

21. Beyond GMOs: The Next Generation of Crop Biotechnology

Dr. Rajib Roychowdhury¹

¹ICRISAT, Patancheru 502324, Hyderabad, India

Abstract

Crop biotechnology has entered a new phase that extends beyond the first generation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). While traditional GMOs focused on single-gene traits such as herbicide tolerance or insect resistance, modern tools now enable precise genome editing, improved nutritional quality, and climate resilience. Technologies such as CRISPR-Cas, synthetic biology, and RNA-based regulation are enabling targeted crop modification, reducing ecological risks and improving sustainability. These innovations are reshaping regulatory frameworks, public acceptance, and global agricultural practices. This article explains how the next generation of crop biotechnology works, presents real-world examples, discusses economic and environmental benefits, and examines ongoing challenges. It concludes by assessing how these technologies can contribute to global food security under a changing climate.

1. Introduction: Moving beyond first-generation GMOs

The first generation of GMOs entered global agriculture in the 1990s. Crops such as herbicide-tolerant soybean and insect-resistant maize dominated adoption. By 2020, genetically modified crops were grown on more than 190 million hectares worldwide (ISAAA, 2020).

These crops focused on input traits. They helped farmers control weeds and pests but offered limited direct benefits to consumers. Public debates on safety, corporate control, and environmental impact slowed broader acceptance.

Today, crop biotechnology is changing. Genome editing and synthetic biology provide more precise tools. Instead of inserting foreign genes, scientists can fine-tune a plant's own DNA. These methods create traits that address nutrition, resilience, and climate change. The next generation of biotechnology aims to move past the limitations of early GMOs.

2. Genome editing and precision breeding

Genome editing allows scientists to make targeted changes in DNA without adding foreign genes. CRISPR-Cas systems dominate this field. They use a guide RNA

to direct the Cas enzyme to a specific DNA site, where the sequence is cut and repaired. This enables gene knockout, replacement, or fine-tuning (Chen et al., 2019).

Examples include:

- **Disease resistance:** Researchers used CRISPR to develop rice varieties resistant to bacterial blight by editing the promoter regions of susceptibility genes (Oliva et al., 2019).
- **Improved yield:** Wheat with edited genes for grain size and number showed significant productivity increases (Zhang et al., 2016).
- **Reduced allergens:** CRISPR has been applied to peanuts to reduce allergen-related proteins, lowering health risks.

Unlike traditional GMOs, genome editing can produce changes that are indistinguishable from natural mutations. This reduces regulatory burden in some countries, such as the United States and Japan, which exempt certain genome-edited crops from GMO regulations.

Precision breeding also includes base editors and prime editors, which modify single nucleotides without double-strand breaks. These tools expand the possibilities for targeted improvement while minimizing unintended effects.

3. Synthetic biology and advanced crop traits

Synthetic biology goes beyond editing existing genes. It designs entirely new biological pathways. In crops, synthetic biology can enable plants to produce new metabolites, enhance photosynthesis, or fix nitrogen more efficiently (Liu & Stewart, 2015).

Examples include:

- **Nutritional improvements:** Golden Rice was an early attempt at enhancing vitamin A through genetic engineering. Now, synthetic biology enables crops with multiple enhanced nutrients, such as rice with higher iron and zinc.
- **Improved photosynthesis:** Efforts to re-engineer photorespiration pathways in tobacco increased biomass yield by 40 percent in greenhouse trials (South et al., 2019).
- **Nitrogen use efficiency:** Synthetic pathways are being explored to reduce dependence on chemical fertilizers, which contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

These applications expand the role of crops from food production to biofactories for health and sustainability. They also challenge current agricultural systems by

introducing traits that could reshape farming practices.

4. RNA-based technologies and regulation of gene expression

RNA interference (RNAi) and related technologies regulate gene expression without altering the DNA sequence. RNAi uses small RNA molecules to silence target genes, often those of pests or pathogens (Baulcombe, 2015).

Examples include:

- **Virus-resistant papaya:** RNAi was used to silence viral genes, creating durable resistance against papaya ringspot virus.
- **Pest control:** Maize expressing RNA molecules that target rootworm genes showed improved resistance without chemical pesticides (Hu et al., 2016).
- **Gene regulation sprays:** Emerging RNA spray technologies can deliver gene-silencing RNAs externally, reducing the need for transgenic plants.

RNA-based tools provide flexibility. They allow temporary control of traits and offer alternatives for regions where permanent genetic modification faces public resistance.

5. Benefits for sustainability and nutrition

The next generation of biotechnology aims to deliver broader benefits than early GMOs.

- **Environmental sustainability:** Genome editing reduces pesticide and fertiliser use by improving resistance and nutrient efficiency. This can lower greenhouse gas emissions and protect biodiversity.
- **Climate resilience:** Crops with improved tolerance to heat, drought, or salinity are under development. Edited tomato varieties already show enhanced tolerance to high temperatures (Zsögön et al., 2018).
- **Nutritional security:** Biofortified crops, such as iron-rich rice or provitamin A cassava, directly address micronutrient deficiencies affecting billions of people worldwide.
- **Economic impact:** Precision technologies may lower input costs for farmers and reduce dependence on imported agrochemicals.

These benefits align crop biotechnology with the goals of sustainable development and global food security.

6. Challenges in regulation, acceptance, and equity

Despite progress, challenges remain.

- **Regulation:** Countries differ in their treatment of genome-edited

crops. While the United States and Brazil exempt certain edits from GMO rules, the European Union regulates them under strict GMO legislation (Eckerstorfer et al., 2019). This creates uncertainty for international trade.

- **Public acceptance:** Trust in biotechnology depends on transparency, communication, and evidence of consumer benefits. Past controversies around GMOs highlight the importance of involving stakeholders early.
- **Equity and access:** Most technologies are developed in high-income countries. Smallholder farmers in low- and middle-income regions may struggle to access seeds and training. Public-sector initiatives and open-source breeding programs can help close this gap.
- **Intellectual property:** Patents on genome-editing tools such as CRISPR-Cas create legal barriers. Shared licensing agreements and public investment will be needed to ensure equitable access.

These challenges must be addressed to realize the full potential of next-generation biotechnology.

7. Conclusion: The future of crop biotechnology

Crop biotechnology is moving beyond GMOs into a new era of precision and sustainability. Genome editing, synthetic biology, and RNA-based approaches provide powerful tools to address pressing agricultural challenges. Examples from rice, wheat, maize, and other crops show that these innovations are not distant promises but active research pipelines.

The benefits include reduced environmental impact, better nutrition, and improved resilience under climate stress. However, progress depends on supportive regulation, equitable access, and transparent communication with the public. Without these, advanced technologies risk repeating the controversies of the first GMO wave.

Future agriculture will likely combine digital farming, genome editing, and synthetic biology. If managed carefully, the next generation of biotechnology can contribute significantly to global food security while supporting sustainability goals. The opportunity is real, but it requires coordinated action across science, policy, and society.

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