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Next-Generation Plant Breeding: The Seeds That Will Secure Our Future

*V. Karpagam
Department of Plant Breeding and Genetics, MIT College of Agriculture and Techonolgy Vellalapatti , Musiri – 621 211, (Tamil Nadu), India
*Corresponding Author's email: karpagampbg@gmail.com

Global agriculture is facing unprecedented challenges. Climate change, shrinking arable land, water scarcity, emerging pests and a growing population are putting enormous pressure on crop production systems. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), global food production must increase by nearly 60% by 2050 to meet rising demand. Traditional plant breeding, though highly successful during the Green Revolution led by scientists like Norman Borlaug, is often slow and time-consuming. Today, a transformative shift is underway. **Next-generation plant breeding (NGPB)** integrates genomics, artificial intelligence (AI), genome editing, speed breeding and digital phenotyping to accelerate crop improvement. It combines biology with data science, automation and predictive modeling — ushering in an era of precision agriculture.

From Conventional to Next-Generation Breeding

Traditional breeding relied on phenotype-based selection and repeated field evaluation across seasons. While effective, it may take 8–12 years to release a new variety. The breakthrough of marker-assisted selection (MAS) and genomic tools changed this paradigm.

With the sequencing of crop genomes such as rice and wheat, and advances reported in journals like Nature Plants and The Plant Genome, breeders can now directly target genes controlling yield, stress tolerance and quality traits.

Core Components of Next-Generation Breeding

Genomic Selection (GS)

Genomic Selection uses genome-wide markers to predict breeding value without waiting for full phenotypic evaluation. Studies published in G3: Genes, Genomes, Genetics (2023–2024) show that machine learning models significantly improve prediction accuracy for complex traits such as drought tolerance and grain yield. GS reduces breeding cycle time and increases selection efficiency, especially for polygenic traits.

Genome Editing – CRISPR Revolution

Genome editing tools such as CRISPR-Cas systems allow precise modification of target genes. Unlike transgenic approaches, CRISPR can introduce small edits without foreign DNA insertion.

The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and CIMMYT are actively applying CRISPR to improve stress tolerance and nutrient use efficiency.

Recent advances (2022–2024) highlight:

- Base editing
- Prime editing
- Multiplex gene editing
- De novo domestication of wild species

Genome editing significantly shortens variety development timelines.

Speed Breeding

Speed breeding accelerates generation advancement using controlled environments, extended photoperiods and optimized temperature regimes.Research from the University of Queensland demonstrates that crops like wheat and barley can produce up to 4–6 generations per year instead of 1–2 under field conditions. When combined with genomic selection, speed breeding creates a powerful rapid-cycling breeding pipeline.

Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

AI is transforming plant breeding through:

- High-throughput image-based phenotyping
- Disease detection using deep learning
- Genotype–phenotype prediction models
- Big data analytics for breeding decisions

Recent publications in Frontiers in Plant Science (2023–2025) show that convolutional neural networks (CNNs) outperform traditional statistical models in disease and stress prediction.

AI reduces human bias, increases accuracy and enhances decision-making speed.

High-Throughput Phenotyping and Drones

Field phenotyping using drones, hyperspectral imaging and thermal sensors allows rapid evaluation of thousands of breeding lines. Institutions like ICRISAT are deploying drone-based platforms to monitor canopy temperature, NDVI and stress indicators in sorghum and millets.

Digital phenotyping bridges the gap between genotype and phenotype.

Pan-Genomics and Wild Relatives

Modern breeding explores the crop pan-genome — capturing both core and dispensable genes.

Wild relatives harbor novel alleles for:

- Drought tolerance
- Pest resistance
- Heat resilience
- Pan-genome research (2021–2024) reveals extensive structural variation contributing to stress adaptation.

Integration: The Breeding Pipeline of the Future

Next-generation breeding integrates:

Genomics + AI + Speed Breeding + Genome Editing + Digital Phenotyping

This integrated model:

- Shortens breeding cycle by 50–70%
- Improves selection accuracy
- Reduces cost per variety
- Enhances climate resilience

Breeding is moving from “selection-based” to “prediction-based” science.

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Despite technological advances, challenges remain:

- Regulatory frameworks for gene editing
- Data management and computational infrastructure
- Skill gaps in bioinformatics
- Public perception and policy issues

The World Bank emphasizes the need for capacity building in developing countries to ensure equitable access to advanced breeding tools.

Future Outlook (2025–2035)

- The next decade will likely witness:
- AI-driven autonomous breeding platforms
- Real-time field genomics

- Climate-specific gene editing
- Digital twins of crops for predictive modeling
- Integration of quantum computing in genomics

Breeding programs will become faster, data-driven and environmentally sustainable.

Conclusion

Next-generation plant breeding is not merely an upgrade of conventional methods — it is a revolution. By integrating genomics, AI, genome editing and speed breeding, scientists are redesigning crop improvement to meet climate and food security challenges. The future of agriculture lies in precision, prediction and performance. With strategic investment, policy support and public awareness, next-generation breeding will empower farmers, strengthen food systems and ensure global sustainability.

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