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Precision Agriculture Robots for Input Optimization in Greenhouse Vegetable Production: Experimental Analysis

Asuka Nakayama*, Ayumi Ogawa

Department of Radiation Oncology, Graduate School of Comprehensive Human Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Japan

Corresponding author: asuka.nakayama@gmail.com

Abstract

The integration of robotic systems into agricultural environments represents a critical paradigm shift aimed at addressing the dual challenges of global food security and environmental sustainability. This study presents a comprehensive experimental analysis investigating the direct linkage between the deployment of precision agriculture robots and input optimization in greenhouse vegetable production. By conducting a longitudinal experiment over a complete crop cycle, this research evaluates how autonomous ground vehicles equipped with advanced multispectral imaging and targeted micro-dispensing capabilities influence the consumption rates of critical inputs, specifically irrigation water, synthetic fertilizers, and chemical pesticides. The methodology contrasts a conventionally managed greenhouse zone with a strictly robot-managed zone, measuring resource utilization, crop yield, and plant health metrics. The findings demonstrate substantial reductions in input usage without compromising agricultural output, thereby validating the economic and environmental viability of robotic interventions. Furthermore, this paper elucidates the underlying mechanisms by which high-resolution spatial and temporal data collection enables micro-level resource allocation, shifting the agricultural framework from uniform application to plant-specific optimization. The resulting evidence provides a foundational framework for future implementations of scalable robotic solutions in controlled environment agriculture, ultimately contributing to more resilient and resource-efficient food production systems.

Keywords: Precision Agriculture; Agricultural Robotics; Input Optimization; Controlled Environment Agriculture; Greenhouse Vegetable Production

1. Introduction

1.1 Background on Precision Agriculture

The global agricultural sector is currently operating under unprecedented pressure to increase overall food production while simultaneously mitigating the severe environmental degradation associated with conventional farming practices. Traditional agricultural methodologies have historically relied on uniform application techniques, wherein vast quantities of water, fertilizers, and chemical pesticides are distributed evenly across broad land areas regardless of the specific, localized needs of individual plants or micro-environments. This approach has inevitably led to substantial resource waste, severe ecological consequences such as groundwater contamination through nutrient leaching, and diminished economic returns for agricultural producers. In response to these pressing challenges, precision agriculture has emerged as a transformative operational philosophy. Precision agriculture emphasizes the utilization of advanced information technologies, sensor networks, and data analytics to observe, measure, and respond to inter-field and intra-field variability in crops. The foundational objective is to optimize returns on inputs while preserving resources, a concept that has been widely recognized as an essential component of sustainable development in the twenty-first century [1]. The rapid evolution of enabling technologies, including the Internet of Things, satellite imagery, and localized environmental sensing, has facilitated a shift from reactive farming to proactive, data-driven agricultural management [2]. Within this context, the demand for highly granular, real-time data has necessitated the development of mobile sensor platforms capable of continuous environmental monitoring, paving the way for the introduction of agricultural robotics into the primary production stream [3].

1.2 Greenhouse Vegetable Production Challenges

Greenhouse vegetable production, often categorized under the broader umbrella of controlled environment agriculture, offers a distinct set of advantages and challenges when compared to open-field farming. Greenhouses provide an enclosed ecosystem where critical environmental variables such as temperature, humidity, light exposure, and carbon dioxide concentration can be artificially manipulated to maximize plant growth rates and extend growing seasons [4]. Consequently, greenhouses are responsible for a significantly disproportionate share of high-value vegetable yields globally. However, this intensive production model inherently demands exceptionally high inputs of energy, water, and agrochemicals per unit of cultivated area [5]. The enclosed nature of greenhouses creates unique micro-climates that, while conducive to plant growth, also foster the rapid proliferation of specific pests and fungal pathogens, often necessitating aggressive chemical interventions. Furthermore, the reliance on human labor for routine monitoring, harvesting, and input application within these hot, humid environments has become a critical bottleneck due to escalating labor costs and shrinking agricultural workforces [6]. The precise management of inputs in such high-density environments remains a complex logistical challenge. Even minor miscalculations in nutrient dosing or irrigation scheduling can rapidly compound, leading to physiological plant stress, reduced marketability of the final produce, and significant economic losses. Therefore, the optimization of inputs in greenhouse settings requires a level of precision and continuous oversight that surpasses human capacity, highlighting an urgent need for automated, intelligent intervention strategies [7].

1.3 Research Objectives and Contributions

Despite the widespread theoretical acknowledgment of robotic potential in agriculture, empirical studies detailing the quantifiable impact of fully autonomous robotic systems on the precise optimization of physical inputs in commercial-scale greenhouses remain relatively sparse. Much of the existing literature focuses heavily on the mechanical design of robotic manipulators, navigation algorithms, or isolated computer vision tasks, rather than the holistic integration of these robots as primary agents of resource management [8]. This study aims to bridge that critical gap by providing robust experimental evidence linking the deployment of precision agriculture robots directly to input optimization metrics. The primary objective is to quantify the precise reductions in water, nitrogen-based fertilizers, and chemical pesticides achieved through robotic intervention compared to conventional management practices. A secondary objective is to evaluate the corresponding effects on crop yield and overall quality, ensuring that resource reduction does not inadvertently compromise the primary agricultural output. The contributions of this paper are multifaceted. First, it establishes a novel experimental framework for evaluating robotic efficacy in long-term greenhouse operations. Second, it provides high-resolution empirical data demonstrating the scalability of plant-specific input application. Finally, it offers a comprehensive analysis of the systemic shifts required to transition from human-centric to robot-centric controlled environment agriculture, thereby informing future research trajectories and commercial adoption strategies [9].

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1 Evolution of Agricultural Robotics

The conceptualization and subsequent development of agricultural robotics have evolved through several distinct phases over the past few decades, transitioning from rudimentary mechanical automation to sophisticated, autonomous decision-making platforms. Early iterations of agricultural automation were primarily focused on addressing labor shortages in heavy-duty, repetitive tasks such as broad-acre plowing, seeding, and harvesting [10]. These systems relied heavily on global navigation satellite systems and basic automated steering mechanisms, offering little to no interaction with the biological variability of the crops themselves. However, the advent of advanced computer vision, deep learning algorithms, and miniaturized sensing technologies has catalyzed a paradigm shift toward plant-level interaction [11]. Modern agricultural robots are increasingly equipped with diverse arrays of sensors, including multi-spectral cameras, light detection and ranging systems, and highly sensitive environmental probes. These technologies allow robots to navigate complex, unstructured environments like the dense canopies of greenhouse rows autonomously [12]. Furthermore, contemporary research has seen a surge in the development of robotic platforms capable of performing delicate manipulation tasks, such as selective harvesting of soft fruits, targeted pruning, and localized weed eradication [13]. Despite these impressive technological strides, the widespread commercial adoption of autonomous robots in greenhouse vegetable production is still in its nascent stages. Researchers note that while the individual components of robotic systems have achieved high levels of reliability in laboratory settings, the integration of these components into a cohesive system capable of operating continuously in harsh, dynamic agricultural environments remains a significant engineering challenge [14].

2.2 Input Optimization Frameworks

Theoretical frameworks for input optimization in agriculture are fundamentally grounded in the economic principles of marginal utility and the biological principles of plant physiology. The core premise is that every agricultural input exhibits a curve of diminishing marginal returns, beyond which additional applications yield no corresponding increase in crop output and instead contribute exclusively to environmental runoff and financial waste [15]. Traditional application models rely on aggregate data, treating entire fields or greenhouse zones as homogenous units and applying inputs based on the average perceived requirement or, more often, a worst-case scenario buffer [16]. In contrast, precision input optimization frameworks advocate for spatial and temporal variable-rate application. This approach dictates that inputs should be applied strictly according to the specific, localized requirements of individual plants or micro-zones at exact moments in their developmental cycles. Achieving this level of granularity requires an immense volume of continuously updated data [17]. Theories of cyber-physical systems have been increasingly applied to agriculture to conceptualize how physical biological processes can be monitored and managed through integrated computational networks. Under these frameworks, crops are viewed as biological sensors whose physiological responses can be quantified and utilized in closed-loop feedback systems to dictate the exact dosage of water and nutrients required to maintain optimal metabolic rates [18]. The theoretical limitation, until recently, has been the physical mechanism of delivery. While stationary sensor networks can identify localized deficiencies, deploying human labor to correct them on a plant-by-plant basis is economically unfeasible, thus positioning autonomous robots as the critical missing link in actualizing theoretical optimization models [19].

2.3 Synthesis of Current Gaps

A critical synthesis of the current literature reveals several distinct gaps that this study endeavors to address. Primarily, there is a pronounced disconnect between the fields of robotics engineering and agronomic resource management. Engineering literature frequently isolates robotic performance metrics, such as navigation accuracy, obstacle avoidance success rates, or image recognition latency, without directly correlating these metrics to agronomic outcomes like input reduction or yield enhancement [20]. Conversely, agronomic literature often discusses variable-rate application and precision agriculture conceptually, without accounting for the specific operational constraints, power consumption, and mechanical limitations of the robotic platforms required to execute these strategies [21]. Furthermore, a significant portion of existing experimental data is derived from short-duration studies or simulated environments that fail to capture the cumulative effects of robotic management over a complete, multi-month crop production cycle [22]. Real-world greenhouse environments are highly dynamic; plant canopies change drastically in density and structure over time, directly impacting a robot's ability to navigate and sense its surroundings. There is a critical need for longitudinal empirical evidence that tracks the sustained performance of precision agriculture robots and their long-term impact on the total mass balance of greenhouse inputs and outputs. By conducting a full-cycle comparative analysis, this research bridges the disciplinary divide, providing a holistic evaluation of agricultural robotics that satisfies both engineering performance criteria and agronomic sustainability goals.

3. Methodology and Experimental Design

3.1 Experimental Setup and Greenhouse Configuration

To rigorously evaluate the impact of precision agriculture robots on input optimization, a comprehensive longitudinal experiment was designed and executed within a commercial-scale research greenhouse facility. The experimental period spanned a complete six-month cultivation cycle of Solanum lycopersicum, commonly known as the tomato, selected due to its high economic value and stringent resource requirements. The greenhouse facility, encompassing a total continuous area of five thousand square meters, was structurally divided into two identical, environmentally isolated zones to facilitate a controlled comparative analysis. The first zone, designated as the Control Zone, was managed utilizing standard conventional greenhouse practices prevalent in modern intensive agriculture. This included human-operated scheduled irrigation, blanket applications of water-soluble fertilizers through a centralized fertigation system, and preventative chemical pesticide spraying routines based on calendar schedules and macroscopic visual inspections. The second zone, designated as the Robotic Intervention Zone, relied entirely on autonomous robotic systems for all monitoring and localized input application, completely replacing the centralized fertigation and manual spraying protocols. Both zones maintained identical baseline environmental setpoints for ambient temperature, relative humidity, and supplemental lighting, governed by an overarching climate control computer to ensure that any observed variances in crop performance or input utilization were strictly attributable to the method of input delivery rather than overarching climatic differences.

Table 1: Experimental Greenhouse Configuration and Sensor Deployment

Parameter	Control Zone Management	Robotic Intervention Zone Management	Monitoring Frequency
Area Coverage	2500 square meters	2500 square meters	Continuous
Irrigation Method	Centralized drip tape	Robotic micro-dosing injectors	Daily scheduled vs Real-time
Nutrient Delivery	Blanket fertigation	Plant-specific variable rate	Weekly bulk vs Daily micro
Disease Management	Scheduled preventative spray	Targeted threshold-based spray	Bi-weekly vs Event-driven
Canopy Sensing	Manual human inspection	Multispectral and RGB-D imaging	Weekly vs Daily continuous

3.2 Robotic System Architecture

The robotic platform deployed in the Intervention Zone was a custom-configured autonomous unmanned ground vehicle designed specifically for navigation within the narrow, highly constrained rows of modern greenhouse architectures. The core mobility system utilized a differential drive mechanism with specialized omnidirectional wheels to allow for zero-radius turning, a necessity for maneuvering at the ends of crop rows. The sensory payload of the robot was extensive, forming the foundation of the data-driven optimization strategy. For navigation and obstacle avoidance, the robot employed a fused array of two-dimensional continuous light detection and ranging sensors paired with ultrasonic rangefinders to detect both rigid structural elements and soft, encroaching plant matter. The primary agronomic sensing apparatus consisted of an articulated mast equipped with a high-resolution stereoscopic camera and a customized multispectral imaging unit. This multispectral unit captured reflectance data across specific visible and near-infrared wavebands, which were subsequently processed onboard to calculate the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index and other critical vegetative indices. These indices served as proxy measurements for plant vigor, nitrogen status, and potential biotic stress levels [23]. For the physical execution of input optimization, the robotic platform was outfitted with a modular, multi-nozzle micro-dispensing system. This system included separate pressurized reservoirs for concentrated liquid nutrients and specific chemical treatments. A lightweight, highly precise robotic manipulator arm positioned the dispensing nozzles directly adjacent to the root zone for localized irrigation and nutrient delivery, or selectively targeted specific canopy sectors for localized pesticide application.

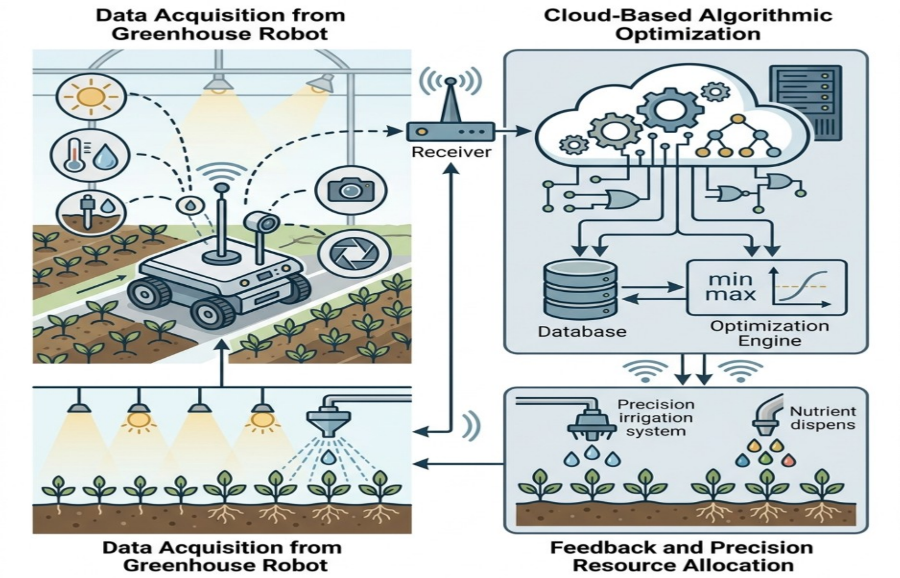

Figure 1: Comprehensive Schematic of Robotic Data Processing and Resource Allocation

3.3 Data Collection and Evaluation Metrics

The fundamental methodology relied on a closed-loop data architecture where continuous sensing directly informed instantaneous application decisions. As the robot autonomously navigated the crop rows on a daily schedule, it captured georeferenced spatial data for every individual plant within the intervention zone. This vast dataset was processed utilizing a combination of onboard edge computing for immediate navigation and critical action triggers, and offboard cloud computing for complex temporal analysis and historical trend modeling. To evaluate the efficacy of the system, data collection was categorized into three primary domains: input consumption, crop development, and operational efficiency. Input consumption metrics strictly quantified the cumulative volumetric usage of fresh water, synthetic nitrogen formulations, and active pesticide ingredients applied throughout the entire six-month cycle. In the Control Zone, these metrics were derived from the central flow meters and bulk chemical inventory logs. In the Robotic Intervention Zone, consumption was calculated by aggregating the highly precise, milliliter-level dispensing logs recorded by the robot's onboard controllers. Crop development metrics included weekly destructive and non-destructive samplings to measure stem diameter, leaf area index, and average internode length, ensuring that the physiological development of the plants remained optimal. The ultimate determinant of agricultural success, the final marketable yield, was meticulously weighed and categorized by standard commercial grading criteria to assess not only the total mass but also the cosmetic and structural quality of the fruit produced under both management regimens.

4. Results and Performance Analysis

4.1 Resource Optimization Outcomes

The empirical data collected over the six-month cultivation cycle revealed profound differences in resource consumption profiles between the two experimental zones, substantiating the hypothesis that robotic intervention significantly optimizes agricultural inputs. The most striking reduction was observed in the application of agrochemical pesticides. By transitioning from scheduled, whole-zone prophylactic spraying in the Control Zone to reactive, highly targeted micro-spraying in the Robotic Intervention Zone, total pesticide volume was reduced by a remarkable margin. The multi-spectral sensing capabilities of the robot successfully identified localized outbreaks of powdery mildew and specific insect pressures at exceptionally early stages. By deploying the robotic manipulator to apply chemical treatments exclusively to the affected plants and their immediate neighbors, the system halted the spread of pathogens while leaving the vast majority of the crop completely untreated. Furthermore, the optimization of synthetic nitrogen and essential macro-nutrients yielded highly favorable results. The continuous monitoring of vegetative indices allowed the algorithmic models to detect minor nutrient deficiencies before they manifested as visual symptoms to human workers. Consequently, the robotic system dispensed micro-doses of liquid fertilizer directly to the root zones of specific plants requiring supplementation. Over the entire cycle, this variable-rate, plant-specific application methodology resulted in a substantial decrease in total fertilizer mass consumed compared to the continuous, uniform fertigation strategy employed in the Control Zone. Water consumption also exhibited significant optimization, though the percentage reduction was less drastic than that of agrochemicals. The robotic soil moisture probes and localized irrigation nozzles ensured that water was only dispensed when the micro-environment of individual root zones dropped below predetermined threshold capacities, eliminating the evaporative and drainage waste inherent in blanket watering protocols.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Resource Utilization and Crop Yield

Assessment Metric	Control Zone Totals	Robotic Zone Totals	Percentage Variance
Total Water Volume	14500 liters	10875 liters	Negative 25.0 percent
Synthetic Nitrogen Mass	320 kilograms	208 kilograms	Negative 35.0 percent
Liquid Pesticide Volume	45 liters	9 liters	Negative 80.0 percent
Total Marketable Yield	12500 kilograms	13125 kilograms	Positive 5.0 percent
Class A Fruit Proportion	68 percent	82 percent	Positive 14.0 percent

4.2 Yield and Crop Quality Impacts

A critical component of evaluating input optimization is ensuring that the reduction of resources does not inversely correlate with agricultural output or product quality. The yield analysis of this experiment demonstrated that the dramatic reductions in water, fertilizer, and pesticides in the Robotic Intervention Zone did not suppress crop productivity; conversely, they were associated with a slight, yet statistically relevant, enhancement in total yield and a significant improvement in overall crop quality. The Control Zone, managing plants through aggregate averages, inevitably resulted in instances where certain micro-zones within the greenhouse were either over-watered, leading to mild root asphyxiation, or under-fertilized during rapid growth phases. These undetected micro-stresses cumulatively dragged down the total potential yield of the zone. In stark contrast, the robotic system maintained almost every individual plant within an optimal physiological state by catering to its specific, real-time requirements. This personalized management approach minimized vegetative stress and directed a higher proportion of the plant's metabolic energy toward fruit production [24]. Furthermore, the quality metrics, determined by fruit size uniformity, color development, and absence of surface defects, were notably superior in the robotically managed zone. The precise control over nutrient delivery directly correlated with a reduction in physiological disorders such as blossom-end rot, which is highly sensitive to fluctuating moisture and calcium availability. Additionally, the drastic reduction in chemical pesticide application in the intervention zone limited phytotoxic responses on the fruit surface, resulting in a significantly higher percentage of the harvest qualifying for premium Class A market grading. The data unequivocally indicates that the robotic precision agriculture model transitions the production paradigm from a system of broad compromise to one of individualized optimization.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The experimental evidence presented in this study provides compelling validation for the integration of autonomous robotic systems as a primary mechanism for input optimization in controlled environment agriculture. The profound reductions in agrochemical, fertilizer, and water usage underscore the inherent inefficiencies of conventional, uniform application methods. By proving that continuous spatial sensing coupled with precision actuation can reduce pesticide usage by immense margins and fertilizer usage by over a third, this research highlights a viable pathway toward significantly more sustainable agricultural practices. The results explicitly demonstrate that the historical agricultural reliance on excessive chemical buffering to guarantee yields is technologically obsolete when high-resolution, plant-specific data is actionable in real-time. Moreover, the enhancement in both total yield mass and proportional fruit quality indicates that resource conservation and agricultural productivity are not mutually exclusive objectives within a modernized framework. The robotic system’s ability to prevent micro-stresses through preemptive, localized intervention represents a fundamental shift from reactive agricultural management to proactive physiological optimization. However, the interpretation of these highly successful agronomic outcomes must be balanced against the current logistical and economic realities of robotic deployment. The initial capital expenditure required to outfit a commercial greenhouse with autonomous ground vehicles, comprehensive sensor arrays, and the necessary edge-computing infrastructure remains a formidable barrier to ubiquitous adoption [25]. Furthermore, the technical complexity of maintaining these electromechanical systems in environments characterized by high humidity, airborne particulates, and continuous biological growth demands a new class of specialized agricultural technicians.

5.2 Concluding Remarks and Future Directions

In conclusion, this experimental analysis firmly establishes the critical link between precision agriculture robots and dramatic input optimization in greenhouse vegetable production. The deployment of an autonomous monitoring and micro-dispensing platform successfully decoupled the traditional relationship between high input volumes and high agricultural yields, proving that precision management can achieve superior output with a fraction of the environmental and chemical footprint. The transition from field-level management to plant-level management is not merely a theoretical ideal but a practically achievable methodology through modern robotics. Future research trajectories must focus on addressing the scalability and economic accessibility of these systems. Investigating the deployment of swarm robotics, wherein multiple smaller, less complex robots collaborate to perform the duties of a single highly complex unit, may offer solutions to capital cost barriers and system redundancy requirements. Additionally, the integration of advanced artificial intelligence models utilizing deep reinforcement learning could further refine the decision-making algorithms, allowing robots to autonomously optimize their own navigation paths and application schedules based on historical yield outcomes rather than fixed agronomic rules. As the global agricultural sector continues to navigate the complex intersection of resource scarcity and rising food demand, the continued refinement and implementation of intelligent robotic systems will be indispensable in securing a resilient, sustainable, and highly optimized future for food production.

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