dot{m} = -D\nabla C$, where (D) is the diffusion coefficient and (C) is moisture concentration [17].

Boundary conditions included solar input (630 W/m^2), convective heat loss (h = 10 W/m^2·K), and ambient temperature (15°C). The model was validated against experimental temperature data, achieving an RMSE of 4.3% [18].

3.4 Performance Metrics

The PCM dryer's performance was evaluated using:

- Thermal efficiency:

$$\eta = \frac{Q_{out}}{Q_{in}} \cdot 100\ \% \tag{7}$$

where $Q_{out} = m_w \cdot L_v$, m_w is evaporated water, $L_v = 2257$, kJ/kg.

Exergy efficiency: $\psi = \frac{Ex_{out}}{Ex_{in}}$, with

$$Ex = Q\left(1 - \frac{T_0}{T}\right)$$

$T_0 = 288$ K — температура окружающей среды,

T = 323 K температура источника.

- Drying rate: $m_w = \frac{\Delta \mathrm{M}}{\Delta \mathrm{t}}$
- Energy storage: $Q = m \cdot L_f = 14 \cdot 230 = 3220\ kJ$ [12].

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were processed using Python (NumPy and SciPy libraries) to compute mean temperatures, drying rates, and efficiencies. Product quality was assessed via L*a*b* color analysis and rehydration tests. The CFD model optimized PCM placement to minimize thermal gradients and airflow resistance [14], [16].

Table 1: Experimental Parameters

Parameter	PCM Dryer	Control Dryer
PCM Type	RT50	None
PCM Mass	14 kg	0 kg
Airflow Rate	0.028 kg/s	0.028 kg/s
Collector Area	1.1 m^2	1.1 m^2
Product Load	6.5 kg mushrooms	6.5 kg mushrooms
Data Interval	12 min	12 min

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Thermal Performance

The PCM-integrated solar greenhouse dryer, incorporating 14 kg of RT50 paraffin wax (melting point 50°C, latent heat 230 kJ/kg), demonstrated significant thermal stability. During daytime operation (6:00–16:00), the drying chamber maintained temperatures of 44–54°C under 630 W/m^2 insolation, reducing peak temperatures by 15.8°C compared to the control's 68°C. At night (16:00–6:00), the PCM sustained temperatures above 39°C for 7.5 hours by releasing stored energy, $Q = m \cdot L_f = 14 \cdot 230 = 3220\ kJ$, while the control dropped to 12°C [11], [12]. These findings are consistent with studies reporting PCM-induced temperature reductions of 12–16°C, enhancing suitability for heat-sensitive crops like mushrooms [19], [20].

The CFD model, validated with an RMSE of 4.3%, showed thermal gradients below 1.6°C/m in the PCM dryer, compared to 5.2°C/m in the control, ensuring uniform drying [17].

4.2 Drying Kinetics

The PCM dryer reduced drying time for mushrooms (90% to 10% moisture, wet basis) to 24 hours, versus 43 hours in the control, a 44% improvement. The drying rate $m_w = \frac{\Delta M}{\Delta t}$, averaged 0.22 kg/h in the PCM dryer versus 0.13 kg/h in the control, driven by sustained nighttime drying that prevented moisture reabsorption [21], [22]. These results align with literature, where PCMs reduced drying times by 35–60% for crops like chilies and tomatoes [23].

4.3 Energy Efficiency

Thermal efficiency

$$\eta = \frac{Q_{out}}{Q_{in}} \cdot 100\ \% \tag{8}$$

where $Q_{out} = m_w \cdot L_v$, $L_v = 2257$ kJ/kg,
reached 47% in the PCM dryer versus 32% in the control, a 47% relative improvement. Exergy efficiency, $\psi = \frac{Ex_{out}}{Ex_{in}}$, with $Ex = Q\left(1 - \frac{T_0}{T}\right)$

$T_0 = 288\ K$, $T = 323\ K$, was $\psi = 5.7\%$ versus 3.8% [24]. These metrics surpass those in similar studies (38–43%) [21].

4.4 Product Quality

PCM-dried mushrooms exhibited superior quality, with L* = 84.5 ± 0.9 (versus 77.8 ± 1.2 in control) and rehydration capacity of 6.6 g/g (versus 5.8 g/g), indicating reduced thermal damage [19], [20]..

Table 2: Performance Comparison

Parameter	**PCM Dryer**	**Control**	**Rabha et al. (2017) [6]**	**Bhardwaj et al. (2022) [10]**
Drying Time (h)	24	43	30 (chilies)	26 (mushrooms)
Thermal Efficiency (%)	47	32	38	43
Temperature Reduction (°C)	15.8	-	12	14.5
Exergy Efficiency (%)	5.7	3.8	4.8	5.3

4.5 Challenges and Limitations

PCM costs ($4.8/kg) imply a 2.2-year payback period. Low insolation (320 W/m²) reduced efficiency by 11%, suggesting hybrid PVT integration. Airflow stagnation near PCM modules requires optimized container designs [24], [25].

5 Implications

The PCM dryer's performance is competitive, particularly in temperate climates, addressing a research gap [21], [22]. Future work should explore bio-based PCMs and AI controls [26].

6 Conclusion

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of integrating RT50 paraffin wax (melting point 50°C, latent heat 230 kJ/kg) into solar greenhouse dryers to enhance drying performance for mushrooms. The PCM dryer maintained temperatures of 44–54°C, reducing peaks by 15.8°C compared to the control's 68°C, and extended drying by 7.5 hours nightly via a storage capacity of $Q = m \cdot L_f = 14 \cdot 230 = 3220\ kJ$ These results align with literature reporting 12–16°C reductions [11], [19].

Drying time was reduced by 44% (24 hours versus 43 hours), with a drying rate of 0.22 kg/h versus 0.13 kg/h, consistent with 35–60% reductions in prior studies [21], [27].

Thermal efficiency, $\eta = \frac{Q_{out}}{Q_{in}} \cdot 100\ \%$, reached 47% ($\eta$=32%), and exergy efficiency, $\psi = \frac{Ex_{out}}{Ex_{in}}$, with $Ex = Q\left(1 - \frac{T_0}{T}\right)$; $T_0 = 288\ K$, $T = 323\ K$, was 5.7% (η 3.8%) [24]. Product quality was enhanced, with L* = 84.5 and rehydration capacity of 6.6 g/g, reflecting minimal thermal damage [19].

The CFD model (RMSE 4.3%) validated uniform heat distribution but identified airflow optimization needs [17]. PCM costs ($4.8/kg) suggest a 2.2-year payback, and low insolation (320 W/m^2) reduced efficiency by 11%, indicating hybrid PVT systems as a solution [22], [25]. The study's focus on temperate climates addresses a research gap [21], [22]. Future work should explore bio-based PCMs and AI-driven controls to enhance sustainability [26].

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