

Precision Agriculture in Soilless Systems

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Abstract:

Hydroponics, a technique that dates back nearly 2,500 years, is an age old agricultural practice that has proven to be both land and water efficient. Today, with much of the Earth's surface dedicated to farming, fertile land is gradually diminishing largely due to the expansion of industrial development. As a result, innovative methods like soilless cultivation, known as hydroponics, are gaining attention. A strategically designed hydroponic system offers a modern agricultural alternative that requires minimal human intervention. This paper aims to contribute to the advancement of hydroponic technologies by conducting an in depth analysis of the essential factors involved in hydroponic farming. It explores key parameters in automated hydroponic systems, including total dissolved solids (TDS) in the water, adequate air circulation for plant health, water and ambient temperatures, the evolution of automation within hydroponics, and effective cost management strategies.

Keywords: Smart agriculture, Controlled Environment Agriculture, Scarcity of water, Hydroponics system

1. Introduction

As the global population steadily increases and natural resources continue to dwindle, the demand for sustainable agricultural methods becomes more urgent. Projections suggest that by 2050, the world population may reach approximately 9.5 billion up significantly from the six billion reported earlier (Mamta D. Sardare et al., 2013). Hydroponic farming, a method of growing plants without soil, relies on mineral-rich solutions and provides an effective response to the imbalance between rising food demands and shrinking arable land. Though it differs from conventional farming, hydroponics adopts similar methodologies, such as vertical gardening, allowing plants to thrive more efficiently by directly absorbing nutrients from water-based solutions (Muhammad E. H. Chowdhury et al., 2019). Since the roots no longer need to search deep into the soil for minerals, plant energy is primarily focused on producing higher yields (Rakshitha M. et al., 2018). At various stages, researchers have investigated the performance of hydroponic systems. The studies incorporated a combination of theoretical models, numerical simulations, and experimental testing. One such study utilized Design Expert software to examine the differences in plant growth by cultivating two cucumber seed varieties under both hydroponic and soil-based conditions. Results, validated by ANOVA testing, confirmed that plants grown hydroponically displayed more robust and rapid development (Raneem Gashgari et al., 2018). In a soil-less setup with controlled conditions, synthetic fertilizers and drip irrigation techniques are used. For instance, tomato plants grown under these systems yielded approximately 2.16 kg per plant, equating to about 112 tonnes per hectare (Dr. Umesh Barikar et al., 2013). Drip irrigation has also been identified as an effective water delivery system, particularly for fruit-bearing plants. Studies indicate that the optimal yield of 126.7 t/ha and average fruit weight of 46.77 grams were achieved using a growing medium mixture of cocopeat, perlite, and vermiculite (50:25:25), combined with a water supply rate of 100% pan evaporation (R. Parameshwarareddy, 2018).

In 2019, S. M. Ghatage explored how common crops could be cultivated independently of outdoor environmental conditions. This led to the development of "pop-up agriculture," a modular and mobile farming approach that can be deployed in various locations with minimal infrastructure. These compact, closed systems are versatile and can attach to existing spaces or water sources (Gwynn-Jones et al., 2018). Pop-up agriculture offers key benefits such as increased yield and reduced production costs. It also allows farmers to select crop varieties and adjust planting schedules to suit ideal growing seasons. In regions like Bangladesh, where arable

land is scarce, this technique has shown promise in addressing agricultural challenges through research and innovation (N.C. Barman, 2016). Automation in hydroponics leverages a closed-loop feedback system, which uses sensors to control various parameters without manual input. Data gathered by these sensors is fed to Android-based applications that help farmers track environmental conditions in real time. This allows for data-driven decision-making, improving yield and efficiency. The app based on PLC (Programmable Logic Controller) technology enables remote access to sensor outputs, with minimal lag. It also allows users to visualize sensor trends over weeks, make timely adjustments, and download real-time data from multiple locations, ensuring effective crop supervision (Rakshitha M., 2018). To further enhance productivity, digital platforms are being developed to store and display real-time data related to crop growth conditions. This accessibility facilitates better monitoring and refined crop management strategies (Palande V. et al., 2017). Additionally, advancements in wireless sensor technology and IoT (Internet of Things) are transforming agriculture. For example, Ayaz M. et al. (2019) highlighted the potential of AI-driven systems in farming. One application involved medical marijuana cultivation, where precise regulation of 138 different variables was achieved using AI tools.

Moreover, the concept of “ontology” in control systems has gained traction. As studied by Phutthisathian A. et al. (2011), the use of ontology in hydroponic control systems enhances adaptability to different environments, sensors, and actuators, making the system flexible and suitable for future agricultural automation.

2. Methodological Framework

The primary objective of this research is to consolidate existing knowledge and current methodologies related to monitoring systems in hydroponics. The foundation of this study is built on a manual analysis of relevant data, identifying key milestones and activities while explaining their significance in the evolution of hydroponic farming. The progression of hydroponic systems is also traced to provide context. A crucial component of modern hydroponic setups is the incorporation of sensor technology, enhanced by smart systems and Internet of Things (IoT) integration. To support this research, a comprehensive review of various sources including academic publications, student dissertations, and online materials was conducted. These sources were systematically analyzed to understand how different parameters have been explored to develop fully automated hydroponic systems.

3. Water Deficiency

In hydroponic systems, a range of parameters are monitored, each using distinct measurement techniques. For example, pH levels can be measured through simple pH test strips, standalone digital sensors with LCD displays, or advanced analog sensors that transmit data either wirelessly or via wired connections to central control units. To ensure the hydroponic system is reliable, efficient, and economically viable, integrating automated sensing technologies is essential. Researchers have adopted various sensor-based approaches to enhance monitoring and control in hydroponic setups. These include the use of microcontrollers, programmable logic controllers (PLCs), and IoT-enabled devices, all aimed at automating data collection and enabling real-time decision-making. By minimizing manual intervention, these automated systems contribute to consistent plant growth, resource optimization, and increased productivity (Wel et al. 2019).

Water is a foundational element in hydroponic systems, often termed the “carrier,” as it dissolves and delivers nutrients directly to the plant roots. Achieving success in soilless agriculture largely depends on water quality. Maintaining optimal parameters such as pH, temperature, dissolved oxygen, and total dissolved solids (TDS) is vital for plant health and growth. Identifying and managing these water parameters ensures effective nutrient delivery and sustainable plant development (“Lab Water Purification Systems,” 2021). (“Lab Water Purification Systems”, 2021).

pH is a critical factor influencing nutrient uptake in hydroponic cultivation. Representing the concentration of hydrogen ions in a solution, pH determines the acidity or alkalinity of the water. When pH levels are too high or too low, plants struggle to absorb essential nutrients, which can impair growth or even lead to plant death. Different plant types have unique pH requirements. While most hydroponically grown fruits and vegetables thrive within a pH range of 5.5 to 6.0, some crops have more specific needs. For example, blueberries prefer an acidic solution with a pH between 4.0 and 5.0 (Judith, 2019), while rhizome plants like ginger grow best in a

range of 6.0 to 8.0 (Fitria Hidayanti et al., 2020). Epiphytic plants, on the other hand, require a pH between 5.5 and 8.0 for healthy growth (Mamta D. Sardare et al., 2013).

Water temperature plays a vital role in nutrient absorption and overall plant health in hydroponic systems. Ideal water temperatures typically range from 18°C to 26°C. Within this range, plant roots can efficiently absorb nutrients dissolved in the solution. A sudden change in temperature between the nutrient solution and the water can shock plant roots, potentially leading to wilting or death. Hence, maintaining a stable temperature is essential. During colder months, aquarium heaters are often used to raise water temperature, whereas chillers are utilized in warmer seasons to keep it within the optimal range ("London Grow," Jan 31, 2020).

Dissolved oxygen is another crucial parameter in hydroponic systems, as plant roots submerged in water require sufficient oxygen for respiration and growth. A minimum DO concentration of 5 mg/L is necessary; levels below this can compromise plant survival. However, as environmental temperatures rise, the solubility of oxygen in water decreases, which can hinder oxygen availability to roots. To address this, devices such as air pumps, air stones, and oxygen diffusers are employed to enhance DO levels and ensure healthy root development (DO Sensor, Hanna Instruments, 2015).

TDS refers to the concentration of dissolved minerals both organic and inorganic in water. Because water dissolves a wide array of substances, it is often called the universal solvent. In hydroponics, TDS helps determine the nutrient concentration in the solution. Key dissolved elements include calcium, magnesium, and chloride ions. Maintaining TDS levels below 1000 ppm is recommended for optimal hydroponic plant growth, as excessive mineral concentration can damage plants (D. Adidrana & N. Surantha, 2019; "Hydroponics vs. Aquaponics – A Complete and Honest Comparison," 2022).

4. Ecological Variable

For plants to grow effectively, they require a precise balance of temperature and humidity. During the vegetative stage, the optimal temperature is around 25°C, while the flowering or peak growth phase demands a slightly higher temperature of approximately 28°C. Humidity also plays a vital role ideally maintained at 60–70% during the vegetative phase and reduced to 40–50% during the flowering stage. These environmental conditions are crucial, as the biochemical processes responsible for plant development are highly sensitive to temperature and humidity, operating most efficiently when these parameters are within ideal ranges.

To promote healthy and complete plant growth, researchers emphasize the importance of managing environmental factors such as natural light and ambient air temperature. Proper regulation of these elements enables growers to optimize the plant's growth cycle and maximize productivity. (Understanding Optimum Temperature and Humidity for Plant Growth Environment, 2020). For optimum growth of ginger, it is recommended to maintain a distance of 12 inches between each plant, providing sufficient space for ginger to flourish. A Many other crops require a sufficient place to survive so the minimum distance has to be maintained as per the plant. In hydroponic systems, natural sunlight significantly contributes to plant health and development. However, in indoor setups where access to sunlight is limited or unavailable, white LED lights serve as an effective alternative to meet the basic light requirements for plant growth. It is essential to carefully choose the intensity and quality of these lights in soilless farming environments to ensure optimal plant performance. Plants absorb light primarily at both ends of the visible spectrum specifically wavelengths that are not visible to the human eye. According to research conducted by the University of Minnesota, plants perform photosynthesis most efficiently at wavelengths of approximately 445 nanometers (blue light) and 650 nanometers (red light) (Julie Weisenhorn & Natalie Hoidal, 2020). To enhance growth, it is recommended that plants be exposed to a combination of red and blue light, maintaining a red to blue ratio greater than 3, for around 16 hours per day. This lighting strategy ensures efficient photosynthetic activity and supports healthy plant development in indoor hydroponic systems (Pennisi, G., Orsini, F., Blasioli, S. et al., 2019).

5. Air Ventilation

To prevent leaf tip burn in controlled environment hydroponic systems, Jun Gu Lee et al. (2013) conducted a study on the impact of air circulation. The research concluded that horizontal airflow is more advantageous than vertical flow for plant health and development. A low air velocity, combined with reduced intensity of white LED lighting, was found to promote optimal plant growth and is considered the most suitable condition for plant survival. To further support these findings, a 3D computational fluid dynamics (CFD) model was developed

using ANSYS software. Ying Zhang et al. (2016) utilized this simulation to visualize and analyze airflow patterns within enclosed hydroponic environments, confirming that optimized horizontal airflow contributes significantly to creating stable and plant friendly microclimates.

6. Smart Soil less Cultivation

Hydroponic systems rely on the accurate measurement and control of various parameters, which can vary across different system configurations. Automation plays a pivotal role in enhancing plant health and productivity by regulating essential factors such as nutrient delivery, pH, temperature, and humidity. In most systems, microcontrollers like the Arduino Nano process input from sensors and trigger outputs to control devices such as motor pumps, sprinklers, conveyor belts, and solenoid valves. These outputs are executed at predefined intervals to ensure consistent nutrient supply (Soniya Joshi et al., 2018). Aeroponics, a subdomain of soilless cultivation, offers an alternative to traditional hydroponics. Instead of water or soil, it uses atomization nozzles to deliver nutrient rich mist directly to plant roots. Continuous monitoring and regulation of environmental parameters are essential in aeroponic systems to support plant health (Imran Ali Lakhari et al., 2018).

To maintain optimal conditions, automated systems have been developed for real time monitoring of electrical conductivity (EC) and pH levels. These systems use solenoid valves to adjust nutrient flow based on sensor data processed by microcontrollers. In such systems, any deviation from preset thresholds prompts automatic corrections. Research has shown a direct correlation between temperature and pH specifically, a 10°C increase in water temperature can cause a 0.06 unit drop in pH, making the solution more acidic (Diego S. Domingues et al., 2012). Advanced tools with embedded actuators and control logic have been designed to maintain pH within an ideal range of 6.5 to 7.5 (Fitria Hidayanti et al., 2020). The use of Internet of Things (IoT) technology further enhances hydroponic automation by enabling remote monitoring of parameters like pH and air quality index. In case of deviations, automated alerts are triggered. Android applications have also been developed to display live sensor data from these IoT systems, facilitating real time management (B. S. Shubhashree et al., 2020).

Specific sensors such as ultrasonic sensors (HC SR04) for measuring nutrient solution levels and LM35 for temperature detection transmit data wirelessly to Arduino Uno microcontrollers. These controllers display the data on an attached screen and regulate nutrient flow using if else logic. Users can view the system status via Android smartphones for comprehensive control (P. Sihombing et al., 2017). A nutrient delivery mechanism using pumps allows for consistent weekly feeding in tomato cultivation, where water and nutrient mixtures are recycled, supporting sustainable farming (Vijendra Sahare et al., 2015). In studies involving Stonecrop family plants, artificial lighting for 16 hours daily was found to yield optimal growth outcomes (Sang Yong et al., 2016). Real time data integration through AVR microcontroller boards and tools like NI LabVIEW allows complete automation and centralized monitoring of hydroponic processes. These platforms are increasingly used in IoT applications to support large scale operations (S. Adhau et al., 2017).

Titan Smarphonics, a prominent name in hydroponics innovation, has introduced several IoT based solutions for remote system management. Their hardware suite includes a variety of sensors and actuators capable of controlling critical variables like pH, humidity, and temperature. Their smartphone compatible software, built using Arduino and Raspberry Pi platforms, delivers high levels of automation and scalability to hydroponic farming (Dr. Asawari Dudwadkar et al., 2020).

7. Growing of plants in soil less farming

Hydroponic systems are known for their efficient use of water, consuming significantly less than traditional farming methods. This advantage is particularly valuable in arid regions such as the Arabian Gulf, where crops like tomatoes, peppers, and lettuce hold high commercial importance. Notably, the growth cycle and developmental stages of hydroponically grown plants closely resemble those observed in conventional farming systems (Sabrina Naz et al., 2021). Horticultural crops such as strawberries, lettuce, tomatoes, and carnations have shown promising results under hydroponic cultivation. These systems rely on minimal inorganic nutrients, combined with essential elements like water, oxygen, and sunlight, to sustain plant health and vitality (Shailesh Solanki et al., 2017).

An experimental study comparing the nutrient content of vegetables grown through hydroponics and traditional farming revealed that hydroponically grown vegetables contained up to 50% more vitamins A, B, C, and E. Additionally, since hydroponics eliminates soil use, it also reduces the need for pesticides and remains less affected by external environmental factors (Satya Prakash et al., 2020). In another experiment conducted in

September 2019, crops like radish, beetroot, and turnip were initially grown in soil and then transplanted into a hydroponic system after 15 days. Colocasia, however, was cultivated directly in a hydroponic setup. Results showed that Colocasia successfully grew under the Nutrient Film Technique (NFT) system, reaching cormlet maturity in 90 days, while radish, turnip, and beetroot were harvested within 48–70 days (Agarwal A. et al., 2021). A separate study analyzed the influence of seed variety and planting systems over a 30 day period using two different seed types. Observations were evaluated using Design Expert software and an ANOVA test. The results indicated that plant growth was largely independent of seed type but heavily influenced by the planting system. Hydroponic cultivation consistently outperformed traditional methods in terms of plant development (Raneem Gashgari et al., 2018). In the broader context of smart farming, the development of large scale IoT based hydroponic systems introduces new business models. Researchers have highlighted the importance of addressing security concerns, privacy issues, and robust data governance. Several challenges and limitations associated with scaling up such systems were also identified, indicating the need for comprehensive planning and system architecture (Brewster C. et al., 2017).

8. Minerals required for Plant growth

The world's largest vertical farm, located in Dubai, spans 130,000 square feet and produces approximately 2,721 kilograms of food daily, using only 0.0004 times the water typically required by conventional agriculture. Remarkably, 85 out of every 100 people in the region consume food grown hydroponically ("Hydroponics: The Power of Water to Grow Food," 2019). Hydroponic systems are characterized by controlled nutrient management, which becomes particularly crucial when harvesting plant roots using downward stream flow applications. Plant responses are monitored to optimize nutrient induction and to prevent the accumulation of toxic or non essential substances. Earlier generations developed nutrient rich solutions to support plant growth (Nguyen NT et al., 2016). One innovative approach involved creating a liquid fertilizer from distillery slop, sugarcane leaves, and filtrate water in ratios of 1:0.1:0.25 and 1:0.25:0.25. This mixture was fermented over 30 days and then diluted with water at a 1:100 ratio. The resulting fertilizer displayed a germination index exceeding 100%, confirming its non phytotoxic properties. Plants grown using this fermented fertilizer showed a growth life cycle similar to those cultivated with chemical fertilizers (Phibunwatthanawong, T. et al., 2019).

Hydroponic systems are designed to circulate minimal yet effective amounts of nutrients directly to the plant roots, enhancing both growth quality and sustainability. The integration of plant growth promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) is encouraged to foster healthier development. Advanced systems now leverage sensor data and machine learning algorithms to analyze plant conditions in real time and adjust nutrient composition accordingly (Paolo Sambo et al., 2019). To further optimize nutrient regulation, a Fuzzy Inference System (FIS) is used as a fitness function for mineral control, while genetic algorithms help reduce fluctuations in mineral delivery. A convergence error function is employed to minimize errors within the FIS framework (Lenord Melvix J.S.M. & Sridevi C., 2014). Thirteen essential nutrients are typically introduced into hydroponic systems to support lettuce growth (J.E. Rakocy et al., 2005). Metal analysis has shown that macro elements accumulate more in the shoots, whereas micronutrients such as Fe, Cd, and Zn are found in higher concentrations in the roots. To support these experiments, specialized lab setups including autoclaves, fume hoods, and temperature controlled rooms (at 40°C) are required (Nguyen NT et al., 2016). Researchers also study transcriptional responses of roots using qRT PCR after modifying nutrient elements such as calcium, magnesium, potassium, and sodium, while keeping other ionic contributions constant (Simon J. Conn et al., 2013). Nutrient supplementation using amino acids and seaweed extract has been shown to prolong the life cycle and improve the physicochemical quality of bell pepper plants, particularly by reducing decay (Rashid Iqbal Khan et al., 2018).

To minimize nutrient waste, hydroponic systems often employ nutrient recirculation methods. Research shows that leachates can remove up to 51% of essential minerals; however, perlite substrates can retain these nutrients until they reach concentrations of approximately 5% calcium, 6% nitrogen, and 7% phosphorus (David Sanjuan et al., 2020). Nutrient delivery systems for crops like tomatoes use advanced recirculation techniques such as Direct Leachate Recirculation (DLR), Chemical Precipitation (CP), and Membrane Filtration (MF) to maintain an efficient supply of essential minerals (Rufi Salís et al., 2020). Lastly, salinity levels play a critical role in hydroponic systems. Experiments on barley plants under elevated Na^+ and Cl^- conditions revealed that hydroponic cultivation is more sensitive to salinity stress compared to traditional farming. These findings underscore the importance of managing osmotic pressure to prevent reduced plant growth in soil less

environments (Tavakkoli et al., 2010).

9. Optimizing water usage.

Water management in hydroponic systems is centered on the recirculation of nutrient rich solutions, which has been shown to benefit a wide variety of crops (Liliana Cifuentes et al., 2020). A critical component of such systems is the treatment of water, particularly when integrating wastewater into hydroponic operations. Pre treatment is essential to eliminate excess nutrients from wastewater, preventing the oversupply of certain elements that may harm plant development. Various water treatment processes such as activated sludge treatment, zoning, and biological activated carbon filtration are implemented to ensure water quality. In these systems, nutrient levels, especially nitrogen, are closely monitored and treated when concentrations exceed 40 mg/L (Alexa Bliedung et al., 2020).

Carmelo Maucieri et al. (2018) evaluated different delivery and flow methods for hydroponic pilot plants and concluded that plant biomass yield remained satisfactory regardless of the initial nutrient content in the wastewater. Recirculation remains one of the most promising techniques for reducing water consumption and maximizing nutrient reuse within hydroponic systems. Earlier work by N. Sigrimis et al. (2001) explored timed nutrient delivery, providing mixed nutrient water for 10 minutes every 70 minutes over a span of 11 to 13 hours daily. This approach was found to be both economically and environmentally sustainable by significantly lowering water pumping requirements. Similarly, in aquaponic systems, optimal performance for fish health, plant growth, and nutrient removal was achieved by reusing treated water at a flow rate between 0.8 and 8.0 liters per minute.

Advanced irrigation models, such as those developed by A. Anastasiou et al. (2019), utilize real time data from greenhouse environments to optimize water supply. These models integrate inputs from drainage meters and soil moisture sensors, and apply linear or nonlinear optimization techniques to minimize water loss and error in irrigation cycles. Marwan Haddad et al. (2011) supported the development of decentralized impure water treatment systems, citing their low cost construction, maintenance efficiency, and long operational life. These systems often utilize simple materials like barrels or channels to form the hydroponic framework.

A comparative study by Guilherme Lages Barbosa et al. (2015) revealed the superior efficiency of hydroponics over conventional farming. In hydroponic systems spanning 815 m², stem less crops yielded 41 kg/m² with a predictable variation of 6.1 kg/m². Water use was recorded at just 20 L/kg of produce, and energy consumption stood at 90,000 KJ/kg (± 3.8 L/kg and $\pm 11,000$ KJ/kg, respectively). In contrast, soil based farming over the same area produced only 3.9 kg/m² (± 0.21 kg/m²), requiring 250 L/kg of water and 110 KJ/kg of energy (± 25 L/kg and ± 75 KJ/kg). These findings underline the significant resource efficiency and yield advantages of hydroponic systems.

10. Basic Hydroponic system

In a brief study, Nisha Sharma et al. (2018) constructed a basic hydroponic system on the terrace of a residential flat. The setup included essential components such as a grow tent, grow light, PVC pipes and end caps, a submersible water pump, plant growing minerals, and pH adjustment solutions. To automate the system, a motherboard and various sensors were integrated, including an Arduino microcontroller, pH sensor, EC sensor, air temperature and humidity sensor, water flow sensor, water temperature sensor, a water filtration and cooling system, and a light intensity sensor. The system employed an Ebb and Flow hydroponic technique, where plants were placed on a growing medium submerged in a water mineral solution. The submersible pump facilitated the flow of this nutrient mixture into the grow bed. Once the cycle completed, the solution drained back into the reservoir, allowing for reuse in subsequent irrigation cycles.

11. Applications

Hydroponic systems have a wide range of applications, including home gardening, indoor cultivation, and the growth of medicinal plants. The ability to precisely control nutrient content and influence plant characteristics reduces the need for chemical pest control, thereby lowering associated costs. These systems can be implemented both vertically and horizontally, allowing for high density cultivation in limited spaces. This makes hydroponics particularly well suited for countries that depend heavily on food imports, especially those located in arid or resource scarce regions.

12. Results

The proposed work demonstrates the efficient automation of hydroponic farming through the use of minimal

resources and cost effective components. The system is designed for easy installation, even under challenging environmental conditions. Experimental results validate its performance, highlighting strong system stability and precise control actions.

13. Conclusions

The purpose of this article is to bridge the gap between technology and agriculture by introducing farmers to the automation of hydroponic systems through neural networks, the Internet of Things (IoT), and SMART applications. It offers in depth insights into nutrient management and biological processes in hydroponics, catering specifically to professionals in Mechanical, Electrical, and Electronics engineering. This paper presents a comprehensive overview of advancements in the field of hydroponics, with the intent to attract attention and encourage further research contributions. The fully automated hydroponic system discussed operates autonomously, requiring human intervention only for initiating the monitoring process. Cultivation using this automated approach has proven to be efficient, as environmental and nutrient parameters are precisely regulated. As proposed, hydroponics shows significant promise for sustainable development, capable of meeting the food demands of a rapidly growing global population.

14. Declaration of competing interest

The authors assert that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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