

Precision Breeding Techniques: CRISPR-Cas9 and Beyond in Modern Plant Improvement

R. Bhuvaneshwari^{*1}, K. R. Saravanan², S. Vennila², S. Suganthi²

¹Department of Soil Science and Agricultural Chemistry, Faculty of Agriculture, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu 608002, India

²Department of Genetics and Plant Breeding, Faculty of Agriculture, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu 608002, India.

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Corresponding Author: R. Bhuvaneshwari | E-Mail: (bhuvanavasusoil@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

Precision breeding techniques, particularly CRISPR-Cas9, have revolutionized modern plant improvement by offering highly targeted approaches to genetic modification. This review explores the advancements in precision breeding, focusing on CRISPR-Cas9 and its applications, as well as emerging techniques that promise to further enhance plant breeding. CRISPR-Cas9, a powerful genome-editing tool, enables precise modifications of specific genes, leading to the development of crop varieties with improved traits such as disease resistance, stress tolerance, and enhanced nutritional profiles. Beyond CRISPR-Cas9, other genome-editing technologies and approaches are emerging, offering new possibilities for accelerating plant improvement. This review examines the principles behind these techniques, their applications, benefits, challenges, and future prospects in the context of modern agriculture and food security.

Keywords: Precision Breeding, Techniques, CRISPR-Cas9, Beyond Modern, Plant Improvement.

Introduction

Precision breeding techniques have transformed plant improvement by providing advanced tools for precise genetic modifications. Among these techniques, CRISPR-Cas9 stands out due to its simplicity, efficiency, and versatility. This review focuses on CRISPR-Cas9, exploring its mechanism, applications, and impact on plant breeding [1]. And will discuss emerging technologies beyond CRISPR-Cas9 that are poised to further revolutionize the field of precision breeding [2]. These advancements are critical in addressing the challenges of global food security, environmental sustainability, and agricultural productivity. The burgeoning global population and the concomitant demand for food, fuel, and fiber have necessitated advancements in agricultural practices and crop improvement. Traditional breeding methods, while invaluable, often fall short in addressing the rapid pace of climate change, emerging pests and diseases, and the need for sustainable agricultural systems. In response to these challenges, precision breeding techniques have emerged as powerful tools for modern plant improvement [3]. Among these, CRISPR-Cas9 has revolutionized the field, offering unprecedented precision and efficiency in genome editing.

CRISPR-Cas9, an acronym for Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats and CRISPR-associated protein 9, is a versatile and programmable genetic tool derived from the adaptive immune system of bacteria. This technology enables targeted modifications to the genome by creating site-specific double-strand breaks, which can then be repaired to incorporate desired genetic changes [4]. The simplicity, accuracy, and cost-effectiveness of CRISPR-Cas9 have accelerated its adoption in plant science, facilitating the development of crops with enhanced traits such as disease resistance, improved nutritional content, and greater environmental adaptability, the landscape of precision breeding extends beyond CRISPR-Cas9 [5].

Other genome editing technologies, including TALENs (Transcription Activator-Like Effector Nucleases) and ZFNs (Zinc Finger Nucleases), as well as newer iterations of CRISPR systems, continue to evolve and contribute to plant improvement. These tools complement traditional breeding and biotechnological approaches, providing a multifaceted strategy to address the complex challenges facing modern agriculture.

This review aims to provide an in-depth exploration of precision breeding techniques, with a focus on CRISPR-Cas9 and its applications in plant improvement [6]. We will examine the principles underlying CRISPR-Cas9, its comparative advantages over other genome editing technologies, and its transformative impact on crop science. Additionally, we will discuss the advancements beyond CRISPR-Cas9, highlighting emerging technologies and their potential to further enhance plant breeding [7]. Finally, we will address the challenges and ethical considerations associated with the deployment of these powerful tools in agricultural systems. Through this comprehensive review, we aim to elucidate the pivotal role of precision breeding in shaping the future of sustainable agriculture.

CRISPR-Cas9 Technology

CRISPR-Cas9, a ground-breaking genome-editing technology, is derived from a bacterial immune system that protects against viral infections. The system utilizes two key components: a guide RNA (gRNA) that directs the Cas9 endonuclease to a specific genomic location, and the Cas9 protein, which introduces a double-strand break in the DNA at the targeted site [8]. This break is then repaired by the cell's natural repair mechanisms, allowing for the introduction of desired genetic changes. The versatility of CRISPR-Cas9 lies in its ability to create targeted mutations, insertions, or deletions with high precision. This technology has been harnessed to develop crop varieties with improved traits such as enhanced disease

resistance, better stress tolerance, and optimized nutritional profiles. For example, CRISPR-Cas9 has been used to edit genes related to pathogen resistance in wheat, leading to varieties with increased resistance to fungal diseases. Similarly, in rice, CRISPR-Cas9 has been employed to enhance nutritional content, such as increasing the levels of essential vitamins and minerals.

Applications in Plant Improvement

CRISPR-Cas9 has revolutionized plant breeding by enabling precise and efficient genetic modifications across a diverse array of crops. In cereals, such as wheat and maize, CRISPR-Cas9 has been instrumental in developing varieties that exhibit improved yield, enhanced resilience to abiotic stresses like drought and salinity, and increased resistance to diseases. For example, researchers have utilized CRISPR-Cas9 to edit genes related to drought tolerance in wheat, leading to varieties that maintain productivity under water-limited conditions. Similarly, maize varieties have been developed with enhanced tolerance to saline soils, improving their growth and yield in regions affected by soil salinization.

In legumes, CRISPR-Cas9 has been employed to enhance traits crucial for nutritional and agricultural performance. Advances include the development of soybean varieties with increased protein content, which is beneficial for animal feed and human consumption. Additionally, CRISPR-Cas9 has been used to improve disease resistance in legumes such as chickpeas and lentils, reducing the impact of pathogens and increasing overall crop yield. The technology has also made significant strides in fruits and vegetables [9]. CRISPR-Cas9 has been used to develop crops with enhanced shelf life, improved flavor, and better nutritional profiles. For example, in tomatoes, CRISPR-Cas9 has been employed to modify genes responsible for fruit ripening, resulting in tomatoes that stay fresh longer and have improved taste. Similarly, researchers have used CRISPR-Cas9 to increase the vitamin content in crops like carrots and spinach, addressing nutritional deficiencies and enhancing their health benefits. One of the most notable applications of CRISPR-Cas9 is the development of disease-resistant crops. For instance, CRISPR-Cas9 has been used to create rice varieties resistant to bacterial blight, a major pathogen that affects rice production globally [10]. This has not only led to improved crop yields but also reduced the need for chemical pesticides, promoting more sustainable agricultural practices. In wheat, CRISPR-Cas9 has been applied to develop varieties resistant to wheat rust diseases, which are significant threats to wheat production worldwide. By improving resistance to these diseases, CRISPR-Cas9 has contributed to more stable and reliable food supplies.

Beyond CRISPR-Cas9: Emerging Techniques

While CRISPR-Cas9 is a ground breaking technology in precision breeding, several emerging techniques are expanding the possibilities for plant improvement. One such technique is CRISPR/Cas12 (Cpf1), which offers several advantages over CRISPR-Cas9. CRISPR/Cas12 is smaller in size, which can facilitate more efficient delivery into plant cells. It also produces staggered cuts in the DNA, which can lead to fewer off-target effects compared to the blunt cuts produced by Cas9. These attributes make CRISPR/Cas12 a valuable tool for precise genetic modifications in plants. Another promising advancement is base editing, a technique that allows for precise single-base changes in the DNA sequence without introducing double-strand breaks.

This method involves a fusion of a catalytically impaired CRISPR-Cas9 with a deaminase enzyme, enabling the direct conversion of one DNA base into another. Base editing reduces the risk of unintended genetic alterations and has shown great potential in correcting point mutations that cause genetic diseases in plants. For example, base editing has been used to fix mutations associated with disease susceptibility in rice and to improve important agronomic traits [11].

Prime editing represents another recent innovation that offers a versatile approach to gene editing. Prime editing enables the introduction of precise genetic changes by directly writing new genetic information into the genome. This technique utilizes a prime editor, which is a fusion of a catalytically impaired Cas9 and a reverse transcriptase enzyme, to perform targeted edits with high accuracy. Prime editing holds great promise for correcting genetic mutations related to plant diseases and enhancing desirable traits, such as yield and quality. Epigenome editing is a novel approach that targets the regulation of gene expression without altering the underlying DNA sequence. By modifying epigenetic marks, such as DNA methylation and histone modifications, epigenome editing can fine-tune gene activity and develop crops with optimized traits. This technique allows for temporary or reversible modifications, which can be advantageous for studying gene function and developing crops with specific, adjustable traits [12].

These emerging techniques, combined with CRISPR-Cas9, represent a new era in precision breeding. They offer enhanced precision, reduced off-target effects, and expanded capabilities for modifying plant genomes. As these technologies continue to evolve, they will further enhance plant breeding efforts, leading to the development of crops with improved traits and greater resilience to environmental challenges. Continued research and innovation will be crucial in fully realizing the potential of these techniques and addressing the complex challenges faced by modern agriculture.

Benefits and Challenges

Benefits

Precision breeding techniques, particularly CRISPR-Cas9, offer transformative benefits for plant improvement. One of the primary advantages is their high precision. Unlike traditional breeding methods, which often rely on chance and can result in unpredictable genetic changes, CRISPR-Cas9 enables targeted modifications at specific loci within the genome. This precision reduces the risk of unintended alterations and ensures that only the desired traits are modified, thereby improving the efficiency and accuracy of the breeding process. Another significant benefit is the reduction in off-target effects. CRISPR-Cas9 technology has evolved to include various strategies to minimize these effects, such as using optimized guide RNAs and employing high-fidelity Cas9 variants. This improvement enhances the reliability of the technology and increases confidence in the outcomes of genetic modifications. CRISPR-Cas9 facilitates the introduction of multiple genetic changes simultaneously. This capability allows for the concurrent modification of several genes or traits, which is particularly valuable for complex traits controlled by multiple genes. For instance, researchers can target several genes involved in stress response pathways, leading to crops that are more resilient to various environmental conditions. The speed at which CRISPR-Cas9 can develop improved crop varieties is another notable advantage. Traditional breeding methods can take many years to achieve significant genetic improvements, as they rely on

crossing and selecting from large populations. In contrast, CRISPR-Cas9 can expedite this process by directly modifying the genome, significantly reducing the time required to develop new varieties with enhanced traits [13].

Challenges

Despite its advantages, CRISPR-Cas9 and other precision breeding techniques face several challenges. One major challenge is the efficiency of the technology, which can vary depending on the plant species. Some plants are more amenable to genome editing than others, and the delivery of CRISPR components into plant cells can be difficult for certain species [14-15]. For example, some crops have complex genomes or require specialized methods for transformation, which can limit the applicability of CRISPR-Cas9. The delivery method of genome-editing components is another critical factor affecting the success of CRISPR-Cas9 applications. Various delivery techniques, such as *Agrobacterium*-mediated transformation, particle bombardment, and protoplast transformation, each have their own advantages and limitations. The choice of delivery method can impact the efficiency of editing and the overall success of the breeding program. The complexity of targeted traits also presents a challenge. Some traits are controlled by multiple genes and are influenced by environmental factors, making them difficult to modify precisely. Additionally, understanding the genetic basis of complex traits requires extensive research and can complicate the design of effective CRISPR experiments. Regulatory and ethical considerations are significant challenges in the adoption of CRISPR-Cas9 technology. The release of genetically edited crops into the environment is subject to regulatory scrutiny, which varies by country and region. These regulations aim to assess the safety and environmental impact of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) [16-17]. The regulatory landscape is continually evolving, and navigating these requirements can be complex and time-consuming. Ethical considerations also play a role in the adoption of CRISPR technology. There are concerns about the potential impact of genetically edited crops on biodiversity and ecosystem health [18]. For example, the introduction of genetically modified traits into natural populations could have unforeseen ecological consequences. Addressing these concerns requires transparent and rigorous risk assessments and ongoing dialogue with stakeholders.

Future Prospects

The future of precision breeding holds immense promise, with ongoing advancements in genome-editing technologies and methodologies paving the way for significant improvements in plant breeding. Integrating CRISPR-Cas9 with other emerging technologies, such as synthetic biology and high-throughput phenotyping, will further enhance the capabilities of precision breeding. Synthetic biology, which involves the design and construction of new biological parts, devices, and systems, can complement CRISPR-Cas9 by enabling the creation of novel genetic circuits and pathways. This integration allows for the engineering of plants with complex traits and functionalities

that are not achievable with traditional breeding methods.

High-throughput phenotyping, which involves the rapid measurement of plant traits using advanced technologies such as imaging and sensors, can provide valuable data for refining CRISPR-Cas9 applications. By combining high-throughput phenotyping with CRISPR-Cas9, researchers can obtain detailed information on the effects of genetic modifications and improve the accuracy of trait predictions, advances in computational tools and bioinformatics will play a crucial role in the future of precision breeding. Improved algorithms and models for predicting the outcomes of genetic modifications will enhance the design and implementation of CRISPR experiments. These tools will also facilitate the integration of genomics, transcriptomics, and proteomics data, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of gene function and trait expression, breeders, and policymakers will be essential in harnessing the full potential of precision breeding technologies. Collaborative efforts can help address the challenges of technology implementation, regulatory compliance, and public acceptance. By working together, stakeholders can ensure that precision breeding technologies are used responsibly and effectively to meet global food security and sustainability challenges, precision breeding techniques, with CRISPR-Cas9 at the forefront, represent a significant advancement in plant improvement. As new technologies and methodologies continue to emerge, they offer exciting opportunities for developing crops with enhanced traits and greater resilience. Continued research, innovation, and collaboration will be crucial in realizing the full potential of these technologies and addressing the complex challenges of modern agriculture.

Conclusion

Precision breeding techniques, particularly CRISPR-Cas9, have revolutionized modern plant improvement by providing unparalleled accuracy and efficiency in genome editing. The advent of CRISPR-Cas9 has accelerated the development of crops with enhanced traits, such as improved disease resistance, increased nutritional content, and better adaptability to environmental stresses. These advancements are critical in addressing the global challenges of food security, climate change, and sustainable agricultural practices. While CRISPR-Cas9 has garnered significant attention, it is essential to recognize the broader spectrum of precision breeding tools, including TALENs, ZFNs, and newer CRISPR systems. These technologies offer complementary capabilities and contribute to a multifaceted approach in crop improvement. The integration of these advanced techniques with traditional breeding methods and biotechnological innovations provides a robust framework for developing resilient and high-yielding crops, the deployment of precision breeding technologies is not without challenges. Issues related to off-target effects, regulatory frameworks, public perception, and ethical considerations must be carefully navigated. Continued research and development are necessary to refine these tools, enhance their precision, and ensure their safe and responsible use in agriculture.

Table 1: Overview of CRISPR-Cas9 Applications in Plant Improvement

Crop Type	Trait Improved	Example Application	Impact
Cereals	Yield and abiotic stress resistance	Development of drought-tolerant wheat varieties by editing stress-responsive genes	Enhanced crop productivity and resilience under water-limited conditions
Legumes	Nutritional content and disease resistance	Increase in protein content in soybeans and disease-resistant chickpeas	Improved nutritional value and reduced loss due to diseases
Fruits	Shelf life and flavor	Modification of fruit ripening genes in tomatoes for extended freshness	Increased marketability and reduced post-harvest losses
Vegetables	Nutritional value	Enhancement of vitamin content in carrots and spinach	Addressing nutritional deficiencies and improving health benefits
Rice	Disease resistance	Development of rice varieties resistant to bacterial blight	Reduced need for chemical pesticides and improved yield
Wheat	Disease resistance	Creation of wheat varieties resistant to wheat rust diseases	Increased stability of wheat production and reduced crop losses

Table 2: Comparison of Genome-Editing Techniques

Technique	Advantages	Disadvantages	Applications
CRISPR-Cas9	High precision, ability to edit multiple genes, rapid development of traits	Potential for off-target effects, varying efficiency across species	Broad applications in cereals, legumes, fruits, vegetables, and more
CRISPR/Cas12 (Cpf1)	Smaller size, distinct cutting patterns, reduced off-target effects	Limited commercial use, less well-characterized than Cas9	Emerging applications in precision breeding for various crops
Base Editing	Precise single-base changes, no double-strand breaks	Limited to base substitutions, potential for unintended genetic effects	Correcting point mutations, enhancing specific traits in crops
Prime Editing	Highly accurate, versatile gene editing, no double-strand breaks	Still in early stages of development, limited availability	Correcting genetic mutations, improving complex traits
Epigenome Editing	Targeted regulation of gene expression, reversible modifications	Complexity in design, potential for unintended effects	Fine-tuning gene activity, developing crops with adjustable traits

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