CRISPR-Cas9-Mediated Crop Genome Editing: From Basic Research to Breeding Applications

Jennifer Mitchell*

Department of Plant Agriculture, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

*Corresponding author: Jennifer Mitchell, mitchell_1994@gmail.com

Abstract

The advent of CRISPR-Cas9 technology has catalyzed a paradigm shift in plant biology and agricultural biotechnology. This revolutionary genome-editing tool, derived from a prokaryotic adaptive immune system, offers unprecedented precision, efficiency, and versatility in modifying crop genomes. This review systematically charts the journey of CRISPR-Cas9 from a foundational research tool to a powerful driver of modern crop breeding. We begin by elucidating the fundamental mechanisms of the CRISPR-Cas9 system, including the engineering of Cas9 variants and the development of diverse delivery methods such as *Agrobacterium*-mediated transformation and ribonucleoprotein (RNP) complexes. We then explore its extensive applications in basic plant research, highlighting its role in functional genomics through targeted gene knockouts, transcriptional regulation, and epigenetic modifications. The core of this article focuses on the translational application of CRISPR-Cas9 in crop improvement, presenting landmark cases where the technology has been successfully deployed to enhance yield, nutritional quality, abiotic stress tolerance, and disease resistance in major cereal, vegetable, and fruit crops. We critically discuss the current global regulatory landscape for CRISPR-edited crops, which is pivotal for their commercial trajectory. Finally, we address persistent challenges-including off-target effects, delivery efficiency in recalcitrant species, and societal acceptance-and outline future perspectives, such as the integration of base editing, prime editing, and multiplexed editing strategies. By bridging the gap between laboratory innovation and field application, CRISPR-Cas9 is poised to make an indispensable contribution to global food security and sustainable agricultural systems.

Keywords

CRISPR-Cas9, Genome Editing, Crop Breeding, Functional Genomics, Agricultural Biotechnology, Food Security

1. Introduction

Feeding a projected global population of nearly 10 billion by 2050 poses one of the most formidable challenges of the 21st century. This challenge is exacerbated by climate change, dwinding arable land, and the environmental impact of intensive agricultural practices. Conventional plant breeding, while responsible for the Green Revolution's successes, is often a slow and labor-intensive process, limited by genetic drag and the reliance on random mutagenesis or interspecific crosses. The emergence of genetic engineering in the late 20th century offered new possibilities, but its adoption has been hampered by regulatory hurdles and public skepticism in many regions [1].

In this context, the development of clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR) and CRISPR-associated protein 9 (Cas9) has emerged as a transformative technology. First repurposed for genome editing in eukaryotic cells in 2012, CRISPR-Cas9 functions as a programmable "molecular scissor." Its simplicity-relying on a guide RNA (gRNA) to direct the Cas9 nuclease to a specific DNA sequence for a double-strand break (DSB)-has democratized genetic manipulation across biological disciplines [2].

In plant science, CRISPR-Cas9 has rapidly evolved from a tool for validating gene function to a central pillar of precision breeding. It enables targeted modifications-from simple gene knockouts to precise nucleotide substitutions-without introducing foreign DNA into the final product, a key distinction from traditional transgenic approaches. This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the CRISPR-Cas9-mediated crop genome editing pipeline. We will traverse from the fundamental principles and mechanistic adaptations of the system to its profound impact on basic plant research and its accelerating translation into commercially viable, improved crop varieties. By synthesizing recent advances and addressing ongoing challenges, this article underscores the pivotal role of CRISPR-Cas9 in shaping the future of agriculture [3].

2. The Fundamental Machinery of CRISPR-Cas9

2.1 Core Mechanism: A Programmable Nuclease

The native Type II CRISPR-Cas9 system from *Streptococcus pyogenes* provides the foundational framework for most plant editing applications. The system comprises two key components: the Cas9 endonuclease and a guide RNA

(gRNA). The gRNA is a chimeric RNA molecule, typically formed by fusing the CRISPR RNA (crRNA), which contains the ~20-nucleotide target-specific sequence, to a trans-activating crRNA (tracrRNA), which serves as a scaffold for Cas9 binding [4].

The mechanism is elegantly simple (Figure 1):

1.Programming: A synthetic gRNA is designed to be complementary to the target genomic DNA locus, which must be adjacent to a short, conserved sequence known as the Protospacer Adjacent Motif (PAM). For the commonly used SpCas9, the PAM sequence is 5'-NGG-3'.

2.Target Recognition: The Cas9-gRNA ribonucleoprotein (RNP) complex scans the genome. Upon finding a DNA sequence complementary to the gRNA and an adjacent PAM, the complex undergoes a conformational change.

3.Cleavage: Cas9 introduces a blunt-ended DSB approximately 3-4 base pairs upstream of the PAM site.

The cell's innate DNA repair machinery then attempts to fix the break, primarily through two pathways:

•Non-Homologous End Joining (NHEJ): An error-prone repair pathway that often results in small insertions or deletions (indels) at the cleavage site. If these indels occur within a protein-coding exon and shift the reading frame, they can effectively knockout the target gene.

•Homology-Directed Repair (HDR): A precise repair pathway that uses a donor DNA template with homology arms flanking the target site. This allows for the introduction of specific nucleotide changes, gene insertions, or gene replacements [5].

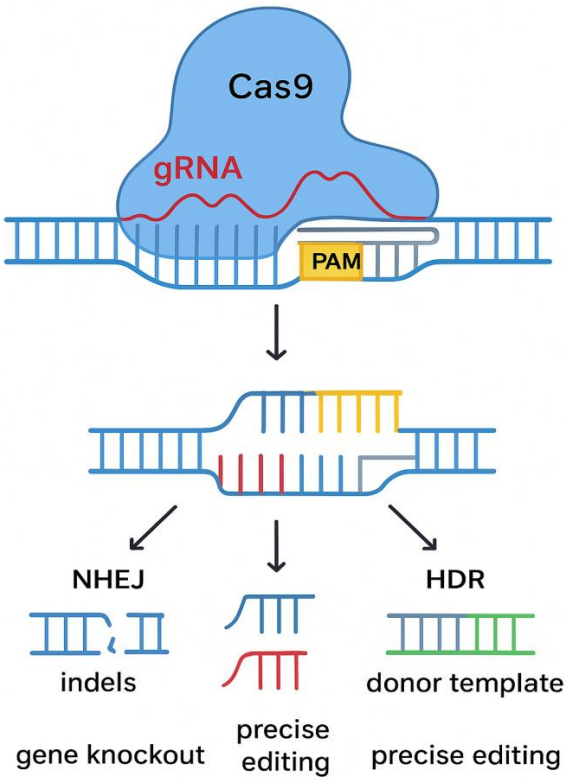

Figure 1. Schematic of the core CRISPR-Cas9 mechanism.

Figure 1 illustrates how CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing works; the entire diagram is actually a "gene modification flowchart." After CRISPR-Cas9 cuts DNA, cells use NHEJ (generating mutations) or HDR (precise repair) to complete gene editing.

2.2 Engineering and Expanding the CRISPR Toolbox

The original SpCas9 system has been extensively engineered to enhance its precision and versatility:

•High-Fidelity Cas9 Variants: Wild-type Cas9 can cleave DNA at off-target sites with similar sequences to the gRNA. To mitigate this, high-fidelity mutants like SpCas9-HF1 and eSpCas9(1.1) have been developed, which reduce off-target activity while maintaining robust on-target cleavage [6].

•PAM Relaxation: The requirement for an NGG PAM restricts the targeting space of the genome. Engineered variants

such as SpCas9-NG and xCas9 recognize broader PAM sequences (e.g., NG, GAA), significantly expanding the number of targetable sites.

•Cas9 Nickases and Dead Cas9 (dCas9): Mutating one of the two nuclease domains (HNH or RuvC) of Cas9 creates a "nickase" (nCas9) that cuts only one DNA strand. Using a pair of nickases targeting opposite strands can dramatically reduce off-target effects. Further mutation of both nuclease domains produces a catalytically "dead" Cas9 (dCas9). When fused to effector domains, dCas9 can be used for transcriptional activation (CRISPRa), repression (CRISPRi), or epigenetic modification without altering the underlying DNA sequence [7].

3. Delivery of CRISPR-Cas9 into Plant Cells

Efficient delivery of the CRISPR-Cas9 components into the plant cell nucleus is a critical step. The choice of method depends on the plant species, the desired outcome, and whether the edits are intended to be transient or heritable.

3.1 *Agrobacterium*-Mediated Transformation (T-DNA)

This is the most widely used method for stable transformation in dicot plants. The genes encoding Cas9 and gRNA(s) are cloned into a T-DNA binary vector and transferred into plant cells via *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* [8]. The T-DNA integrates into the plant genome, leading to the constitutive or inducible expression of the CRISPR machinery. While highly effective, this method can result in the random integration of the T-DNA, which may be subject to GMO regulations.

3.2 Biolistics (Gene Gun)

This method involves coating gold or tungsten microparticles with plasmid DNA or pre-assembled RNP complexes and physically bombarding them into plant cells or tissues. It is particularly valuable for transforming species that are recalcitrant to *Agrobacterium* infection, such as many monocots (e.g., wheat, maize). However, it can cause significant cellular damage and may lead to complex integration patterns.

3.3 Ribonucleoprotein (RNP) Complex Delivery

Direct delivery of pre-assembled Cas9 protein and *in vitro*-transcribed gRNA complexes is gaining traction. The RNP complex is active immediately upon entry into the cell and is rapidly degraded, minimizing off-target effects and preventing integration of foreign DNA into the genome. This DNA-free approach often produces edited plants that are devoid of any transgene, potentially simplifying their regulatory status (Woo et al., 2015). Delivery methods for RNPs include biolistics, polyethylene glycol (PEG)-mediated transfection of protoplasts, and, more recently, nanotechnology-based carriers [9].

Table 1. Comparison of major CRISPR-Cas9 delivery methods in plants.

Method	Principle	Advantages	Disadvantages	Best For
Agrobacterium	T-DNA transfer	Stable integration; high efficiency in dicots; multiplexing	Random T-DNA insertion; GMO classification	Stable transformation, dicots
Biolistics	Physical DNA/RNP delivery	Species-independent; no vector needed	Tissue damage; complex integration; high cost	Recalcitrant species, monocots
RNP (Protoplast)	Direct delivery of protein/RNA	DNA-free; minimal off-targets; rapid action	Protoplast regeneration is difficult for many species	DNA-free editing, species with robust protoplast systems
Virus-Based	Viral vector replication	High copy number; systemic movement; no tissue culture	Limited cargo capacity; potential viral spread	*Nicotiana benthamiana*, some vegetables

Table 1 compares several methods for delivering CRISPR-Cas9 into plant cells. It compiles the principles, advantages, disadvantages, and most suitable plant types for each method, like a quick reference table. The purpose of this table: Different plants and different experimental targets require different CRISPR delivery methods. This is a comparison table of CRISPR plant delivery methods, telling you: how to do each method, its advantages and disadvantages, and the plants that are suitable for it.

4. Applications in Basic Plant Research

CRISPR-Cas9 has become an indispensable tool for dissecting gene function and understanding complex biological pathways in plants.

4.1 High-Throughput Functional Genomics

The ability to generate targeted mutations efficiently allows for the creation of large-scale mutant libraries. By designing gRNAs targeting thousands of genes, researchers can perform forward genetic screens to identify genes involved in specific traits, such as disease susceptibility, hormone signaling, or nutrient uptake [10]. This is a more direct and comprehensive approach compared to traditional chemical or radiation mutagenesis.

4.2 Gene Regulation and Epigenetic Engineering

The dCas9 system has opened up new frontiers in controlling gene expression without altering the DNA sequence. By fusing dCas9 to transcriptional activators (e.g., VP64) or repressors (e.g., SRDX), researchers can precisely upregulate or downregulate endogenous genes. Furthermore, fusing dCas9 to epigenetic modifiers (e.g., DNA methyltransferases, histone acetyltransferases) enables the study of epigenetic marks on gene expression and heritable traits.

4.3 Multiplexed Editing for Pathway Engineering

Many agronomic traits are controlled by multiple genes or gene families. CRISPR-Cas9 systems can be engineered to express multiple gRNAs simultaneously, enabling the editing of several loci in a single transformation event. This multiplexing capability is crucial for studying redundant gene families, engineering complex metabolic pathways (e.g., for vitamin biosynthesis), or stacking multiple disease-resistance genes [11].

5. Translation to Crop Breeding and Improvement

The true power of CRISPR-Cas9 lies in its direct application to develop improved crop varieties with enhanced agronomic performance.

5.1 Yield and Quality Enhancement

•Grain Size and Weight: In rice, editing the *GS3* gene (a negative regulator of grain size) and *GW5* gene has successfully produced lines with significantly larger and heavier grains.

•Seed Shattering: Editing genes involved in seed shattering (e.g., *qSH1* in rice) can reduce seed loss during harvest, directly improving yield.

•Nutritional Quality: To address vitamin A deficiency, researchers have used CRISPRa to upregulate the endogenous *Psy* and *Lcy* genes in tomato, boosting provitamin A (beta-carotene) content. In maize, editing the *lw* gene has led to increased lysine content, enhancing the protein quality [12].

5.2 Biotic and Abiotic Stress Tolerance

•Disease Resistance: A landmark achievement was the knockout of the *MLO* gene in wheat, conferring broad-spectrum resistance to powdery mildew, a devastating fungal disease. Similarly, editing susceptibility genes like *OsSWEET14* in rice can confer resistance to bacterial blight.

•Herbicide Tolerance: Precise edits mimicking natural mutations have been introduced into the *acetolactate synthase (ALS)* gene in crops like rice and flax, conferring tolerance to specific herbicides and enabling more effective weed management.

•Drought and Salinity Tolerance: Researchers are targeting genes involved in stress-responsive pathways, such as those encoding osmotic regulators (e.g., *AREB1*), ion transporters (e.g., *OsHKT1;5*), and transcription factors, to develop crops with improved resilience to climate-induced stresses.

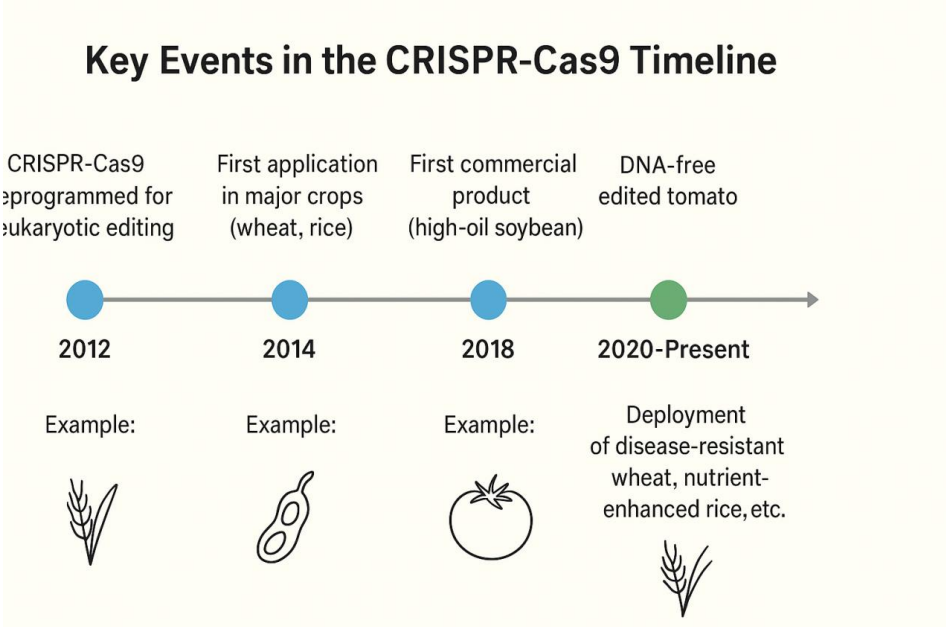

Figure 2. Timeline of key milestones in CRISPR-Cas9-Mediated crop improvement.

Figure 2 shows the chart is a timeline of key milestones in the development of CRISPR-Cas9 (2012 → present). It uses a horizontal timeline to depict the key events in the development of gene-editing technology, from breakthroughs in the

laboratory to agricultural applications and commercialization, allowing viewers to see at a glance the history of CRISPR's development in plant science. Key years and major events in the development of CRISPR-Cas9 in the fields of agriculture and plant biotechnology. This diagram shows the complete growth trajectory of CRISPR from laboratory technology → crop application → commercial product → large-scale agricultural deployment.

5.3 Domestication and De Novo Domestication

CRISPR-Cas9 enables the rapid domestication of wild crop relatives by targeting key domestication genes. For instance, editing just a few genes controlling plant architecture, seed dispersal, and photoperiod sensitivity in the wild groundcherry (*Physalis pruinosa*) has generated plants with more domesticated-like traits. This strategy provides access to the vast genetic diversity and stress resilience found in wild germplasm [13].

Beyond groundcherry, this approach is being applied to numerous orphan crops and wild species. For example, in wild tomato relatives (*Solanum pimpinellifolium*), editing genes related to fruit size and lycopene content has created lines with enhanced nutritional and agronomic traits. Similarly, efforts are underway to domesticate perennial grasses and legumes using CRISPR, which could lead to more sustainable cropping systems with reduced soil erosion and lower fertilizer requirements. The ability to rapidly introduce domestication traits into wild species not only broadens the genetic base of our crops but also helps in utilizing the adaptive traits preserved in wild germplasm, which are often lost during centuries of conventional domestication.

5.4 Enhancing Resource Use Efficiency (New Subsection)

Another critical application of CRISPR-Cas9 in crop breeding is improving resource use efficiency, particularly nitrogen and water use efficiency. Nitrogen use efficiency (NUE) is a prime target, as excessive nitrogen fertilizer application poses serious environmental challenges. Researchers have used CRISPR to modify genes involved in nitrogen uptake and assimilation. For instance, knocking out negative regulators of nitrogen assimilation in rice, such as *NGR5*, has been shown to enhance nitrogen utilization and reduce the need for chemical fertilizers [14]. Similarly, editing genes involved in ammonium transport (*AMT1*) in tomato has demonstrated potential for improving nitrogen uptake under low-nitrogen conditions.

Water use efficiency (WUE) is equally critical in the context of climate change and increasing water scarcity. CRISPR has been employed to manipulate stomatal density and patterning by editing genes like *EPFL9* in rice and *SPCH* in tomato, resulting in plants with reduced water loss through transpiration without compromising photosynthetic efficiency. These modifications help crops maintain yield under drought stress, providing a viable strategy for breeding climate-resilient varieties. The combination of improved NUE and WUE not only enhances sustainability but also reduces the environmental footprint of agriculture.

6. The Regulatory and Societal Landscape

The global regulatory framework for CRISPR-edited crops is evolving and remains heterogeneous.

- Product vs. Process-Based Regulation: Some countries, like the United States and Japan, have adopted a product-based approach. If the final crop product is indistinguishable from what could be achieved through conventional breeding or natural mutation and contains no foreign DNA, it may not be regulated as a GMO. In contrast, the European Union's Court of Justice ruled in 2018 that organisms obtained by mutagenesis techniques, including CRISPR-Cas9, are GMOs and subject to strict regulations, creating a significant barrier to commercialization [15].

- The Case of the GABA Tomato: The Sicilian Rouge GABA tomato, developed by Sanatech Seed in Japan, is a landmark case. It was engineered using CRISPR-Cas9 to knock out a gene suppressing GABA production, resulting in high GABA content, which may help lower blood pressure. It was the world's first direct-consumption CRISPR-edited food product and was commercialized without being subject to GMO regulations in Japan, highlighting a path forward for similar products.

This regulatory patchwork creates uncertainty for developers and investors. Clear, science-based, and proportionate regulations are essential for fostering innovation and ensuring that the benefits of this technology can reach farmers and consumers globally.

7. Challenges and Future Perspectives

Despite the remarkable progress, several challenges remain.

- Off-Target Effects: While improved Cas9 variants and RNP delivery have reduced this risk, careful gRNA design and comprehensive whole-genome sequencing are still required to confirm the specificity of edits.

- Delivery and Regeneration: Efficient transformation and regeneration protocols are still lacking for many agronomically important but recalcitrant crops (e.g., pulses, perennial trees).

- Public Perception and Acceptance: Clear communication about the technology, its safety, and its benefits compared to both conventional breeding and transgenic approaches is crucial for gaining public trust.

Future advancements will focus on:

1.Precision Editing Tools: The adoption of base editors and prime editors, which can directly convert one base pair to another or install small insertions/deletions without requiring a DSB or donor template, will enable more precise and predictable outcomes.

2.Multiplexed and Systems-Level Engineering: The ability to edit dozens of loci simultaneously will allow for the reprogramming of entire metabolic pathways or the introduction of complex trait stacks.

3.Integration with Speed Breeding and AI: Combining CRISPR-Cas9 with speed breeding techniques and AI-driven predictive models for gRNA design and phenotype prediction will dramatically accelerate the breeding cycle.

7.1 Beyond Technical Hurdles: Regulatory Harmonization and Public Engagement

While technical challenges such as off-target effects and delivery efficiency are actively being addressed, the regulatory and societal hurdles remain significant. The current global regulatory landscape is a patchwork, with countries like the United States and Brazil adopting product-based approaches, while the European Union subjects gene-edited crops to stringent GMO regulations. This lack of harmonization creates uncertainty for international trade and research collaboration.

To overcome these barriers, several initiatives are underway. The International Society for Genome Editing advocates for science-based, proportionate regulations that distinguish between transgenic organisms and those with edits indistinguishable from natural mutations. Furthermore, transparent public engagement and science communication are crucial. Initiatives such as public seminars, interactive web platforms, and collaboration with farmers and consumer groups can help demystify the technology and highlight its benefits for sustainability and food security. The successful commercialization of the GABA tomato in Japan demonstrates that public acceptance is achievable when the benefits are clearly communicated and directly relevant to consumers.

7.2 Future Perspectives: Next-Generation Editing Tools and Digital Integration

The future of CRISPR-based crop improvement lies in the integration of next-generation editing tools and digital agriculture. While base editors and prime editors represent significant advances, further engineering is underway to develop dual-base editors capable of converting C-to-G and A-to-T, and prime editors 2.0 with improved efficiency and reduced off-target effects. These tools will enable more complex and precise genetic rewiring, such as recreating beneficial haplotypes from wild relatives or engineering entirely novel metabolic pathways.

Moreover, the integration of CRISPR with speed breeding and artificial intelligence (AI) is set to revolutionize the breeding cycle. AI algorithms can predict optimal gRNA designs, forecast editing outcomes, and even identify novel gene targets based on multi-omics data. When combined with speed breeding-which uses controlled environments to accelerate generation turnover-this integrated approach can reduce the time from gene discovery to field evaluation from decades to just a few years. For instance, AI models trained on genome and phenome data can prioritize candidate genes for drought tolerance, which are then rapidly edited and validated in speed breeding facilities. This synergy between genome editing, digital technology, and accelerated breeding will be the cornerstone of next-neration crop improvement, enabling us to meet the dual challenges of population growth and climate change.

8. Conclusion

CRISPR-Cas9 has unequivocally established itself as a cornerstone technology for plant science and crop improvement. Its journey from a fundamental discovery in bacterial immunity to a precision breeding tool exemplifies the power of basic research to drive transformative applications. By enabling targeted, specific, and rapid genetic improvements, CRISPR-Cas9 offers a sustainable pathway to develop climate-resilient, nutritious, and high-yielding crops. As the technology continues to mature, supported by sensible regulations and public engagement, it holds immense promise for empowering breeders and securing a robust food supply for future generations.

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