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Machine Learning–Driven Real-Time Detection and Classification of Crop Diseases Using IoT-Enabled Smart Farming Systems

Preeti Mishra

Research Scholar

Kalinga Univerity, Raipur, Chhattisgarh

Introduction

This study implemented and evaluated a fully functioning IoT-enabled smart farming system that integrates edge and cloud machine learning (ML) models for real-time detection, classification, and alerting of crop diseases. The project deployed low-cost field sensors and camera modules across experimental plots of tomato and soybean crops to collect multisource input (leaf images, ambient temperature, humidity, and soil moisture). Edge devices performed preliminary image preprocessing and lightweight convolutional neural network (CNN) inference to detect symptomatic leaves; suspicious samples were sent to a cloud server for robust multi-class classification using a deeper CNN ensemble. The system delivered real-time notifications to farmers and logged incidents into a central dashboard for further agronomic recommendations. Over two cropping seasons, the platform processed 18,450 images and correlated disease classification outputs with manual expert diagnoses and laboratory confirmations to evaluate accuracy, latency, and practical utility.

Theoretical Background of the Study

This research is grounded in three theoretical strands: (1) Precision Agriculture theory, which posits that timely, spatially resolved information improves input efficiency and crop health; (2) Pattern Recognition and Deep Learning theory, which underpins automated disease detection via feature learning from images; and (3) Cyber-Physical Systems (CPS) and IoT theory, which describe how distributed sensing, networked processing, and actuation form an intelligent decision-support loop. Combining these perspectives, the study tests the hypothesis that integrated ML+IoT systems can provide accurate, early-stage disease detection and support targeted management decisions that reduce crop losses.

Significance of the Study

The study demonstrates a scalable, low-cost approach for continuous disease surveillance in small-to-medium farms, offering several benefits: (1) earlier identification of disease outbreaks enabling timely interventions, (2) reduction in blanket pesticide applications through targeted treatment, (3) objective documentation of field health for extension services, and (4) evidence for policymakers and agri-tech developers on practical constraints of field deployment (connectivity, power, model drift). The results provide actionable guidelines for farmers, extension officers, and technology providers seeking to implement ML-driven plant-health monitoring in resource-constrained settings.

Statement of the Problem

Crop diseases and pest outbreaks cause substantial yield losses annually. Traditional scouting and laboratory diagnosis are time-consuming and reactive. There is a need for an automated, accurate, and real-time system that can detect and classify crop diseases in the field to trigger prompt, site-specific management. This study addresses the problem by developing and empirically validating an IoT-integrated ML system for real-time disease detection and classification.

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Operational Definition of Key Terms

- **IoT-Enabled Smart Farming System:** Network of field sensors, cameras, edge devices, and cloud services that collect, transmit, and process agronomic data for decision support.
- **Real-Time Detection:** Identification of symptomatic plant conditions within a timeframe (≤ 2 minutes for edge detection; ≤ 30 seconds additional for cloud classification) that allows immediate action.
- **Disease Classification:** Assignment of detected symptoms to a disease class (e.g., late blight, bacterial spot, foliar fungal infection) with a confidence score.
- **Edge Inference:** ML model execution on a local device (Raspberry Pi / microcontroller + camera) to reduce latency and bandwidth.
- **Ground Truth:** Expert agronomist field diagnosis and laboratory confirmation used as the reference label for model evaluation.

Variables

- **Independent Variable:** Deployment of the ML–IoT detection system (system active vs. system inactive/baseline manual scouting).
- **Dependent Variables:** Detection accuracy (precision, recall, F1), classification accuracy across disease classes, time-to-detection (latency), false alarm rate, and agronomic outcomes (disease incidence reduction, pesticide usage).

Objectives of the Study

1. To design and deploy an IoT-enabled architecture combining edge and cloud ML for real-time crop disease detection and classification.
2. To evaluate the detection and classification accuracy of the system against expert ground truth.
3. To measure system latency, false alarm rate, and field robustness under varying environmental conditions.
4. To assess agronomic impact: change in disease incidence and pesticide application frequency in monitored plots.
5. To identify practical deployment challenges and propose best-practice recommendations for scale-up.

Research Questions of the Study

1. How accurately does the ML–IoT system detect symptomatic plants in real field conditions?
2. What is the multi-class classification accuracy for the targeted crop diseases?
3. How quickly can the system detect and classify disease events (system latency)?
4. Does the continuous monitoring system reduce disease incidence and pesticide applications compared to conventional scouting?
5. What operational challenges (connectivity, power, model drift) affect system performance?

Scope of the Problem

The investigation focused on two economically important crops (tomato and soybean) across small-plot farms in a single agro-climatic zone. The study concentrated on foliar diseases identifiable via optical imaging and correlated environmental sensors, not on root or systemic diseases requiring destructive sampling. Findings are generalizable to similar cropping systems with caveats on scale and disease spectra.

Delimitation and Area

- Study area: Three experimental farm clusters in the research district (total 18 hectares).
- Crops: Tomato (Solanum lycopersicum) and soybean (Glycine max).

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- Timeframe: Two consecutive cropping seasons (monsoon and post-monsoon).
- Exclusions: Post-harvest disease monitoring and soil-borne pathogen classification.

Research Methodology

- Research Design- An applied experimental-cum-quasi-experimental design: an intervention group with IoT–ML monitoring and a matched control group relying on conventional scouting. Mixed-methods evaluation combined quantitative performance metrics and qualitative farmer feedback.
- Population- Smallholder and medium-size farms cultivating tomato and soybean in the selected district.
- Sample- Intervention: 12 farms (total 9 hectares) instrumented with IoT nodes.
  - Control: 12 matched farms (9 hectares) with standard scouting.
  - Data samples: 18,450 leaf images; 10,320 sensor readings; 720 field inspection records.

Sampling Method

Purposive selection of farms with similar crop management practices, followed by random allocation to intervention or control within matched strata (farm size, cultivar).

Source of Data

Primary: Field-collected images, sensor logs, expert field diagnoses, laboratory pathogen confirmations, farmer-recorded pesticide applications. Secondary: Local extension records and agronomic guidelines.

Research Tool

- Hardware: Raspberry Pi + camera modules for edge nodes, low-power environmental sensors (temperature, RH, soil moisture), 4G modems/LoRa gateways.
- Software: Edge preprocessing pipelines, lightweight MobileNetV2 for on-device detection, cloud-based ensemble (ResNet50 + EfficientNet) for classification, dashboard for alerts.
- Validation instruments: Standardized field inspection checklist and laboratory PCR/plate culture confirmation for a subset.

Data Collection

Automated continuous collection of images and environmental readings during daylight hours; scheduled expert inspections twice weekly; random laboratory sampling of 240 suspected symptomatic leaves for pathogen confirmation. Farmer logs collected weekly for pesticide usage and yield estimates.

Statistical Analysis of Data

- Performance metrics: Precision, recall, F1-score, accuracy, ROC-AUC per class.
- Latency analysis: median and 95th percentile detection/classification times.
- Comparative agronomic outcomes: t-tests and ANCOVA comparing disease incidence and pesticide usage between intervention and control (adjusting for baseline differences).
- Time-series analysis for sensor-based predictors (cross-correlation, LSTM forecasting experiments).
- Error analysis stratified by illumination, occlusion, and leaf age.

Findings of the Study

1. The two-tier edge-cloud architecture enabled rapid flagging (median edge detection latency = 45 seconds) and robust classification (median additional cloud processing = 8.2 seconds).

2. The ensemble classifier achieved 82.4% overall accuracy; best performance was for late blight (90.1%) and bacterial spot (87.3); lower for nutrient-deficiency mimic symptoms (75%).
3. Sensor fusion (environmental context) improved classification confidence by 5–7% and aided early risk alerts.
4. Intervention farms experienced a 21% reduction in disease incidence and an 18% reduction in pesticide application frequency compared to controls over the seasons.
5. Operational constraints—intermittent connectivity, battery maintenance, and model performance degradation due to seasonal phenology changes—were observed and addressed via scheduled local retraining and hybrid connectivity fallback (LoRa + 4G).

Summary

The implemented ML–IoT system demonstrated field-ready performance for real-time detection and classification of foliar diseases in tomato and soybean, delivering measurable agronomic benefits.

Conclusions

Integrated edge-cloud ML systems can significantly improve early detection, reduce unnecessary pesticide use, and support targeted interventions. System robustness requires attention to power, connectivity, and continuous model maintenance.

Recommendations

- Scale pilot deployments with community-shared gateways to reduce costs.
- Integrate active learning pipelines to incorporate field-validated new samples for periodic retraining.
- Provide farmer training on dashboard interpretation and trust-building with human-in-the-loop confirmations.
- Work with extension agencies to integrate alerts into existing advisory workflows.

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