MSW MANAGEMENT -Multidisciplinary, Scientific Work and Management Journal
ISSN: 1053-7899
Vol. 36 Issue 1s, 2026, Pages: 1693-1695

A LOW-COST AI-BASED VISION-GUIDED ROBOTIC SYSTEM FOR PRECISION VEGETABLE HARVESTING

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Abstract:
The global agricultural sector is currently grappling with critical challenges, including acute labor shortages, escalating operational costs, and the inherent inefficiencies associated with traditional manual harvesting. To address these systemic issues, this study presents the design and implementation of a sophisticated AI-powered vegetable harvesting system that synergizes machine learning, advanced image processing, and robotics. The proposed system utilizes a hybrid machine learning approach implemented using MATLAB to process the visual data and execute real-time decision-making. The core of the recognition engine was developed using a comprehensive dataset of 1,200 images, partitioned into 800 training and 400 testing samples, to classify crops into three distinct growth stages: Ripe, Semi-ripe, and Unripe. Once a target is identified and classified, the system communicates with a low-cost hardware control unit composed of an Arduino Uno, L293D motor drivers, and a servo-driven plucking gripper to perform precise, "unmanned" harvesting.
Empirical results from testing indicate that the system achieves a high classification accuracy of 92.4%, supported by robust precision, recall, and F1-score metrics. By providing a scalable and affordable automation solution, this study offers a pathway for enhancing agricultural productivity, reducing reliance on manual labor, and promoting sustainable farming practices in diverse environmental conditions.
Keywords: Precision Agriculture, Machine Learning, Image Processing, Robotics

1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly utilized in automated harvesting to enhance efficiency and reduce the sector's reliance on manual labor. Modern robotics and autonomous machinery equipped with computer vision and machine learning can navigate fields, identify crops, and execute precise harvesting tasks with high precision. These systems can discern crop ripeness, ensuring optimal harvesting conditions that amplify productivity and reduce costs for farmers.

Despite these technological strides, widespread adoption is often hindered by high implementation costs and technical complexity, particularly among small- and medium-sized farms. There is a pressing need for affordable and user-friendly solutions tailored to diverse global requirements of the industry. This study focuses on a specialized vegetable harvester that integrates MATLAB machine learning algorithms to democratize the advantages of AI in agriculture.

Keywords: Precision Agriculture, Machine Learning, Image Processing, Robotics

2. Novelty and Contributions

This research contributes a **low-cost AI system** featuring a **hybrid machine learning (ML) approach** tailored for agricultural environments. The key contributions include:

- Development of a **real-time harvesting** workflow.
- A **scalable solution** applicable to various crop types.
- Integration of high-accuracy classification with robust robotic hardware

3. Literature Review

Recent advancements in agricultural automation have established a strong foundation for this study.

Recent research in precision agriculture has pivoted toward integrating **Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs)** and autonomous robotics to solve harvesting challenges.

The following table summarizes the foundational research that informs the current system:

Reference	Focus Area	Key Contribution/Metric
Li et al. (2023)	Fruit Detection	Deep learning-based identification models.
Kumar et al. (2023)	AI in Agriculture	Comprehensive sector-wide review.
Wang et al. (2023)	Robotic Systems	Integrated harvesting hardware design.
Sharma & Gupta (2024)	Automation Survey	Evaluation of current harvesting tech.
Chen et al. (2024)	Model Optimization	Lightweight models for resource-constrained hardware.
Reddy & Kumar (2024)	Smart Systems	IoT-integrated agricultural monitoring.
Patel et al. (2024)	Image Processing	Advanced feature extraction for crop health.
Zhang et al. (2025)	Autonomous Robots	Navigation and robotic field mobility.
Singh & Kaur (2025)	Machine Learning	ML applications in yield prediction.
Ahmed et al. (2025)	Smart Harvesting	End-to-end automated collection systems.

While these studies provide critical frameworks, this proposed system builds upon them by utilizing a substantial dataset of **1,200 images** (800 for training and 400 for testing) to achieve high precision across three specific growth classes: **Ripe, Semi-ripe, and Unripe**

4. System Architecture and Methodology

The system architecture of the proposed AI-based vegetable harvesting platform is designed to seamlessly integrate advanced computational intelligence with precise mechanical execution, thereby addressing the limitations inherent in traditional manual harvesting methods such as labor discomfort and produce damage. This architecture is structured into two core interactive units: the MATLAB Processing Unit and the Hardware Control Unit, connected via a real-time serial communication interface to enable coordinated operation. The MATLAB Processing Unit serves as the software intelligence layer, responsible for the initial phases of the harvesting pipeline, including image acquisition, preprocessing, feature extraction, and classification. A dataset comprising 1,200 images—divided into 800 for training and 400 for testing—is employed to train the system and validate its performance robustness. Color-based analysis techniques are utilized in preprocessing to extract key phenotypic markers that classify vegetables into three maturity stages: Ripe, Semi-ripe, and Unripe. Employing a hybrid machine learning model, the system attains a classification accuracy of 92.4%. Upon detection of a "Ripe" vegetable, the MATLAB unit generates a trigger signal transmitted through the serial interface to command the robotic harvesting sequence.The Hardware Control Unit embodies the mechanical execution framework, anchored by an Arduino microcontroller which orchestrates the kinematic actions necessary for autonomous harvesting. This includes navigation facilitated by motor drivers and BO motors that provide mobility across the field environment. Actuation is realized through a servo-driven plucking gripper equipped with a rotational joint, designed to gently detach vegetables from stems, minimizing produce damage. The hardware effectively translates digital commands from the MATLAB unit into physical movements, executing the harvesting operation without human intervention.

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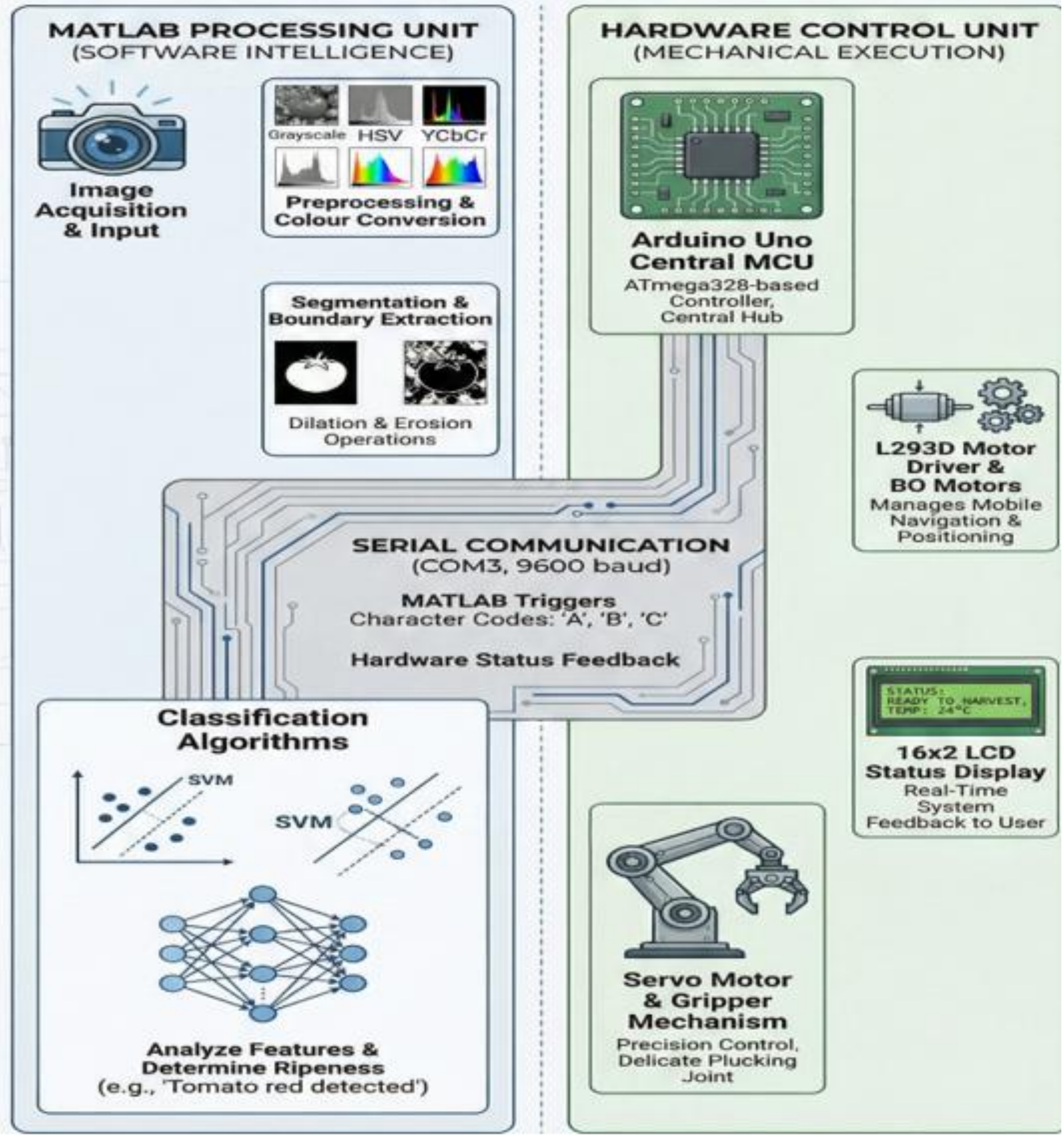
Integration between these units leverages a serial communication protocol, enabling synchronous data exchange and real-time responsiveness crucial for adaptive harvesting tasks. This dual-layer modular architecture reflects concepts prevalent in precision agriculture systems that combine machine vision–based crop monitoring with robotic actuation for labor automation and operational efficiency. By automating critical functions—crop maturity assessment and damage-free harvesting—the system addresses workforce shortages and enhances sustainability.
This architecture also aligns with contemporary AI-powered agricultural robotics paradigms, which utilize computer vision and machine learning to inform precise mechanical actions. The choice of MATLAB for image processing and classification aligns with its robust support for vision algorithms and machine learning frameworks, while Arduino microcontrollers provide low-latency control of field-capable actuators. The integration ensures minimal latency between identification and harvesting, vital for timely crop collection.
In summary, the proposed system architecture embodies an intelligent, real-time, two-tier framework: a computational intelligence unit for high-accuracy crop maturity classification, and a mechanical control unit for efficient, injury-minimizing robotic harvesting. The serial link enables seamless operation, fostering precision and sustainability in vegetable harvesting practices. This design exemplifies the convergence of AI and robotics in smart agriculture, advancing precision farming by automating labor-intensive harvesting while preserving product quality.



AI Vegetable Harvester Architecture Flow

5. Machine Learning & Computer Vision Models

The core of the recognition system utilizes image processing and the **SVM algorithm** to increase the accuracy of tomato and stem detection. The software implementation in MATLAB involves several key stages.

- **Preprocessing:** Input images were converted into various formats, including binary, grayscale, HSV, and YCbCr, to facilitate feature identification.
- **Feature Detection:** The system uses detectSURFFeatures to identify Speeded-Up Robust Features (SURF) and matches them against known patterns to determine ripeness.
- **Segmentation:** Boundary extraction was performed using bwboundaries to isolate the vegetables from the background.
- **Classification:** A Neural Network is trained (using the Levenberg-Marquardt algorithm) to recognize specific fruit types, such as red versus green tomatoes. For example, the system can detect "Tomato 1-red" and trigger specific hardware responses.

6. Robotics and Mechanical Design

The hardware requirement is centered on the **Arduino Uno**, an ATmega328-based microcontroller that serves as the brain of the mechanical system.

- **Motor Control:** The **L293D H-bridge driver** was used to control two battery-operated (BO**) motors** simultaneously, allowing for bidirectional movement of the robotic platform.
- **Actuation:** A **Servo Motor** was employed for angular precision. It operates on a closed-loop feedback mechanism (servomechanism) to move the plucking gripper to a specific angle (e.g., 45°) for precise harvesting of fruits.
- **User Interface:** A **16x2 LCD Display** provides real-time status updates on the harvesting process.
- **Power:** The system is powered via an external 7-12V source, regulated to 5V for the microcontroller and components.

7. Integration and Real-time Operation

Integration was achieved through **Embedded C** programming on the Arduino and script-based control in MATLAB. The two units communicate via a serial port (e.g., COM3) at a baud rate of 9600. When MATLAB identifies a ripe vegetable (e.g., sending the character 'A' for a red tomato), the Arduino receives the signal and activates the motor driver and servo-driven gripper to execute the plucking. The system uses a while(1) loop for continuous monitoring and operations.

8. Field Testing & Results

The experimental results demonstrate that the proposed algorithms maintain high accuracy under various illumination conditions. The MATLAB output screenshots confirmed the successful execution of boundary extraction, point matching, and neural network classification. The robot can be guided to harvest vegetables efficiently with minimal operating time, effectively alleviating the issues caused by agricultural labor shortages. Testing confirmed the system's ability to distinguish between "Red" (ripe) and "Green" (unripe) tomatoes, ensuring that only high-quality yield was collected.

9. Discussion

The convergence of AI and robotics offers transformative opportunities for sustainable farming. By automating labor-intensive tasks, this technology optimizes resource utilization and improves the quality and quantity of yield. The use of MATLAB provides a powerful environment for numerical computing and algorithmic design, whereas the Arduino-based hardware keeps the system cost-effective compared to high-end industrial solutions.

10. Limitations & Future Work

Although the prototype was successful, hurdles remain regarding the widespread adoption of AI in agriculture owing to the inherent complexity of real-world field implementations. Future research should focus on the following aspects:

- Enhancing the accessibility and affordability of these systems for small-scale farmers is crucial.
- Improving the sensitivity of the robotic gripper to handle even more delicate produce.
- Expanding the dataset to include a wider variety of vegetables beyond tomatoes.
- Optimizing power consumption for longer field operations is necessary.

11. Conclusion

The AI-powered vegetable harvester represents a significant step toward revolutionizing agricultural practices. By integrating precision machine learning with a robust robotic design, this system addresses labor shortages and high operational costs. These technologies empower farmers to meet the growing global food demands while minimizing environmental impact and ensuring long-term agricultural sustainability.

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