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Smart Water Management in Vegetable Crops: Advances in Water Use Efficiency, Precision Irrigation and Sustainable Production

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~Abstract~

Water is one of the most critical inputs in vegetable production, directly influencing plant growth, nutrient uptake, yield, quality and profitability. However, increasing water scarcity, erratic rainfall, climate variability, declining groundwater resources and inefficient irrigation practices are creating serious challenges for sustainable vegetable production. Conventional irrigation systems often apply water uniformly without considering spatial and temporal variations in soil moisture, crop water requirement and prevailing weather conditions, resulting in substantial losses through evaporation, runoff and deep percolation. Smart water management provides an integrated approach in which irrigation is scheduled according to actual crop demand through efficient irrigation systems, soil- and plant-based sensing, weather information, Internet of Things (IoT), automation and data-driven decision support. Drip irrigation and fertigation form the foundation of efficient water management, while soil moisture sensors, evapotranspiration-based scheduling, remote sensing, wireless sensor networks and artificial intelligence are increasingly enabling precision irrigation. Recent systematic reviews indicate that IoT-based irrigation systems can substantially reduce irrigation water use while maintaining or improving productivity, although outcomes vary with crop, soil, climate, sensor calibration and irrigation strategy. The integration of these technologies with mulching, deficit irrigation, suitable cultivars and improved soil-water management can enhance water-use efficiency and contribute to climate-resilient vegetable production. This article reviews recent advances, opportunities, limitations and future directions of smart water management in vegetable crops.

Keywords: *Vegetable crops, water-use efficiency, smart irrigation, precision irrigation, drip irrigation, fertigation, IoT, soil moisture sensors, artificial intelligence, sustainable production.*

1. Introduction

Vegetable crops are among the most water-responsive agricultural commodities because of their relatively shallow root systems, high biomass production, succulent tissues and continuous demand for moisture during critical growth stages. Adequate water availability is essential for cell expansion, photosynthesis, nutrient transport, flowering, fruit development and maintenance of marketable quality. At the same time, both water deficit and excessive irrigation can adversely affect vegetable production. Deficit irrigation may reduce plant growth, fruit size and yield, whereas over-irrigation can promote nutrient leaching, root-zone hypoxia, disease development and unnecessary energy consumption.

The challenge is therefore not simply to increase the quantity of irrigation water but to improve productivity per unit of water consumed. Water-use efficiency (WUE) represents the relationship between crop productivity and water use and has become an important indicator for sustainable vegetable production. Earlier research emphasized that improving WUE requires both reduction of avoidable water losses and maintenance of vigorous crop growth through appropriate cultivars and management practices.

The concept of smart water management represents a shift from fixed or calendar-based irrigation towards demand-based, site-specific and adaptive irrigation. Modern systems can integrate information from soil, crop and atmosphere to determine when irrigation is required and how much water should be applied.

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2. Water Management Challenges in Vegetable Production

Vegetable crops are frequently cultivated under intensive production systems where water demand may change rapidly with crop growth, temperature, solar radiation, wind speed and humidity. A single irrigation schedule may therefore be inadequate throughout the crop cycle.

Major causes of inefficient water use include excessive irrigation, poor irrigation scheduling, evaporation from exposed soil, runoff, deep percolation below the effective root zone and non-uniform distribution of water. In addition, conventional surface irrigation may supply water without considering the actual moisture status of individual crop zones.

Climate change further complicates irrigation management. Increasing temperatures and irregular rainfall can increase crop evapotranspiration and shorten the period during which adequate soil moisture is available. Thus, future vegetable production requires irrigation strategies capable of responding dynamically to environmental variability rather than relying exclusively on predetermined schedules.

3. Drip Irrigation and Fertigation: The Foundation of Efficient Water Management

Drip irrigation is one of the most important technologies for improving water management in vegetable crops. It delivers water close to the root zone through emitters, thereby reducing unnecessary wetting of the soil surface and minimizing evaporation and runoff. The system also allows irrigation frequency and quantity to be adjusted according to crop growth stage and environmental conditions.

The combination of drip irrigation with fertigation provides an additional advantage because water and nutrients can be delivered directly to the active root zone. This improves synchronization between nutrient availability and plant demand and can reduce nutrient losses through leaching. In high-value vegetables such as tomato, chilli, capsicum, cucumber, brinjal and watermelon, drip-based fertigation can therefore contribute simultaneously to water, nutrient and labour-use efficiency.

However, drip irrigation should not be considered synonymous with smart irrigation. A drip system operated according to a fixed calendar may still apply excessive water. The major advancement comes when drip irrigation is combined with real-time monitoring and demand-based scheduling.

4. Soil Moisture-Based Irrigation Scheduling

Soil moisture monitoring provides direct information about the amount of water available in the crop root zone. Sensors can detect changes in soil water status and trigger irrigation when moisture falls below a predetermined threshold.

Low-cost capacitive sensors and microcontroller-based systems have attracted considerable attention because they can provide continuous measurements at relatively low cost. A recent review specifically focused on IoT-enabled low-cost sensors for vegetable crops and reported substantial improvements in irrigation management, while also highlighting the importance of soil-specific calibration, particularly in heavy clay and black soils.

The selection of an appropriate moisture threshold is critical. Irrigation initiated too early may lead to unnecessary water application, whereas an excessively low threshold may expose plants to water stress. Therefore, threshold values should ideally be determined according to crop species, cultivar, soil texture, root-zone depth, climatic conditions and growth stage.

5. Evapotranspiration and Weather-Based Irrigation

Crop evapotranspiration (ETc) provides an important scientific basis for estimating crop water requirements. Reference evapotranspiration, crop coefficients, temperature, solar radiation, relative humidity and wind speed can be used to estimate atmospheric water demand.

Weather-based irrigation controllers can combine these parameters to modify irrigation schedules according to changing environmental conditions. Such approaches are particularly useful in regions where crop water demand varies substantially between seasons.

An important advantage of ET-based scheduling is that it accounts for atmospheric demand rather than relying solely on soil moisture. However, the accuracy of the approach depends on reliable weather information and appropriate crop coefficients. The best strategy may therefore be a combination of weather-based, soil-based and plant-based information rather than dependence on a single indicator.

6. Internet of Things (IoT) in Smart Irrigation

The Internet of Things has transformed irrigation from a manually operated activity into an increasingly connected decision-making system. An IoT-based irrigation system may include soil moisture sensors, temperature and humidity sensors, weather stations, flow meters, controllers, wireless communication networks and cloud-based platforms.

Data collected from the field can be transmitted to a central platform where irrigation decisions are generated automatically. Depending on system design, irrigation can then be activated through pumps, solenoid valves or automated controllers.

Recent systematic evidence suggests that IoT-enabled smart irrigation can reduce irrigation water use while maintaining or improving productivity, although the magnitude varies considerably among crops and

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management conditions. Importantly, not every reduction in water use results in higher yield; therefore, smart irrigation should be evaluated using both water saving and crop productivity rather than water saving alone.

For vegetable production, this distinction is particularly important because excessive deficit irrigation may save water but compromise marketable yield and quality.

7. Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning: The Next Frontier

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) are emerging as powerful tools for irrigation decision-making. Traditional irrigation scheduling generally follows predetermined rules, whereas AI-based systems can identify relationships among soil moisture, weather parameters, crop development and historical irrigation responses.

Machine learning models can potentially predict crop water requirements, identify irrigation thresholds and recommend irrigation timing. When integrated with IoT sensors, these systems can continuously update irrigation decisions using real-time field data.

Emerging research is also moving towards cloud computing, digital twins and increasingly autonomous irrigation systems. Nevertheless, AI should not be viewed as a replacement for agronomic knowledge. Poor-quality sensor data, insufficient field calibration and limited datasets can lead to unreliable recommendations. Therefore, successful AI-based irrigation requires strong integration of crop physiology, soil science, meteorology and data science.

8. Mulching and Soil-Water Conservation

Smart water management does not depend exclusively on electronic technologies. Agronomic practices such as mulching remain highly valuable. Organic and plastic mulches can reduce direct soil evaporation, moderate soil temperature, suppress weeds and improve soil moisture conservation.

Mulching can be particularly effective when combined with drip irrigation. The drip system supplies water directly to the root zone, while mulch reduces water loss from the soil surface. Such integrated management can improve the efficiency of each unit of irrigation water applied.

Similarly, increasing soil organic matter, improving soil structure and maintaining adequate soil cover can enhance the soil's capacity to retain and supply water to plants. Thus, technological and biological approaches should be considered complementary rather than competing strategies.

9. Deficit Irrigation: Saving Water Without Sacrificing Productivity

Deficit irrigation involves applying less water than the full crop evapotranspiration requirement during selected growth stages. The underlying principle is that mild water stress during relatively less sensitive stages may reduce water consumption without causing proportionate yield losses.

However, vegetable crops differ greatly in their sensitivity to water stress. Stress during flowering, fruit setting and rapid fruit enlargement may have serious consequences in fruit vegetables. Therefore, deficit irrigation should be crop- and stage-specific.

The objective should not simply be maximum water saving but maximum economic yield per unit of water. The impact of smart irrigation on yield and water saving is highly dependent on irrigation thresholds and management strategies.

10. Remote Sensing and Precision Irrigation

Remote sensing technologies provide spatial information about crop and soil variability. Satellite imagery, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), thermal imaging and vegetation indices can be used to identify differences in crop vigour and water stress.

This information can support variable-rate irrigation, in which different portions of a field receive different amounts of water according to their requirements. Such an approach is particularly relevant to precision vegetable production, where soil and crop variability can occur even within relatively small fields.

The integration of remote sensing with soil sensors and weather information can provide a more comprehensive representation of crop water status. Precision farming research in vegetables has demonstrated the potential of remote sensing, GPS and GIS for site-specific crop management.

11. Towards an Integrated Smart Water Management Framework

The future of vegetable irrigation lies in integrating multiple technologies rather than depending on a single system. A practical smart irrigation framework can be visualized as:

Field → Sensors → Data Transmission → Decision Support → Automated Irrigation → Crop Response → Feedback

Soil moisture sensors provide root-zone information, weather stations estimate atmospheric demand, crop sensors identify plant stress, and IoT platforms transmit the data. AI or decision-support algorithms can then combine these inputs to determine irrigation timing and quantity. Automated valves and pumps execute the irrigation decision, while subsequent crop and soil measurements provide feedback for the next irrigation cycle.

This closed-loop approach is superior to rigid calendar-based irrigation because it allows the system to respond to changing field conditions. It accounts for uncertainty and feedback from the production environment.

12. Major Constraints and Research Gaps

Despite considerable technological progress, several barriers restrict the widespread adoption of smart water management in vegetable production.

First, the initial cost of sensors, controllers, communication infrastructure and automated irrigation equipment can be significant for small and marginal farmers. Second, sensors require proper installation, calibration and maintenance. Sensor readings can be affected by soil texture, salinity, temperature and other environmental factors.

Third, many smart irrigation studies are conducted under experimental or prototype conditions, whereas long-term validation under diverse farmer-field conditions remains comparatively limited. Scalability, sensor calibration, standardization, economic feasibility and farmer training remain important research gaps.

Future studies should therefore focus on low-cost, robust and crop-specific systems suitable for smallholder vegetable growers. Standardized protocols for sensor calibration, irrigation thresholds and evaluation of water productivity are also required.

13. Future Prospects

The next generation of smart irrigation is expected to move from simple monitoring towards predictive and autonomous decision-making. Integration of IoT, AI, remote sensing, cloud computing and digital technologies could enable irrigation systems to anticipate crop water requirements before visible water stress occurs.

Future systems may combine real-time soil moisture, weather forecasts, crop growth models, plant physiological indicators and market-oriented production objectives. Renewable-energy-powered irrigation, particularly solar-powered pumping integrated with automated controllers, may further improve sustainability.

For vegetable science, an important research direction is the development of crop-specific irrigation intelligence. Instead of developing generic irrigation models, future systems should account for cultivar, root architecture, growth stage, soil type, protected/open-field conditions and target market quality.

14. Conclusion

Smart water management represents a major transition from conventional irrigation towards precise, demand-driven and sustainable water use in vegetable production. Drip irrigation and fertigation provide the basic infrastructure, while soil moisture sensing, evapotranspiration modelling, IoT, remote sensing, AI and automated control systems provide the intelligence required for precision irrigation.

The ultimate goal should not be maximum water saving alone but the production of more marketable vegetables per unit of water, energy and land. Smart irrigation has considerable potential for improving water-use efficiency, but successful adoption requires crop-specific validation, affordable technologies, reliable sensor calibration and farmer-oriented solutions.

Thus, the future of vegetable production will depend on integrating agronomic knowledge with digital technologies. Smart water management can become a cornerstone of climate-resilient vegetable production by improving water-use efficiency, maintaining productivity and reducing the environmental footprint of intensive horticulture.

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