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Digital Phenotyping Platforms for Smart Vegetable Breeding

Nilesh Ninama*

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Vegetable Science, Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia krishi Vishwavidyalaya, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh – 474002

*Corresponding author - nileshninama181@gmail.com

Dr. Shruti Paliwal

Project Research Scientist, Dr. Reddy institute of life science Hyderabad- 500019

Homeshvari

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Horticulture, JNKVV, Jabalpur - 482004

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Abstract

Smart vegetable breeding increasingly depends on digital phenotyping platforms to bridge the gap between genotype and high-throughput phenotypic data. Digital phenotyping leverages sensors, imaging, robotics, data analytics and modelling to measure plant traits non-destructively, frequently and at scale. This article explores the architecture, trait types, platform types, workflows, challenges and opportunities of digital phenotyping for vegetable breeding. Emphasis is placed on what is possible now, what remains difficult, how to validate and maintain phenotyping pipelines and how breeders can make decisions grounded on reliable phenotype measurements.

Keywords: Digital phenotyping, high-throughput phenotyping, vegetable breeding, sensors, imaging platforms, trait measurement, data analytics, workflow, validation, breeding pipelines

Introduction

Vegetables tomato, pepper, carrot, lettuce, cabbage, eggplant, okra, beans, cucurbits play a crucial role in nutrition, livelihood and food security. Improving their yield, nutritional quality, disease resistance and stress tolerance is central to sustainable agriculture. However, breeding progress has often lagged because measuring the traits needed (e.g. disease resistance, canopy architecture, fruit quality) is laborious, expensive and slow.

Digital phenotyping platforms offer a pathway to speed this up. They allow measurement of many plants repeatedly, non-destructively, with high precision, often in field or semi-field conditions, using imaging (2D or 3D), spectral sensors, robotics or mobile platforms and

sophisticated analytics. For vegetable breeding this means faster selection, better understanding of trait-by-environment interactions, more precise QTL mapping or genomic prediction and ultimately greater genetic gain per unit time.

Key types of traits in vegetable breeding and how phenotyping can measure them

Vegetable breeding focuses on many trait categories. Digital phenotyping platforms measure multiple types of traits; each requires different sensors, frequency and data handling.

Morphological and architectural traits

Leaf number, leaf area, plant height, stem thickness, branching/tillering, fruit size, fruit shape, plant canopy geometry. These traits are often measurable via imaging (2D or 3D), either from the side, top, or both. Structure from Motion (SfM), LiDAR, stereo imaging, even mobile phone video approaches are used. For example, chilli plants have been monitored in outdoor conditions using smartphones and SfM to reconstruct 3D models and measure leaf length, width, angles etc.

Physiological traits

Traits like chlorophyll content, stomatal conductance, photosynthesis rate, water use, canopy temperature, fluorescence, pigment content, nutrient deficiency symptoms. These require spectral sensors, thermal imaging, or specialized fluorescence or hyperspectral cameras. The speed of measurement and calibration are critical.

Fruit and yield related traits

Fruit number, fruit size, fruit weight, yield per plant or per area, uniformity, colour, firmness, shelf-life traits. These are often measured at harvest but can be partially forecast or estimated via imagery or proxies (e.g. fruit load via RGB or multispectral imaging).

Stress response traits

Response to drought, high heat, salinity, disease pressure. Early detection via canopy temperature, spectral indices, fluorescence. Time-series imaging allows tracking of stress onset and recovery.

Seed- and germination-related traits

Seed size, seed shape, germination rate, viability; vigour in seedlings. Digital imaging and optical sensors can digitize seed phenotyping, both external (size, shape) and internal (via spectroscopy) where feasible.

Platform types and architectures

Digital phenotyping platforms differ by scale, automation, mobility, cost, environment. Below are common platform types and their architectural features.

- **Greenhouse / controlled environment platforms:** Fixed imaging booths, conveyor systems, crates or pot systems moved on belts. High control of lighting, sometimes automated watering or stress imposition.
- **Field platforms / mobile systems:** Ground rovers, tractor-mounted sensors, handheld or mobile phone based, UAV (drones) platforms. These must cope with variable lighting, weather, shadows, wind.
- **Stationary field sensors:** Fixed towers, phenotyping masts, sensor arrays with spectral, thermal, fluorescence sensors. Useful for continuous data in defined plots.
- **Low-cost / citizen tools:** Smartphone imaging, budget multispectral sensors, DIY robotics or mounting rigs. These trade precision or throughput for affordability and accessibility.
- **Robotic / automated phenotyping rigs:** Robots that move around plot rows, acquiring multi-angle/direction images and often integrating LiDAR or hyperspectral sensors. Some build 3D point clouds to estimate volume or structural traits. For example, a field robot was developed for high-throughput 3D phenotyping of sugar beet, soybean, maize using multiple sensors to reconstruct point clouds and meshes.

Workflow in digital phenotyping for vegetable breeding

Designing and using phenotyping platforms involves multiple stages. Getting this right determines whether data are useful.

Trait selection and relevance

First, breeders must decide what traits are most relevant for their objectives (yield, disease resistance, flavour, nutritional content, stress tolerance). Digital phenotype measurement should align with those traits.

Sensor / platform choice and calibration

Selecting appropriate sensors (RGB, thermal, hyperspectral, LiDAR) and platforms (drone, rover, fixed, handheld) depends on scale, budget, environment and trait. Calibration (radiometric, geometric), ensuring sensor stability and validation against manual measurements are essential.

Data acquisition schedule and frequency

Frequency of measurement matters: certain traits (e.g. flowering date, disease onset) require more frequent imaging; others (fruit size, yield) may require fewer snapshots. Temporal dimension (time-series) helps in modelling dynamic traits and stress responses.

Image/data processing and trait extraction

Image pre-processing (correction for lighting, noise, shadow), segmentation

(identifying plant vs background), feature extraction (leaf area, colour metrics, volumetric measures) using computer vision or ML tools. For complex traits, multi-view 3D reconstruction or point cloud analysis may be needed. Example: 3D leaf geometry and organ-level traits in leafy vegetables using SfM from mobile phone video.

Data management, storage and computational resources

High-throughput phenotyping generates large volumes of data (images, spectral bands, point clouds). Storage, backup, metadata standards (what sensor, when, position, genotype, environmental condition) are critical. Cloud or local HPC resources may be needed. Data pipelines must be robust to missing values, sensor errors.

Validation and ground truth

Manual measurements (biomass, fruit weight, lab assays) remain necessary to validate derived digital traits. Cross-environment trials help assess how stable traits are and whether transformations generalize. Also, error estimation (RMSE, etc.) helps breeders know confidence in trait estimates.

Integration with breeding decision pipelines

Once digital phenotypes are reliable, they can feed genomic prediction models, QTL mapping, selection indices. Data must be accessible to breeders and decision rules (which genotypes to advance) must reflect both measured values and predicted stability.

Recent advances and case studies

- A low-cost 3D measurement method using smartphones recorded video of leafy vegetables at various angles; via structure-from-motion and point cloud reconstruction it estimated traits like plant height, leaf number, leaf length, leaf angle. Accuracy was good (errors within a few units' vs manual measurement) for outdoor conditions.
- In tropical carrot germplasm, aerial imagery with RGB sensors in flights was used to compute various indices (hue, brightness, vegetation indices) and correlated these with agronomic traits such as root yield and disease severity. This helped classify genotypes, detect unmarketable roots, etc.
- Reviews and studies in horticultural crops show wide adoption of RGB, thermal, hyperspectral, fluorescence and tomographic imaging platforms for morphological, physiological, biochemical, yield-related, biotic- and abiotic-stress traits. Such reviews highlight which sensors are mature, which traits are well predicted and where bottlenecks remain.
- A study using digital images in papaya breeding showed that fruit length and diameter measured via image processing matched those by calliper; estimation error was

negligible. This suggests some morphological fruit traits are highly amenable to digital phenotyping.

- Sensor-based phenotyping for seed traits (shape, size, spectral signatures) using optical sensors (imaging, spectroscopy) is growing, enabling high throughput evaluation of seed lots, seed quality and potential performance.

Challenges and trade-offs in implementing digital phenotyping

While promise is high, there are significant challenges; breeders need to weigh trade-offs carefully.

Cost, infrastructure and maintenance

High-end sensors (hyperspectral, LiDAR), robotics, drones, imaging rigs are expensive. Maintenance, calibration, lighting control, weatherproofing, staff training, data storage etc. add recurring costs. For many breeding programs (especially in developing countries), cost is a central barrier.

Data processing bottlenecks and algorithmic maturity

Sensors produce large, noisy datasets. Extracting useful traits depends on robust segmentation, good ML models, coping with occlusion, shadows, variation in lighting and changes in growth stage. Many algorithms developed in ideal conditions degrade in field heterogeneity. Reproducibility and avoidance of overfitting are important.

Environmental variability, genotype × environment interaction

Traits measured by imaging may perform differently under shade, different light quality, temperature extremes. Modelling must consider environmental metadata (temperature, light, humidity) and ideally include multiple environments in training.

Trait complexity and proxy limitations

Some traits are difficult to measure directly via imaging internal traits (nutrient content, biochemical qualities, flavour compounds, shelf life), or small pests or pathogens until late stages. Proxies (colour, indices) may not always correlate strongly. Ground truthing and biochemical assays remain necessary.

Scalability and throughput vs precision

Higher throughput platforms may sacrifice precision or resolution. For example, drone flights over large fields cover many plants but with lower spatial resolution; close imaging rigs give high precision but for fewer plants. Breeders must decide what balance is acceptable.

Data ownership, standardization, interoperability

Phenotypic data are valuable; issues of who owns the images, algorithms, derived data arise. Also, lack of standards in metadata, formats, naming, trait definitions hinder data sharing and comparability across programs.

Table: Comparison of Digital Phenotyping Components / Platforms / Trade-Offs

Component / Platform	Trait(s) Measured	Typical Sensor(s) / Technology	Throughput (plants/area / time)	Environment (Field / Greenhouse / Controlled)
RGB imaging (side + top view)	Leaf area, plant height, canopy cover, fruit colour	RGB camera	High (hundreds per day)	Field / Greenhouse
Multispectral imaging	Vegetation indices, stress detection	Multispectral cameras (visible + near-IR)	Medium	Field / UAV / Greenhouse
Hyperspectral imaging	Pigment profiles, nutrient deficiency, disease indicators	Hyperspectral sensors (narrow bands)	Lower throughput (fewer plants)	Controlled / Greenhouse / Field edges
Thermal imaging	Canopy temperature, transpiration, water stress	Thermal infrared cameras	Medium	Field / Greenhouse
LiDAR / 3D scanning	Canopy architecture, volume, leaf angle, plant height	LiDAR scanners or structured light / ToF sensors	Medium	Field / Greenhouse
Root imaging platforms	Root architecture, root depth, branching	Rhizotrons, transparent media, MRI / X-ray CT (lab), minirhizotron	Low	Controlled / Lab
Seed phenotyping (optical / spectroscopy)	Seed size, shape, germination potential, internal properties	High resolution imaging, spectroscopy	High	Controlled / Seed labs
Time-series phenotyping (frequent repeated imaging)	Growth trajectory; stress onset; phenology	Any imaging + scheduled visits or automated triggers	Medium to High	Field / Greenhouse
Machine-learning / AI trait extraction tools	Complex trait detection (disease)	RGB / spectral + ML pipelines	High	Any environment where images are collected

	symptoms, fruit quality, shape)			
Low-cost / smartphone-based phenotyping	Basic morphological traits (height, leaf count, colour)	Smartphone cameras + apps	Low to Medium	Field / Greenhouse
Phenotyping robots (mobile around plots)	Multiple trait capture: architecture, stress, fruit load	Robotic platforms with multiple sensors	Medium	Field / Greenhouse
High-throughput imaging for postharvest traits	Fruit firmness, colour uniformity, shelf life, defects	RGB / hyperspectral / computer vision in sorting lines	Medium	Packing / Postharvest environment

Integration into breeding pipelines: decision points and examples

Digital phenotyping should not be a gadget but part of decision workflows in breeding programs. Below are typical integration points and examples of what success would look like.

- **Early generation screening:** In segregating populations, use digital phenotyping (e.g. seedling vigour, early canopy traits) to discard poor performers before field testing, saving resources.
- **Genotype × environment trials:** Use platforms in multiple environments to collect phenotypic data for same genotypes, enabling robust estimation of stability and environmental interaction.
- **Genomic prediction and selection indices:** Digital traits serve as covariates or secondary traits in genomic prediction models, improving prediction of complex traits.
- **Trait discovery:** Using image and spectral data, new traits or proxy traits can be discovered (e.g. image indices that correlate with disease resistance or fruit quality) and then validated.
- **Quality trait assessment:** For traits important for markets (color uniformity, shape, defects), integrating phenotyping platforms in packing or sorting lines helps breeders understand what forms are accepted and what traits to select.

Validation, calibration and reproducibility

- **Ground truth:** Manual measurements remain essential for calibrating digital trait extraction (leaf area, biomass, fruit size). Representative manual sampling across growth stages and environments.
- **Cross-platform consistency:** Check that traits measured by different platforms (drone, rover, imaging booth, etc.) yield compatible data or know their biases.

- **Temporal validation:** Check consistency of trait estimates over time (repeat measurements) to assess sensor drift, structural changes in canopy (occlusion) and imaging angle or lighting effects.
- **Statistical error estimation:** RMSE, bias, correlation with manual data, heritability of digital traits, repeatability across replicates. These help breeders understand how reliable selections based on those traits will be.

Conclusion

Digital phenotyping platforms offer a powerful means to accelerate vegetable breeding by enabling measurement of many traits with higher throughput, non-destructively and repeatedly across growth cycles. They help breeders make better decisions, discover new traits and improve genotype-environment understanding. Yet, success depends on paying close attention to trait relevance, platform design, calibration and validation, cost and alignment with breeding goals. For vegetable breeding programs whether well-funded or modest investment in judicious phenotyping can yield outsized returns. Designing a phenotyping pipeline means making trade-offs: throughput vs precision, visible vs biochemical traits, cost vs infrastructure. The ideal is an evolving pipeline: start with traits and sensors you can afford, validate them well, adapt systems to your environment and gradually build towards more complex sensors/tools. With such progression, vegetable breeding can become more predictive, faster and more resistant to stresses and climate variation.

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