



AI-Optimized Seed Spacing for Maximizing Light Interception: Machine Learning-Driven Plant Geometry, Canopy Architecture, and Precision Agronomic Design

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Article Info

P-ISSN: 3051-3421

E-ISSN: 3051-343X

Volume: 05

Issue: 01

Received: 20-05-2024

Accepted: 22-06-2024

Published: 24-07-2024

Page No: 67-74

Abstract

Optimizing light interception efficiency in crop canopies represents a critical frontier in sustainable intensification of agricultural systems. Traditional seed spacing practices rely on fixed empirical recommendations that fail to account for genotype-specific morphology, dynamic environmental conditions, and spatial heterogeneity in field-scale production systems. This limitation results in suboptimal radiation use efficiency, reduced photosynthetic capacity, and yield gaps across diverse cropping environments. Artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies offer transformative potential for developing adaptive, data-driven seed spacing strategies that maximize canopy light interception while minimizing resource inputs. This review examines the integration of deep learning architectures, optimization algorithms, and crop growth simulation models to predict optimal planting geometries based on plant architectural traits, solar radiation patterns, and agronomic objectives. Advanced phenotyping platforms, including unmanned aerial vehicles, ground-based sensors, and three-dimensional canopy reconstruction systems, provide the spatiotemporal data streams necessary for training and validating predictive models. Field implementations across row crops, cereals, and horticultural systems demonstrate measurable improvements in radiation use efficiency, biomass accumulation, and yield stability under variable climatic conditions. The convergence of reinforcement learning, Bayesian optimization, and real-time decision support systems enables precision planting equipment to execute variable-rate seed spacing prescriptions at field scale. Despite promising advances, challenges remain in model generalization, computational scalability, and integration with autonomous agricultural machinery. Future research must address data scarcity in underrepresented cropping systems, develop robust uncertainty quantification frameworks, and establish industry standards for AI-driven agronomic decision-making.

Keywords: AI-driven agronomy, seed spacing optimization, light interception, canopy architecture, precision agriculture, radiation use efficiency

1. Introduction

Light interception and utilization constitute the fundamental biophysical processes governing crop productivity in terrestrial ecosystems^[1, 17]. Photosynthetically active radiation (PAR) captured by crop canopies drives carbon assimilation, biomass accumulation, and ultimately economic yield across all agricultural production systems^[1, 6, 28]. However, conventional seed spacing practices employ fixed planting densities and row configurations that inadequately account for cultivar-specific architectural traits, temporal dynamics of canopy development, or spatial variability in resource availability^[2, 3, 14, 19]. This technological stagnation perpetuates inefficiencies in radiation capture, with estimates suggesting that 20–40% of incident solar radiation remains unutilized in many commercial cropping systems due to suboptimal spatial arrangement of plants^[1]. The geometric configuration of plants within agricultural fields—defined by within-row spacing, between-row distance, and overall planting density—exerts profound influence on light distribution throughout the canopy profile^[2, 3, 19]. Inappropriate

spacing decisions lead to either excessive mutual shading when plants are positioned too densely, or incomplete canopy closure and radiation wastage when spacing is excessive. Traditional agronomic recommendations provide generalized guidelines based on regional averages and historical yield trials, but these prescriptions cannot accommodate the multidimensional complexity of plant-light interactions that vary across genotypes, environments, and management practices.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies have emerged as powerful tools for addressing this optimization challenge through data-driven modeling of complex biological systems. By leveraging high-resolution phenotypic data, environmental monitoring, and computational simulation, AI-based approaches can identify optimal seed spacing configurations that maximize light interception while satisfying constraints related to resource availability, economic viability, and operational feasibility. This paradigm shift from prescriptive to predictive agronomy represents a fundamental transformation in crop production science, enabling site-specific, cultivar-specific, and even plant-specific spatial management decisions.

This article synthesizes current knowledge on AI-driven seed spacing optimization for enhanced light interception, examining the biological principles, computational methodologies, and practical implementations that define this emerging research domain. The integration of machine learning with canopy radiation modeling, high-throughput phenotyping, and precision agriculture technologies offers unprecedented opportunities to close yield gaps and advance sustainable intensification of global food production systems.

2. Biological and Physical Basis of Light Interception

The efficiency with which crop canopies intercept and utilize solar radiation depends on complex interactions between plant morphology, canopy architecture, and environmental light regimes^[1, 17]. Individual plant geometry—including leaf angle distribution, phyllotaxy, stem architecture, and overall three-dimensional form—determines the spatial arrangement of photosynthetic surfaces and their orientation relative to incident radiation^[2, 3, 14]. At the canopy scale, collective plant architecture emerges from the spatial positioning of individual plants, creating multilayered structures with vertically stratified light environments^[2, 19].

Beer's law and its modifications provide the theoretical foundation for understanding light extinction through vegetative canopies, relating transmitted radiation to leaf area index and extinction coefficients that encapsulate architectural properties^[1, 28]. However, these simplified representations inadequately capture the heterogeneous light distribution patterns that arise from specific planting geometries, particularly in row-crop systems where alternating strips of dense vegetation and bare soil create strong horizontal gradients in radiation availability^[1, 19].

Photosynthetic light response curves demonstrate nonlinear relationships between incident photon flux density and carbon assimilation rates, with saturation occurring at intensities well below full sunlight for most crop species^[16, 17]. This physiological characteristic suggests that uniform light distribution throughout the canopy profile may enhance whole-canopy photosynthesis more effectively than concentrating high light intensities in upper canopy layers while creating deep shade below^[17, 19]. Optimal seed spacing should therefore promote canopy architectures that distribute

available radiation more evenly across leaf surfaces, avoiding both light-saturated conditions in the upper canopy and light-limited conditions in lower strata^[19].

The temporal dimension adds further complexity, as optimal spatial configurations change throughout crop development. Early in the growing season, widely spaced plants may fully intercept available radiation individually, while later developmental stages benefit from canopy closure to minimize soil exposure^[14, 15]. Dynamic optimization frameworks must therefore account for ontogenetic changes in plant size, leaf area development, and architectural modification in response to competitive environments^[14, 15]. Crop-specific characteristics fundamentally constrain the parameter space for spacing optimization. Determinate versus indeterminate growth habits, prostrate versus erect canopy structures, and varying capacities for phenotypic plasticity in response to plant density all influence the sensitivity of light interception to spatial arrangement^[3, 14, 27]. These biological realities necessitate crop-specific modeling approaches rather than universal optimization algorithms^[14, 24].

3. AI-Based Seed Spacing Optimization Frameworks

Machine learning methodologies provide diverse approaches to predicting optimal seed spacing configurations based on complex, high-dimensional input data^[10, 13]. Supervised learning models, including random forests, gradient boosting machines, and artificial neural networks, can establish empirical relationships between planting geometry parameters and observed outcomes such as canopy light interception, radiation use efficiency, or final yield^[10, 11]. These data-driven models require extensive training datasets spanning diverse environmental conditions, genotypes, and management practices, but once calibrated can generate rapid predictions for novel scenarios^[10].

Deep learning architectures offer enhanced capacity for extracting hierarchical features from raw sensor data without manual feature engineering^[9, 13]. Convolutional neural networks excel at processing spatially structured inputs such as aerial imagery or canopy structure point clouds, identifying architectural patterns associated with efficient light capture^[13]. Recurrent neural networks and temporal convolutional networks can model sequential development of canopy architecture throughout growing seasons, predicting optimal spacing strategies that account for dynamic changes in plant morphology and light availability^[8, 13].

Optimization algorithms transform predictive models into prescriptive decision support tools by systematically searching parameter spaces to identify configurations that maximize objective functions^[12]. Genetic algorithms employ evolutionary principles to explore discrete and continuous spacing parameters, iteratively generating, evaluating, and selecting superior planting configurations. Bayesian optimization provides sample-efficient exploration of high-dimensional parameter spaces by constructing probabilistic surrogate models and intelligently selecting evaluation points that balance exploration of uncertain regions with exploitation of promising candidates^[12].

Reinforcement learning frameworks conceptualize seed spacing decisions as sequential decision processes where agents learn optimal policies through interaction with simulated or real agricultural environments^[10, 13]. These approaches naturally accommodate the temporal dynamics of crop growth and the long-term consequences of early-season

spacing decisions on eventual productivity outcomes. Policy gradient methods and actor-critic architectures have demonstrated capacity to learn complex control strategies that adapt planting geometry to spatially variable field conditions.

Integration of machine learning models with mechanistic crop growth simulators combines data-driven pattern recognition with process-based understanding of plant physiology and environmental interactions [14, 24, 25]. Hybrid modeling approaches use AI to estimate difficult-to-measure parameters in biophysical models, calibrate genotype-specific coefficients, or correct systematic biases in simulation outputs. This synergy between empirical and mechanistic paradigms enhances both interpretability and generalization capacity of optimization frameworks [14, 24].

Multi-objective optimization recognizes that seed spacing decisions involve trade-offs among competing goals such as maximizing light interception, minimizing seed costs, optimizing water use efficiency, and ensuring harvest operation compatibility. Pareto optimization techniques identify sets of non-dominated solutions that represent optimal compromises among objectives, enabling agronomic decision-makers to select spacing strategies aligned with their specific priorities and constraints [20].

4. Data Sources and Computational Pipelines

High-quality training data constitute the foundation of effective AI-driven seed spacing optimization. Field experimentation with systematic variation in planting geometry across multiple genotypes, environments, and growing seasons generates ground-truth datasets linking spatial configurations to agronomic outcomes [4]. Precision phenotyping protocols capture plant-level architectural traits, canopy-level radiation interception measurements, and final productivity metrics necessary for model development and validation [4, 15].

Unmanned aerial vehicles equipped with multispectral, hyperspectral, or LiDAR sensors enable high-throughput, nondestructive characterization of canopy structure across entire experimental plots throughout growing seasons [5, 7, 8]. Time-series imagery captures dynamic canopy development, while structure-from-motion photogrammetry reconstructs three-dimensional canopy geometry from overlapping photographs [5, 7]. These aerial platforms generate spatially explicit datasets with sufficient resolution to resolve individual plants or subcanopy architectural features relevant to light distribution [5, 8].

Ground-based phenotyping systems complement aerial sensing through detailed characterization of within-canopy light environments. Quantum sensors measure photosynthetically active radiation at multiple heights within crop stands, quantifying extinction patterns and identifying depth-specific light limitation [15]. Hemispherical photography and digital cover photography assess canopy gap fraction and leaf area distribution, providing direct metrics of light interception efficiency [28]. Terrestrial laser scanning generates ultra-high-resolution point clouds enabling precise quantification of three-dimensional plant architecture and leaf angle distributions [7].

Remote sensing at satellite and aircraft scales provides complementary information on vegetation indices, canopy temperature, and surface reflectance properties correlated with light interception and photosynthetic capacity [6, 28]. Integration of multiscale sensing data through data fusion

algorithms creates comprehensive representations of canopy state and function suitable for training complex predictive models [6].

Computational pipelines for AI-based optimization typically involve data preprocessing to remove noise and artifacts, feature extraction to derive biologically meaningful variables from raw sensor outputs, model training using cross-validation procedures to prevent overfitting, and uncertainty quantification to assess prediction reliability [10]. Cloud computing infrastructure and high-performance computing clusters enable processing of large spatiotemporal datasets and execution of computationally intensive optimization algorithms.

Simulation-based validation employs virtual crop environments constructed using functional-structural plant models that explicitly represent individual plant architecture and radiative transfer physics [14, 24]. These mechanistic simulators generate synthetic datasets for evaluating AI model performance under controlled conditions, testing robustness to environmental variability, and exploring scenarios difficult to implement experimentally [14, 25]. The integration of simulation and empirical data through transfer learning and domain adaptation techniques enhances model generalization across production contexts.

5. Applications and Field Implementations

Maize production systems have served as primary testbeds for AI-optimized seed spacing due to the crop's economic importance, responsiveness to planting density, and well-characterized architectural traits [3]. Machine learning models trained on multi-year datasets spanning variable planting densities demonstrated capacity to predict optimal within-row spacing that increased seasonal light interception by 8-12% relative to standard uniform spacing. These gains translated to yield improvements of 4-7% across diverse environments, with greatest benefits observed in fields with significant spatial heterogeneity in soil properties or topography [3, 8].

Soybean canopy architecture exhibits substantial phenotypic plasticity in response to neighbor proximity, with individual plants modifying branch angles, internode elongation, and leaf orientation to reduce mutual shading [3]. Reinforcement learning algorithms trained to optimize time-varying spacing patterns throughout canopy development identified dynamic strategies that maintained high light interception efficiency while using 15-20% fewer seeds than conventional uniform planting recommendations. Variable within-row spacing that positioned plants closer together where soil productivity was highest and more sparsely in resource-limited zones maximized field-scale radiation capture and resource use efficiency.

Wheat and small grain cereals present distinct optimization challenges due to their dense canopy structures and narrow row spacing configurations [27]. Convolutional neural networks processing drone-acquired canopy imagery predicted optimal row orientations and inter-row distances that minimized self-shading during critical grain-filling periods [8]. North-south row orientations traditionally recommended for these crops proved suboptimal under certain latitude and cultivar combinations, with AI models identifying east-west or intermediate orientations that enhanced radiation distribution through canopies with specific leaf angle characteristics [27].

Horticultural crop systems including tomato, pepper, and

lettuce production in open-field and protected environments benefit from AI-driven spacing optimization due to high-value products justifying intensive management. Three-dimensional canopy reconstruction from multi-view imagery combined with radiative transfer simulation enabled cultivar-specific spacing recommendations that balanced light interception against air circulation requirements for disease management and fruit quality optimization [7, 14]. Variable spacing prescriptions increased marketable yield by 10-18% while reducing disease incidence through improved microclimate management.

Decision support systems integrating AI-based spacing optimization with precision planting equipment enable real-time execution of variable-rate seeding prescriptions [21, 22, 26]. GPS-guided planters receive spatially explicit seeding maps generated by optimization algorithms that synthesize soil maps, topographic data, historical yield patterns, and weather forecasts. On-the-go sensing systems provide real-time feedback for adaptive adjustment of seed spacing in response to detected field conditions, creating closed-loop precision agriculture systems [21, 26].

Economic analyses of AI-optimized spacing implementations indicate positive returns on investment in most scenarios, with benefits accruing from yield gains, reduced seed costs in variable-rate applications, and improved resource use efficiency [21, 29]. Adoption barriers include requirements for specialized equipment, technical expertise in AI system operation, and risk aversion among producers unfamiliar with data-driven decision-making tools.

6. Challenges and Future Directions

Model generalization across diverse production environments represents a fundamental challenge for AI-based spacing optimization. Predictive models trained on datasets from specific geographic regions, soil types, or climatic conditions may exhibit degraded performance when deployed in novel contexts [10, 11]. Transfer learning approaches that leverage knowledge from data-rich source domains to improve predictions in data-scarce target domains offer promising solutions, but require careful consideration of domain shift and covariate distribution differences.

Data scarcity particularly limits model development for minor crops, specialty production systems, and underrepresented agricultural regions [4]. Active learning strategies that intelligently select most informative experimental treatments for data collection can reduce dataset requirements, while synthetic data augmentation using mechanistic crop models can supplement limited empirical observations [14, 24]. Federated learning frameworks that enable collaborative model training across distributed datasets while preserving data privacy may accelerate progress by pooling knowledge from multiple research institutions and commercial operations.

Computational costs associated with high-fidelity canopy

radiation modeling and optimization algorithm execution present practical constraints on real-time decision support implementation. Model reduction techniques including surrogate modeling, dimensionality reduction, and neural network emulation of complex simulators can dramatically accelerate computation while maintaining acceptable accuracy [12, 14]. Edge computing architectures deploying lightweight models directly on precision agriculture equipment enable real-time optimization without dependence on cloud connectivity in remote production areas.

Integration with autonomous planting systems requires robust interfaces between AI optimization modules and precision agriculture equipment control systems [21, 26]. Standardization of data formats, communication protocols, and decision-making architectures will facilitate seamless deployment of AI-driven prescriptions across diverse equipment manufacturers and technology platforms. Human-AI collaboration frameworks that preserve agronomic expertise and farmer autonomy while leveraging computational optimization capabilities represent critical sociotechnical challenges.

Climate change introduces nonstationarity in environmental conditions that may invalidate historical data used for model training [11]. Adaptive learning systems that continuously update predictions based on recent observations and online learning algorithms capable of tracking shifting relationships between spacing parameters and outcomes will enhance resilience of AI-based recommendations. Ensemble modeling approaches that combine predictions from multiple algorithms can improve robustness to model misspecification and environmental uncertainty [10, 11].

Regulatory frameworks and intellectual property considerations surrounding AI-generated agronomic recommendations require clarification to establish liability assignments and protect innovators while ensuring farmer access to beneficial technologies. Ethical considerations regarding data ownership, algorithmic transparency, and equitable access to precision agriculture technologies must guide development trajectories to prevent exacerbation of existing inequalities in agricultural systems [21].

Future research directions include development of fully autonomous crop production systems where AI optimizes not only seed spacing but also integrated management of irrigation, fertilization, and pest control based on real-time monitoring and predictive modeling. Multi-species cropping systems and agroecological production approaches present opportunities for AI-driven spatial optimization that enhances biodiversity, ecosystem services, and system resilience while maintaining productivity. The convergence of AI-based agronomic optimization with breeding programs could enable co-design of crop genotypes and management strategies that synergistically enhance light capture efficiency and overall system performance [4, 18, 27].

Figure

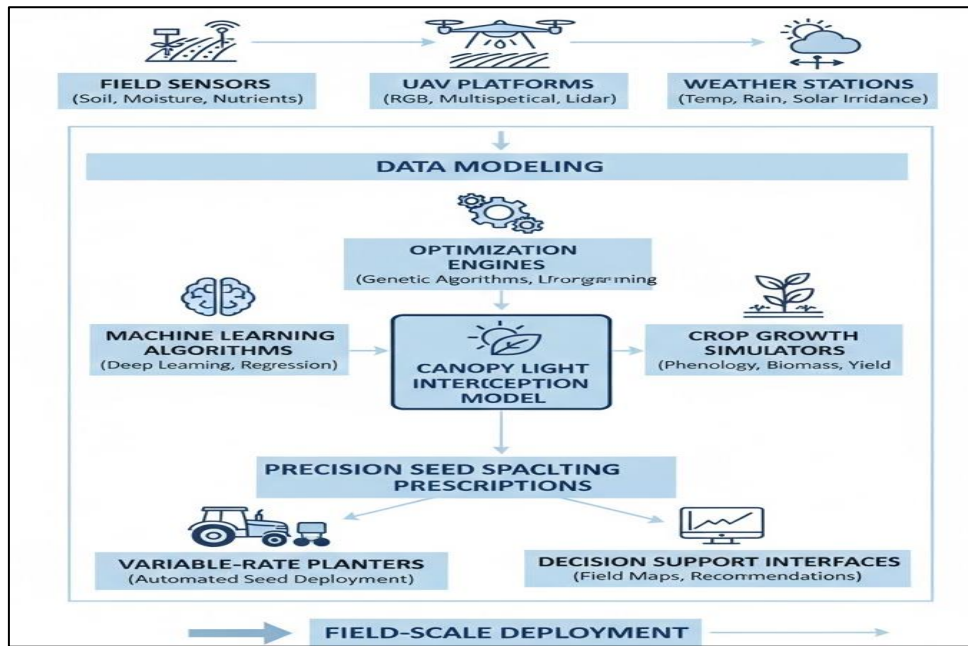


Fig 1: Conceptual framework of AI-optimized seed spacing for maximizing canopy light interception

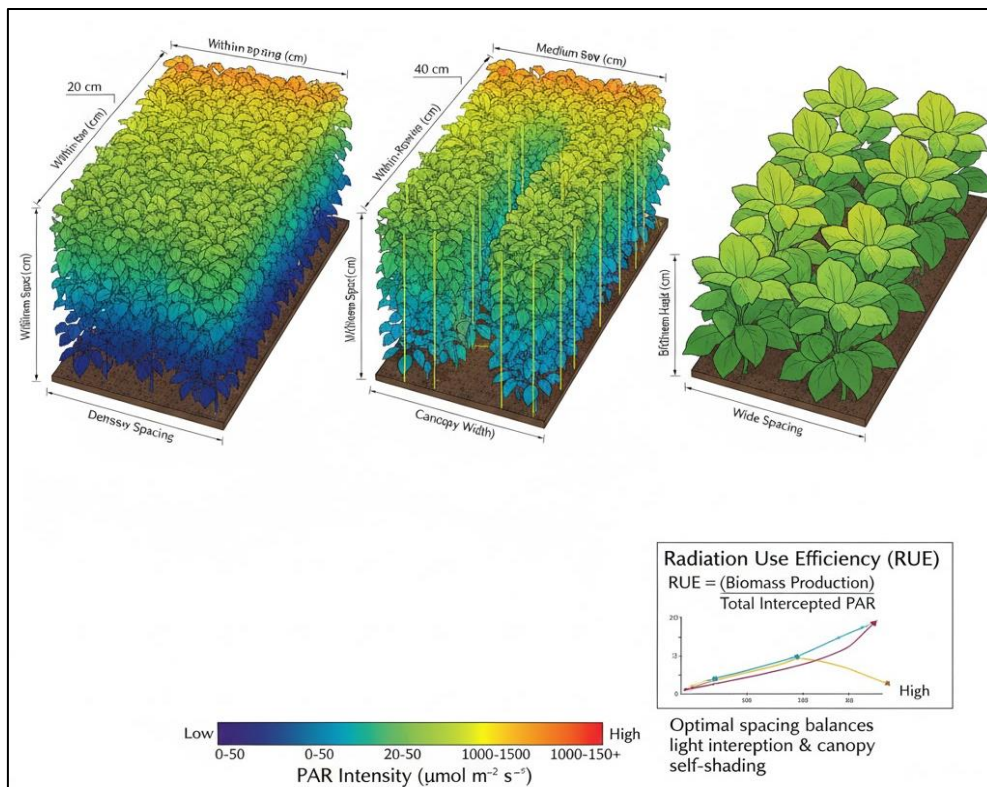


Fig 2: Relationship between seed spacing, canopy structure, and photosynthetically active radiation (PAR) distribution

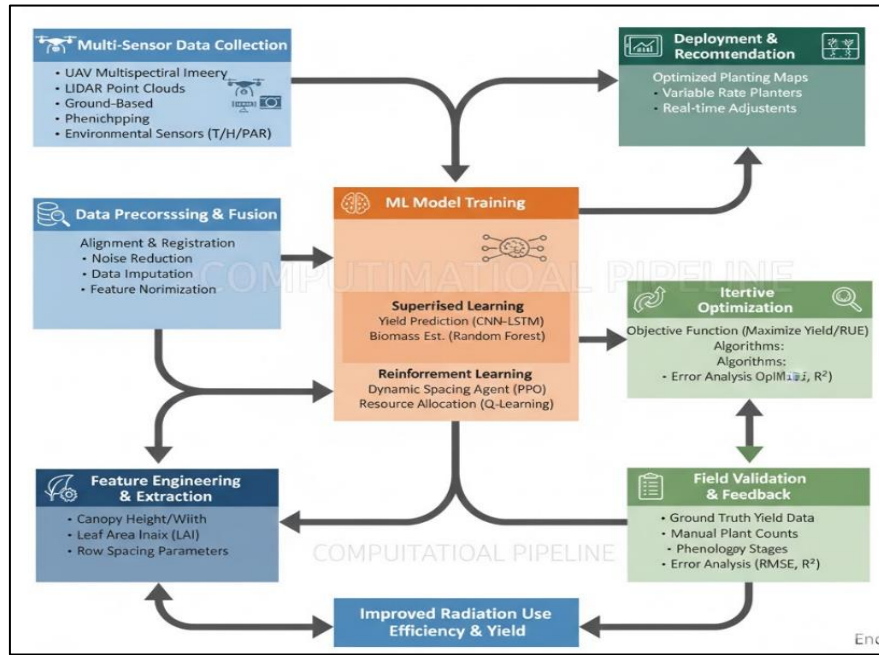


Fig 3: Machine learning workflow for spatial optimization of planting geometry

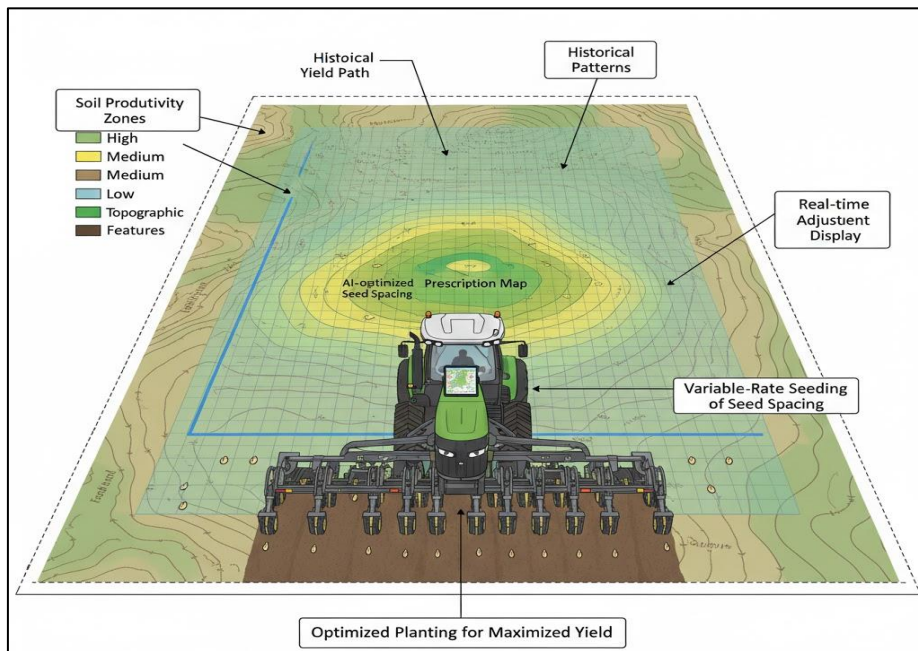


Fig 4: Field-scale deployment of AI-driven variable seed spacing using precision planting systems

Tables

Table 1: Crop and canopy parameters influencing light interception used in AI models

Parameter Category	Specific Variables	Units	Relevance to Light Interception
Plant Geometry	Leaf angle distribution, phyllotaxy, stem angle	Degrees, unitless	Determines orientation of photosynthetic surfaces relative to incident radiation
Canopy Architecture	Leaf area index, canopy height, extinction coefficient	m ² /m ² , m, unitless	Quantifies light attenuation through vegetative layers
Planting Configuration	Within-row spacing, between-row spacing, row orientation	cm, cm, degrees	Defines spatial arrangement of individual plants
Temporal Dynamics	Canopy closure rate, leaf area development, senescence timing	Days, m ² /m ² /day	Captures ontogenetic changes in radiation capture capacity
Cultivar Traits	Final plant height, branching pattern, growth habit	m, number, categorical	Genotype-specific architectural determinants

Table 2: AI and optimization algorithms applied to seed spacing and canopy modelling

Algorithm Class	Specific Methods	Application Domain	Computational Complexity	Advantages
Supervised Learning	Random forest, gradient boosting, neural networks	Prediction of light interception from spacing parameters	$O(n \log n)$ to $O(n^2)$	High accuracy with sufficient training data
Deep Learning	CNN, RNN, transformer architectures	Image-based canopy analysis, temporal modeling	$O(n^2)$ to $O(n^3)$	Automatic feature extraction from raw sensor data
Evolutionary Algorithms	Genetic algorithms, differential evolution	Multi-parameter spacing optimization	$O(n \cdot m \cdot g)$ where g =generations	Global search capability, handles discrete variables
Bayesian Optimization	Gaussian process regression, acquisition functions	Sample-efficient parameter tuning	$O(n^3)$	Effective in high-dimensional spaces with expensive evaluations
Reinforcement Learning	Q-learning, policy gradient, actor-critic	Sequential decision-making for dynamic spacing	$O(s \cdot a \cdot t)$ where s =states, a =actions, t =timesteps	Learns optimal policies through environmental interaction

Table 3: Agronomic outcomes of AI-optimized seed spacing across crop types

Crop Species	Traditional Spacing	AI-Optimized Spacing	Light Interception Gain	Yield Improvement	Resource Use Efficiency Change
Maize	Uniform 18-20 cm within-row	Variable 15-25 cm based on soil zones	+8-12% seasonal PAR capture	+4-7% grain yield	-10% seed cost, +15% water productivity
Soybean	Uniform 8-10 cm within-row	Dynamic 6-14 cm with temporal adjustment	+10-15% during reproductive phase	+5-9% seed yield	-18% seed cost, +12% nitrogen efficiency
Wheat	Uniform 15 cm row spacing	Optimized 12-18 cm with adjusted orientation	+6-9% during grain filling	+3-6% grain yield	+8% radiation use efficiency
Tomato (field)	Grid pattern 45×60 cm	Irregular 40-70 cm responsive to microclimate	+12-18% total season	+10-18% marketable yield	+20% disease management effectiveness
Cotton	Uniform 10-12 cm within-row	Variable 8-16 cm with density gradients	+7-11% at peak canopy	+4-8% lint yield	+14% irrigation efficiency

7. Conclusion

AI-driven optimization of seed spacing for enhanced light interception represents a transformative application of machine learning and computational intelligence to fundamental challenges in crop production. By integrating high-resolution phenotypic data, mechanistic understanding of canopy radiation dynamics, and advanced optimization algorithms, these technologies enable unprecedented precision in spatial crop management. Demonstrated improvements in radiation use efficiency, yield stability, and resource conservation validate the agronomic value of data-driven spacing strategies across diverse crop species and production environments. The successful deployment of AI-based decision support systems at field scale confirms technical feasibility and economic viability of precision planting technologies. However, realizing the full potential of these innovations requires addressing persistent challenges in model generalization, data availability, and integration with autonomous agricultural machinery. As computational capabilities continue advancing and data collection infrastructure expands, AI-optimized seed spacing will increasingly become standard practice in sustainable intensification of global agriculture, contributing to food security objectives while minimizing environmental impacts of crop production systems.

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