Reg. No.: COOP/2023/KOTA/201080/26/185

## AGRICULTURE FORUM FOR TECHNICAL EDUCATION OF FARMING SOCIETY

**Kota, Rajasthan**

# Horticulture 4.0: How AI Is Transforming Fruit and Vegetable Production

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## INTRODUCTION

The production of fruits and vegetables requires timely decisions.

A short delay in irrigation, pest control, harvesting or cooling can reduce yield, appearance, shelf life and market value.

Horticulture 4.0 integrates sensors, cameras, drones, weather data, smart machinery, robotics and artificial intelligence to detect change at an early stage, predict what may happen next, and recommend the most appropriate action.

It is not to replace the grower, but a clearer picture of the crop and more confidence to act at the right time.

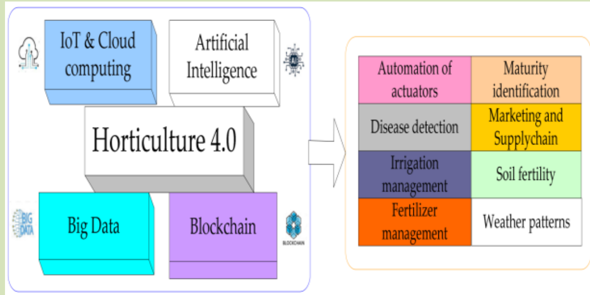
### What Makes Horticulture 4.0 Different

Precision horticulture maps variability at the scale of an orchard, field or greenhouse; Horticulture 4.0 goes on to learn from it.

Soil-moisture probes, weather stations, satellite and drone images, smartphones, connected machinery and packhouse sensors provide a constant flow of data.

AI integrates these data with information on the crop stage, variety, management history and weather forecasts. It can detect stress, count fruit load, forecast irrigation needs, detect quality defects and alert to disease-favoring conditions.

When linked with drip systems, greenhouse controls, sprayers or robots, information becomes targeted action rather than merely another digital dashboard.




### AI Gives the Crop a Digital Voice

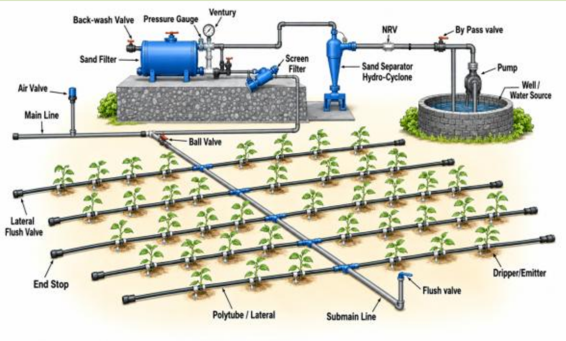
Computer vision enables a farmer to monitor thousands of plants with greater consistency than sporadic human visits. Images taken by smartphones, stationary cameras, systems mounted on tractors or flying drones can detect irregular canopy growth, empty spots, flowering intensity, fruit load, maturity as well as visible pest damage and disease. Multispectral and thermal cameras can detect physiological stress before it is visible to the naked eye. These products assist scouts in finding priority areas, but an image is not always a diagnosis. Heat, nutrient deficiency, water stress and disease can show the same symptom. So, the field validation and expert opinion is essential prior to application.

### More Crop per Drop

AI-based irrigation integrates many factors including root-zone moisture, weather, crop demand, growth stage, and past irrigation response to predict when and how much water is needed.

Electrical conductivity and drainage information can also be used to enhance fertigation decisions in greenhouses, nurseries, and soilless production systems.

Smart controllers operate pumps and valves automatically and alert growers when moisture or salinity levels fall out of the specified range. Recent studies indicate that sensor-managed fertigation can minimize over- irrigation and simultaneously enhance root regeneration, nutrient absorption, produce quality and water use efficiency.
However, thresholds must be adjusted for the crop, soil, climate and production system.




### Greenhouses That Learn

In protected cultivation, the temperature, humidity, radiation, $CO_2$, ventilation, irrigation and nutrition can be monitored and controlled, which makes it very applicable to AI. Prediction methodologies can also predict heat or humidity spikes and modify fans, vents, screens, fogging, heating, and/or irrigation to mitigate crop stress. Furthermore, AI can determine environmental factors that are linked to flowering, fruit set, fruit expansion and colour development, and quality. Explainable systems are particularly interesting, as they show which environmental factors influenced a recommendation. This allows growers to determine whether the advice is biologically reasonable before allowing the system to control expensive equipment.

### Count Today, Plan Tomorrow

AI can enumerate flowers and fruits, track development and predict the size of the harvest and when it will be gathered. Cameras can observe the same rows several times, while drones can quickly cover large areas of orchards or fields of vegetables. More reliable and earlier forecasts allow better planning of thinning, labour, harvesting machinery, crates, cold store, transport and sales contracts. Load maps of fruit can also identify weak areas within an orchard that need closer examination. However, the models need to be recalibrated if the variety, canopy structure, season, camera position, or lighting conditions change. What works well in one orchard or greenhouse doesn't necessarily work everywhere.

### Targeted Crop Protection

AI algorithms can integrate information from crop images, smart-trap counts, leaf wetness, temperature, humidity and weather forecasts to predict the risk of pests and diseases. Instead of treating a whole block on a fixed calendar, growers can look at or spray the place and time of highest risk. Smart sprayers can detect crop canopies, weeds or diseased spots and modulate the discharge, minimizing unnecessary chemicals use and drift when adequately calibrated. The best system links AI with integrated pest management: verify the problem, compare it to an economic threshold, conserve beneficial organisms, choose the least-disruptive control and document the result so future suggestions are improved.

### Robots as Horticultural Co-workers

Machines guided by AI are being created for nursery grafting, transplanting, weeding, pruning, pollination, thinning, spraying and harvesting. A harvesting robot should be able not only to detect the fruit, evaluate its ripeness, compute its 3D position, plan a collision-free path to the fruit, but also to grasp and detach the fruit without inflicting any damage to it. Fruit recognition under orchard and greenhouse conditions has greatly been enhanced by recent advances in machine vision. However, commercial implementation is limited by concealed fruits, varying illumination, irregular canopies, fragile products, slow picking rates, and high costs. Adoption in the near term will thus involve a hybrid of human workers and specialized machines that perform the repetitive, exhausting or dangerous labour.

### Intelligence After Harvest

AI continues to operate when produce is out of the field. Colour, size, shape, maturity and surface defects can be graded by computer vision. Internal quality attributes can be predicted using NIR and hyperspectral sensors without the need to cut the produce, and the cold chain can be monitored by temperature and humidity sensors. Predictive models can be used to manage storage, shelf-life, packaging decisions, and allocation to distant versus local markets. Consistency and speed over the manual grading may be achieved, but each model must be validated on different cultivars, production regions and growing seasons. The erroneous discard of marketable produce is also avoided by human quality criteria and the routine calibration.

**Where the Real Value Comes From**

AI creates value when the information leads to better decisions. They may be decreased in consumption of water, fertilizer, pesticide, energy and labour; earlier stress termination; higher marketable yield; more uniform quality; safer working conditions; better scheduling of the harvest; diminished postharvest loss. Prices include sensors, subscriptions, connectivity, installation, calibration, maintenance, training, repairs, and data administration. There are certain technologies that small-scale farmers do not have to invest in to own. High-cost equipment can be transformed into affordable per-acre or per-lot services through the Custom Hiring Centres, cooperatives, FPOs, start-ups, drone operators, packhouses and advisories.

**Start with a Problem, Not a Product**

- ❖ **Identify the loss:** Excess irrigation, delayed disease detection, uneven grading, labour shortage or uncertain harvest volume.
- ❖ **Record the baseline:** Measure input use, labour requirements, marketable yield, quality rejection and profit.
- ❖ **Conduct a small pilot:** Test the technology in a representative area while retaining the existing practice for comparison.
- ❖ **Verify the recommendations:** Compare alerts with field observations and agronomic expertise, and calibrate sensors locally.
- ❖ **Measure the complete return:** Include purchase, subscription, connectivity, training, maintenance and replacement costs.
- ❖ **Expand carefully:** Scale the system only when the improvement is reliable, practical and greater than its total cost.

**Keep the Human in Control**

Inaccurate sensor positioning, dirty lenses, data loss, spotty connectivity and models trained on the wrong crop types can result in confident but wrong advice. Farmers need to be informed about what data are collected, who owns it, how it is used and whether it can be moved to another platform. The systems need to work offline, have cybersecurity, provide transparent recommendations and have a safe manual override. AI should support not bypass crop physiology, local experience, food-safety requirements and responsible pesticide use.

**The Future Is Augmented Horticulture**

The next era of horticulture will integrate edge AI, digital twins, autonomous machines and traceable supply chains. But the best farm will not necessarily be the one with the most. It is the result of dependable observation combined with a timely, profitable, and environmentally responsible decision. Horticulture 4.0 makes every plant, every greenhouse or orchard block, a source of learning, and turns that learning into better fruit, better vegetables and better returns.

## CONCLUSION

Horticulture 4.0 is converting fruit and vegetable production from standard, traditional practices to data-guided, precise, and intelligent systems. AI, IoT, computer vision, robotics, drones, and remote sensing allows for on-time decisions related to crop management, irrigation, nutrition, detection of pests and diseases, estimation of yield, harvesting, and postharvest processing. They can enhance productivity, resource use efficiency, quality, and climate resilience, and minimize production losses. However, issues such as high costs, limited connectivity, data quality, digital literacy, and access to technology need to be overcome. In the end Horticulture 4.0 can contribute to making horticultural production more intelligent, sustainable, profitable and resilient, especially if technology is developed based on the practical requirements of farmers.