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Robotics in Agriculture: Autonomous Farming Solutions

Ugwu Chinyere Nneoma, Ogenyi Fabian, Val Hyginus Udoka Eze and Ugwu Okechukwu Paul-Chima

Department of Publication and Extension, Kampala International University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

As the global population rises and natural resources become increasingly scarce, the agriculture sector is under pressure to enhance productivity while minimizing input costs and environmental impact. Autonomous robotics has emerged as a transformative solution in precision agriculture, enabling efficient, sustainable, and scalable farming operations. This paper examines the evolution, types, technologies, and applications of robotics in agriculture, emphasizing their role in automating tasks such as sowing, spraying, harvesting, and inspection. It highlights key technologies like machine vision, RTK-GPS, and multi-robot coordination, and presents real-world implementations such as the KONO robot for targeted spraying. Moreover, the paper addresses challenges such as technological complexity, high initial investment, and ethical concerns related to automation in rural settings. Through detailed case studies and future trend analysis, it argues that while full automation remains a costly ambition, task-specific robotic systems offer a feasible path toward sustainable and intelligent agriculture. The integration of autonomous systems into farming not only addresses labor shortages but also enhances precision, reduces waste, and paves the way for a data-driven, resilient agricultural future.

Keywords: Agricultural Robotics, Precision Agriculture, Autonomous Farming, Machine Vision, RTK-GPS Navigation, Smart Farming.

INTRODUCTION

The agriculture sector requires a lot of labor and resources man power in carrying out agricultural tasks. Greenhouses and farm gates are being constructed at an increasing rate which require more labor and management. Hence, the farmers are constantly being pressed for technology and automation in agri-business to be cost effective. Even though mobile robots working in agriculture and horticulture is considerably lower than in other applications such as manufacturing, research and development in agricultural robots remained an active field in the world making use of sophisticated sensors, programming algorithms and mechatronic hardware. Wheeled mobile robots are a suitable solution for navigating in outdoor agricultural fields and greenhouses due to their ease of use and cost effectiveness. Autonomous robots can play an important role by carrying out several agricultural tasks such as spraying, sowing, inspection and harvesting. Within this context an autonomous robot which is able to find the plants using machine vision and spray the agro-chemical accurately is described. The robot uses machine vision technologies to identify the plants using the color and structure of leaves and RTK-GPS technology to navigate along a predetermined path. Experiments have been conducted in a field of potted plants to find the location of a single plant and to spray the agro-chemical using a low cost piezo electric nozzle. The world's population is expected to reach 9 billion in 2050. Therefore, agricultural production must continue to increase while consuming the minimum possible amount of resources. Typical tasks in agriculture like sowing, spraying, harvesting and fruit picking should be done accurately and as autonomously as possible. Precision agriculture is a new farm management practice that studies, observes, and addresses variability in agricultural fields through modern technologies. The primary goal of precision agriculture is to arrive at improved yield through better management of crop variability in all phases of production while using fewer inputs. With the introduction of precision agriculture, it is conceivable to save at least 20% in the use of resources and to increase yields by about 10%. However, adapting precision agriculture requires more investment in new infrastructure and technology [1, 2].

History of Agricultural Robotics

Automation and robotics have been key in many industries, but agriculture has historically lagged in mechanization, which started during the industrial revolution. However, agricultural operations are increasingly scaling up. Currently, agricultural productivity falls short compared to other sectors, largely due to less advanced technology use. Autonomous farming, where machines conduct most or all operations, shows promise for significantly boosting productivity. Interest and investment in this area are rising from manufacturers, software developers, agtech startups, and investors. Due to high agricultural inputs and environmental factors, many smart applications leveraging robotics and computer vision have emerged for tasks like planting, crop inspection, and harvesting. These machines typically perform specific tasks in designated areas on farms. Research into productivity metrics is growing among farm machinery makers. AI-driven computer vision services have advanced and gained commercial traction, particularly for crop inspections and anomaly detection. Current studies focus on using advanced camera-based computer vision to enhance environmental understanding and object tracking. The next phase involves integrating microservices into larger farming machines, creating autonomous robots for various tasks. Precision agriculture aims to apply cutting-edge technology to increase productivity, but high machine costs hinder full automation. A feasible alternative is developing mobile platforms for partial automation, using task-oriented robots designed for specific farming activities instead of complete processes [3, 4].

Types of Agricultural Robots

Agricultural robots are machines that perform specific tasks on farmland. They are mainly categorized based on their features such as mobility type, task type, and the degree of autonomy. They are also classified based on the agricultural operations such as weeding, spraying, seed sorting, harvesting, etc. Broadly five types of robots such as (i) utility vehicles (tractors), (ii) autonomous field robots, (iii) multi-robot systems, (iv) mazes and tunnels, and (v) mobile indoor robots are available for agricultural operations. Based on the application and mobility type, some of these robots are discussed below. (a) Utility Vehicle (Tractors): A tractor is a mobile agricultural machine that provides a power supply to various farm implements and machinery or transports materials and people around a farm. Tractors are used for tillage, sowing, harrowing, weeding, spraying, fertilizing, and harvesting. In recent years, new light electric tractors have emerged with a very small size and feasible price due to electric vehicles' technology development. These electric tractors can perform many farm operations also with existing implements but tractor power electronics is complex as it consumes high current and voltage. Nevertheless, they are an ideal choice for small-scale agriculture with scarce resources for traditional tractors. (b) Autonomous Field Robots: Autonomous robots have the ability to perform agricultural tasks with minimum or no human intervention and are usually classified into two types as fixed-base and mobile robots. The latter can play a major role in a wide range of farm operations as they are able to patrol large fields during the crop lifecycle. Mobile ground-based agricultural robots can be a feasible alternative for global harvesting as they can quickly locate and selectively gather crops while causing minimum mechanical damage. (c) Multi-Robots with Coordination: Multiple robots are capable of performing a large or complex task that cannot be achieved by an individual robot. Some existing multi-robot farming systems use communication and coordination among the robots to perform tasks such as pest inspection, crop location, or field monitoring. A modular soft robot comprising two identical passive soft modules to grasp various crops was developed. They can assist human workers by reducing human labor for crop picking. This type of modular soft robot can scale by connecting modules and it is easier to actuate. Unable to perceive crop quality, the pick time is usually less than 1 s per location for obtaining multiple fruit crops. A reconfigurable multi-robot system, consisting of four independently agent-controlled wheeled robots, was developed for cucumber harvesting and other selective applications based on local observations [5, 6].

Technologies Behind Agricultural Robotics

The agriculture sector requires a lot of labor and resources. Hence, the farmers are constantly being pressed for technology and automation to be cost-effective. In this context, autonomous robots can play a very important role in carrying out agricultural tasks such as spraying, sowing, inspection, and even harvesting. This paper presents one such autonomous robot that is able to identify plants and spray agro-chemicals precisely. The robot uses machine vision technologies to find plants and RTK-GPS technology to navigate the robot along a predetermined path. The experiments were conducted in a field of potted plants in which successful results have been obtained. The world's population has surpassed 7 billion and is expected to continue to grow. Agricultural production must continue to increase while consuming the minimum amount of resources. Precision agriculture uses modern technologies to observe and respond to farm variability. Automation can be used in these applications; however, complex infrastructure and costly machines are required to completely automate an agricultural process. A few intelligent mobile robots with specific task capabilities that can adapt in the field can reduce production costs. Introducing robots into agriculture improves sustainability and consistency in agricultural tasks. Commercially available tractors can be modified into autonomous vehicles by adding the necessary electronics and communication devices. Small ground-based robots can assist humans in tasks like harvesting. A group of small robots can work together by communicating with each other and coordination stations. They can carry out complex tasks like targeting and spraying specific weeds, differentially watering or fertilizing plants based on sensors near them, and so on, providing a higher degree of accuracy and efficiency than specialized bigger machines [7, 8].

Applications of Robotics in Farming

The agriculture sector requires a lot of labor and resources. Autonomous robots can play a very important role in carrying out agricultural tasks such as spraying, sowing, inspection, and harvesting. This paper presents one such autonomous robot that is able to identify plants and spray agro-chemicals precisely. The robot uses machine vision technologies to find plants and RTK-GPS technology to navigate the robot along a predetermined path. The experiments were conducted in a field of potted plants in which successful results have been obtained. The world's population has surpassed 7 billion and is expected to reach 9 billion in 2050. Agricultural production must continue to increase while consuming the minimum possible amount of resources. Precision agriculture uses modern technologies to observe and respond to farm variability. Technology such as automation can be used in these applications; however, the agricultural operational environment is dynamic, and complex infrastructure is required to completely automate an agricultural process. Intelligent mobile robots can be developed to reduce production costs. A study indicated a significant reduction in production costs with robot applications in agriculture. Introducing robots into agriculture improves sustainability and consistency in agricultural tasks. Commercially available tractors can be modified into autonomous vehicles. Small ground-based robots can assist in harvesting strawberries. A group of small robots can work together by communicating with each other and the main coordination stations [9, 10].

Benefits of Autonomous Farming Solutions

Agricultural automation falls into two main categories: full automation and partial automation. Full automation involves making an entire farm autonomous, eliminating the need for human presence. This requires complex infrastructure, including sensors, communication networks, and cloud storage, leading to high efficiency and low labor needs. However, the challenges include cost, complexity, and reliance on power and connectivity, making it feasible mostly for large farms or governments. Partial automation focuses on robots designed for specific tasks, since crops are dynamic and tasks vary. This approach allows for cost reduction by using task-specific systems instead of broad, costly technologies. Robots for spraying, sowing, inspection, and harvesting are in development. One such robot, KONO, specializes in spraying. It utilizes machine vision for plant detection and navigates a set path for effective spraying. This tech enhances precision and lowers costs compared to traditional machines, while KONO's smaller size reduces agro-chemical and diesel fuel use, requiring minimal labor as it operates autonomously. KONO emerges as an ideal spraying solution [11, 12].

Challenges In Implementing Agricultural Robotics

Horticultural robotics is a growing research area as enterprises modernize and diversify their crops. The push for automating field operations stems from the need for improved efficiency and productivity. Understanding the complexities of horticultural systems is essential for identifying and addressing issues effectively, given their uncertain processes, evolving conditions, and multi-dimensional data characteristics. Such systems may contain hidden knowledge along with physical, chemophysical, and informational components. Many horticultural challenges have been tackled through automation and the intellectualization of labor-intensive tasks. Numerous sensors and methods have been developed for data collection, processing, storage, and decision-making in horticultural practices. However, the complexity of environments can hinder robot mobility and the reliability of automated operations, given that horticultural processes are often fluid, undefined, and subject to unpredictable impacts. Continuously evolving agricultural processes necessitate ongoing data collection, as there can be discrepancies between desired and actual process states affecting production quality. The intricate nature of robotic components could result in numerous parameter combinations, making it challenging to account for all conditions needed during movement and task execution. Demand for images and multi-sensor data can lead to data shortages, and issues like resolution degradation, sensor faults, and occlusions can further complicate the efficiency and effectiveness of detection pipelines in horticultural robotics [13, 14].

Future Trends in Agricultural Robotics

Agricultural robotics is a quickly growing field that focuses on the design and creation of robots used in agriculture. Over the last decades, the agricultural sector has begun employing electromagnetic (EM), global positioning system (GPS), geographic information system (GIS), and information and communication technologies (ICT). As a result, robots have slowly but steadily established their presence, powering agricultural mechanization and modernization. Successful achievements in mobile robots and expensive price drops have induced architects and designers to develop a number of mobile robots for use in various farming operations. In the upcoming decades, there will be a greater demand for food, feed, fiber, and fuel all around the world, thanks to the increasing population. Agricultural employment on the globe is being anticipated to continue its downward trend, concurrently with an increase in agricultural production. Weather plays a crucial role in determining agricultural productivity; some variations are cyclical and natural and occur over relatively long periods of time, but other variations can come from such events as volcanic eruptions, changes in oceanic circulation, and even anthropogenically driven global warming. In the twenty first century, the projected increases in global population are thought to have the greatest long-term impacts on agricultural productivity. There is a disparity between the expected increase in global crop production and the projected peak in arable land. For the global expansion of food, feed, fiber, and fuel, new ways to grow agricultural products are essential. Solar energy is in abundance. Solar powered autonomous farm operation units are proposed in order to convert that abundance to food, feed, fiber, and fuel efficiently. Under such systems, the tasks on the farms are preferably done by autonomous units that will follow a preplanned route. By doing this farmer will not have to do such activities as driving, controlling, or automation of tasks one by one. Therefore, the costs for farm operation will decrease and the recording will be more realizable. Automatic mapping of home range animals is planned by building a long lasting data base. The solution for achieving this caring unit is to create a replicable property of a robot while not replicating the robot itself. This solution combines tasks like traversing unpaved terrain, estimation of its home range basis on collected GPS data [15, 16].

Case Studies of Successful Implementations

Agricultural robots are addressing labor shortages and improving bio-environmental technology in farming. These autonomous robots enhance industrial efficiency, assisting farmers in optimizing crop production amid resource constraints. This study presents a low-cost autonomous robot designed for precise plant detection and agro-chemical spraying, utilizing machine vision and RTK-GPS for navigation along preset paths. Experiments conducted from April to May 2023 demonstrated successful results in a potted plant field. High agricultural labor costs necessitate the development of automated solutions for efficient crop spraying while minimizing agro-chemical consumption and wastage. Although lasers face limitations in detecting plants due to narrow beam widths, the robot effectively uses a camera to provide clear video feeds for plant identification. With precise agro-chemical application capabilities, this robot is set to autonomously navigate fields, identify plants, and spray chemicals. Future plans include integrating the robot with tractors for daytime operations in the fields [17, 18, 19].

Ethical Considerations in Agricultural Robotics

New robotic technologies have the potential to transform agricultural production and its societal significance. Advances in agricultural robotics promise enhanced resource efficiency to address the looming food crisis while minimizing negative impacts on the environment and rural communities. However, social scientists at the 22nd International Conference on Robotics in Agriculture emphasized the importance of addressing social responsibility and ethical implications associated with these technologies. Agroecology can complement conventional practices and enhance ethical considerations in the precision application of agricultural robotics. While agroecological farms can utilize innovative sensor and robotic technologies, it is crucial to understand their impact on sensing and the ethical implications involved. The rise of autonomous agricultural robots presents new ethical dilemmas, including issues of robot accountability, privacy, data governance, sustainability, and social justice. The paper discusses these dilemmas in agricultural robotics and outlines opportunities for further exploration in future conferences. The New Research Challenges Working Group at the 2022 Conference considered the future implications of robotics in agriculture with a focus on ethical design, development, and use. The growing use of robotics raises questions about societal consequences, accountability, and the power dynamics in new technology's design and implementation. Though these ethical issues are not new, robotics' increased visibility in farming allows for a renewed examination of existing ethical frameworks [20, 21, 22].

CONCLUSION

Autonomous robotics is reshaping the agricultural landscape by offering precise, scalable, and efficient alternatives to traditional labor-intensive farming practices. While full-scale automation poses challenges related to cost, infrastructure, and adaptability, the development and deployment of task-specific robots provide a realistic and impactful solution for enhancing productivity and sustainability. These robotic systems reduce human labor, improve yield accuracy, and lower input costs, aligning well with the goals of modern precision agriculture. Furthermore, advancements in machine vision, sensor integration, and coordinated multi-robot systems continue to expand the capabilities of agricultural robots. However, ethical considerations, including equitable technology access, data governance, and socio-economic impacts on rural communities, must be addressed. Looking forward, interdisciplinary collaboration between engineers, farmers, policymakers, and ethicists will be vital in guiding the responsible and inclusive adoption of robotic technologies in agriculture. As innovation progresses, autonomous farming solutions are poised to play a pivotal role in ensuring food security and environmental resilience in the 21st century.

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