Potato disease-detection technologies

By Lukie Pieterse, editor and publisher, Potato News Today

The consequences of uncontrolled potato diseases are far-reaching. Late blight, known for causing the Irish potato famine in the mid-19th century, can lead to complete crop failure. Early detection and control are crucial to prevent the spread of these diseases. If left unchecked, producers face economic losses and the loss of food supply for the consumer market, affecting food prices and availability. Disease outbreaks can lead to the overuse of chemical pesticides, which carry their own environmental and health risks.

By analysing patterns in plant growth, discolouration, and texture that might escape the human eye, disease-detecting technology offers the promise of bringing potato farming into a new era of precision agriculture, where every plant can be monitored, and every disease managed.

Traditional detection methods

Traditional methods rely heavily on human intervention, with visual inspection and laboratory testing being the two primary tactics utilised.

Visual inspection is a common method used for disease detection by producers and agronomists. It involves meticulously examining plants for visible symptoms such as spots on leaves, wilting and growth abnormalities. This method is time-consuming, subjective and prone to misdiagnosis due to similarities between disease symptoms and other factors such as pests or nutrient deficiencies. Due to the labour-intensive nature of this method, it is not feasible for producers to manage large acreages without a substantial workforce.

Laboratory testing supplements visual inspection by providing a scientific approach. Samples of affected plant tissues are analysed in laboratories using techniques like culturing, polymerase chain reaction and enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) to identify pathogens. Laboratory testing is expensive, time-consuming and may delay disease response. It is often reserved for cases where the disease is unknown or has already reached an advanced stage.

Emerging technologies

Deep learning, a subset of machine learning, mimics the workings of the human brain in processing data and creating patterns for use in decision-making. It is defined by its ability to learn, in an unsupervised manner, from large amounts of unstructured data.

The most common architecture of deep learning that is particularly effective in image recognition tasks is the Convolutional Neural Network (CNN). CNNs are inspired by the organisation of the animal visual cortex and are specifically designed to automatically and adaptively learn spatial hierarchies of features from visual input. Such networks are adept at managing two-dimensional data, such as images, and extracting patterns that are too subtle or complex for the human eye to discern.

CNNs consist of multiple layers of neurons that process input images and extract a hierarchy of high-level features. These features become progressively more abstract at each layer. A typical CNN architecture comprises convolutional, pooling and fully connected layers.

Convolutional layers apply a set of filters to the input image to create feature maps, which highlight regions of the image that are relevant to detecting patterns. Pooling layers then 'down-sample' these feature maps to reduce dimensionality and computational load, while preserving the most essential information. Fully connected layers interpret these feature maps and output a prediction, such as the presence or absence of a particular plant disease.

For potato producers, the implications of CNNs are profound. A trained CNN can scan images of potato leaves, capturing data that ranges from overt signs of disease to subtle variations in colour, shape, and texture. These data points might be missed by the human eye or be indiscernible through conventional disease detection methods.

Deep learning methods

Training a CNN involves several steps that must be meticulously followed to ensure that the network can correctly learn from the data provided. Gathering a robust dataset is critical. It should include high-quality images of various potato diseases, and healthy plants for comparison. Images must clearly show disease symptoms, such as colour changes, spots, or lesions on the leaves or tubers.

To assemble a comprehensive dataset, it is often necessary to source images from different locations, times of day, and under varied weather conditions to make the CNN adaptable to real-world scenarios. Once collected, these images are annotated, a process where disease features are labelled so the CNN can learn what to look for when analysing new images. Labelling done by experts ensures accuracy.

CNNs are then fed the dataset for training, which allows the model to adjust its internal parameters through a process called backpropagation. Dataset division into training, validation, and testing subsets is essential. CNNs learn to identify disease presence, type and severity through pattern recognition and regression analysis.

The types of diseases that a CNN might learn to identify in potatoes include early and late blight and viral infections such as potato leafroll virus and potato virus Y. By training on diverse images depicting early and late blight, CNNs can learn to distinguish between them based on subtle differences.

A CNN trained on a temporally diverse dataset can learn to recognise the stages of disease progression. This is particularly important for providing actionable insights to producers. Knowing the stage of the disease helps in determining the appropriate intervention measures, which can range from targeted application of fungicides in the early stages to more drastic actions such as crop quarantine or destruction in advanced stages.

Advanced techniques

Data augmentation such as cropping, rotating, zooming, or changing the colour balance expands the training dataset. Architectural nuances such as residual networks (ResNets) or networks with inception modules improve accuracy.

The utilisation of CNNs in real-world scenarios for potato disease detection has led to several success stories that underscore their effectiveness, efficiency, and scalability. A notable example is the Potato Crop Diseases (PCD) mobile application (app). This app is free for producers and was created to facilitate early detection of potato crop diseases. Leveraging CNNs, the app enables producers to capture images of their crops using basic mobile devices, after which the images are processed to identify potential disease symptoms. In a field trial, the PCD app demonstrated an accuracy level that inspired confidence among producers, with real-time feedback enabling them to take immediate action.

Economic impact of deep learning

Economically, the most immediate effect is the potential for increased yield. Accurate disease identification enables targeted interventions, safeguarding harvests. Increased yield translates into stable income for producers and helps stabilise potato market prices worldwide.

Deep learning tools contribute to a reduction in operational costs. For instance, AI-powered systems can replace or augment traditional scouting methods, which require extensive labour and time to physically inspect crops. Automation benefits smallholder producers by easing financial demands. Labour costs decrease due to streamlined processes.

This technology-driven approach enables more precise use of pesticides and fungicides, reducing overall chemical use. It also mitigates the risk of developing resistance to pests and diseases, which could have severe long-term economic repercussions.

Environmental impact

Precision agriculture promotes a more sustainable use of resources. The minimised use of chemical treatments preserves soil health and prevents water contamination.

Deep learning technologies help maintain healthier crops and avoid the need for replanting. With land being a finite resource, any measure that can maintain or increase yield without the need for expansion into natural habitats is of significant environmental value. It also indirectly contributes to combating deforestation and biodiversity loss.

AI-driven pest and disease detection systems analyse data from weather patterns and plant imagery. This enhances climate resilience in potato farming, allowing producers to adapt to changing environmental conditions and contribute to broader climate change efforts.

Social impact

Deep learning tools hold the promise of fostering rural development. Advanced technologies have the potential to reduce rural poverty, malnutrition and lack of education.

There is a profound educational element involved in the deployment of deep learning technologies. Producers are exposed to cutting-edge methods in agronomy, engendering a skilled workforce that is conversant in both traditional farming techniques and modern technologies. By closing the digital divide, such exposure can empower producers to become innovators, driving further advancements in sustainable agriculture.

Challenges and limitations

Each of the following concerns requires thorough navigation to harness the power of AI in agriculture.

High initial costs: The sophisticated sensors, drones, computing infrastructure, and software needed to implement these technologies can be prohibitive, especially for small-scale producers. The high price tag of advanced devices and analytical tools makes them less accessible for those with limited financial resources.

The return on investment, although potentially significant, is not immediate. This delay can deter producers when it comes to new technology investments, particularly in regions where credit facilities and agricultural subsidies are lacking or insufficient to offset the initial expenditure.

Technical expertise: Operating AI-based disease detection systems, interpreting data outputs, and maintaining the technology require specialised knowledge. Training existing personnel or hiring new employees with technical skills adds to the overall cost and complexity. In regions where educational infrastructure lacks emphasis on technical proficiency in digital technologies, this becomes a challenge.

Data privacy: Deep learning systems function optimally when fed with data, which often includes sensitive farm operations information. The apprehension over how this data might be stored, used, or potentially shared is not trivial, given the increasing global emphasis on data rights and privacy.

Agricultural data has immense value for individual producers, seed companies, agrochemical businesses and financial institutions. Producers may be reluctant to embrace systems that could expose their operational data to external parties, particularly without clear regulations and assurances on data use and ownership.

Resistance to new technology: Farming communities have long-standing practices and knowledge systems. Introducing AI-driven approaches often means disrupting established routines and traditional systems. Resistance to change, born of scepticism over new tools' efficacy, can be pragmatic. Producers might also fear that reliance on technology could lead to a devaluation of their expertise. Building trust, ensuring ease of use, and complementing traditional agricultural wisdom are key.

Drones and IoT devices

The future of potato farming is one where drones soar above fields, outfitted with high-resolution cameras and sensors that capture a wealth of data. Deep learning algorithms, operating from this rich lode of aerial imagery, have the potential to discern subtle patterns indicative of disease outbreaks long before they become visible to the human eye. The use of drones extends the spatial reach and precision of monitoring, allowing for rapid, wide-scale detection that would be impractical and costly with ground-based surveillance alone.

Deep learning's synergy with Internet of Things (IoT) devices amplifies this paradigm shift. In the fields, networks of IoT sensors could constantly monitor a range of variables such as soil moisture, nutrient levels, temperature, and more.

Data management and analytics

With blockchain technology, producers may soon be able to securely and transparently share crop data. Coupled with smart contracts, this could lead to novel forms of co-operative disease management and resource sharing.

Predictive analytics could transform data into forecasts that predict disease outbreaks and suggest optimal planting schedules, harvest times, and market trends.

Collaboration and education

Public-private partnerships can play a pivotal role in funding research and development, while educational programmes prepare the next generation of agricultural experts. This synergistic effort can accelerate the translation of research findings into practical technologies.

Basics of deep learning

Deep learning technologies offer promise for disease detection in the potato industry, but integrating them into everyday practices requires practical steps.

Producers and consultants must first gain a basic understanding of deep learning and how it applies to agriculture. Online courses, workshops, and seminars are available, some tailored specifically to agricultural applications. Organisations such as the American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers host educational events for those interested in agricultural AI.

Consultants should work with producers to perform a thorough assessment of their needs. Questions to consider include: What are the most prevalent diseases affecting crop yield? What types of data are already being collected? Understanding the specific disease threats and the farm's data capacity is crucial in determining the most suitable deep-learning solution.

The next step is to select appropriate deep-learning tools and services. Producers should look for platforms that have been successfully tested in agricultural environments, ideally with a focus on potato diseases. They should also consider the comprehensiveness of the service. Some platforms offer end-to-end solutions, while others may require the integration of drones, IoT devices, and cloud computing services.

Integration, support and updates

Successful integration requires a well-defined protocol. This includes establishing when and how often data will be collected, who will be responsible for monitoring outputs, and what actions should be taken based on the insights gained. Staff training is important to ensure that everyone is comfortable using the new technology.

Keeping the system up-to-date with the latest developments is necessary. Producers should ensure they have access to ongoing support from their technology providers and remain abreast of advancements. Regular updates may be required.

Producers and consultants should consider building a network of collaboration that includes researchers, technology developers, and other producers who are also using deep learning technologies.

Monitoring the impact

Regular assessment helps in determining if the technology is meeting its goals, what improvements can be made, and how it is affecting the overall sustainability and profitability of the farming enterprise.

Producers and consultants can pave the way for enhanced crop health, yield, and sustainability. The journey to integrating these innovative solutions may require time and patience, but the benefits they offer could very well redefine the future of potato farming.

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VOL 38 NO 4 • JULY / AUGUST 2024

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