

BIODEGRADABLE AND ECO-FRIENDLY NANOMATERIALS FOR SUSTAINABLE FARMING SYSTEMS

CHAPTER 8

Asiya Nisar¹

¹Department of Environmental Science, NIMS Institute of Allied Medical Science and Technology, NIMS University, Rajasthan, Jaipur India.

Manas K. Dhal²

²Department of Zoology, Shivaji College, University of Delhi, New Delhi 110027, India.

Email id: manasdhal@shivaji.du.ac.in

ABSTRACT: The growing demand for sustainable agricultural practices has accelerated the exploration of biodegradable and eco-friendly nanomaterials as alternatives to conventional agrochemicals. These innovative materials, derived from renewable resources such as biopolymers, plant extracts, and microbial biomass, are engineered to enhance nutrient delivery, pest control, and soil health while minimizing environmental harm. Unlike traditional nanomaterials, biodegradable variants degrade naturally into non-toxic components, thus reducing the risk of bioaccumulation and ecological toxicity. This chapter examines the synthesis, application, and environmental interactions of biodegradable nanomaterials within farming systems. It emphasizes their potential in nano-fertilizers, biopesticides, soil remediation, and biosensing technologies, which collectively contribute to resource efficiency and climate-smart agriculture. The discussion also highlights key factors such as biodegradation rates, characterization parameters, and regulatory implications essential for ensuring safe and effective integration of these materials into modern agroecosystems. Ultimately, biodegradable nanomaterials represent a transformative pathway toward a resilient and environmentally responsible agricultural future.

Keywords: Biodegradable nanomaterials, green nanotechnology, sustainable agriculture, nano-fertilizers, biopesticides, soil remediation, eco-friendly materials, environmental safety, nutrient management, nanoscience in farming systems.

INTRODUCTION

Modern agriculture faces the dual challenge of ensuring food security for a rapidly expanding global population while maintaining ecological balance and long-term soil productivity. The intensification of farming practices, coupled with the indiscriminate use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and plastics, has led to alarming environmental consequences, including soil nutrient depletion, contamination of water bodies, biodiversity loss, and elevated greenhouse gas emissions. These challenges underscore the urgent need to transition from input-intensive to knowledge- and technology-driven sustainable agricultural systems. In this context, nanotechnology has emerged as a transformative platform capable of addressing multiple agricultural challenges simultaneously enhancing efficiency, precision, and sustainability. When employed responsibly, it can minimize resource wastage and reduce the ecological footprint of modern farming.

Among the various branches of nanotechnology, biodegradable and eco-friendly nanomaterials have gained significant attention as a sustainable alternative to conventional nanomaterials. These innovative materials are designed to perform specific agricultural functions such as nutrient delivery, pest control, or soil remediation and subsequently degrade into harmless, often organic, compounds without leaving long-lasting residues in the environment. Such materials, derived from renewable natural sources like chitosan, starch, cellulose, alginate, and polyhydroxyalkanoates, are not only biodegradable but also biocompatible and non-toxic (Verma *et al.*, 2025). Their synthesis through green chemistry routes or biological processes further reduces the use of hazardous solvents and minimizes energy consumption, making them highly suitable for eco-conscious agricultural applications.

The agricultural relevance of biodegradable nanomaterials extends across multiple dimensions of the food production system. In soil nutrient management, these nanomaterials can be engineered as nano-fertilizers that release nutrients in a slow and controlled manner, ensuring synchronization with plant demand and reducing nutrient losses through leaching or volatilization. Similarly, in pest and disease management, biodegradable nanocarriers can be used to encapsulate bio-pesticides or plant-based extracts, offering sustained and targeted delivery that minimizes off-target effects and reduces the total pesticide load in ecosystems (Singh *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, in postharvest management, biodegradable nanocoatings can be employed to extend the shelf-life of fruits and vegetables by

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modulating gas exchange and preventing microbial spoilage, thereby enhancing food security and reducing postharvest losses.

Despite these promising advancements, several research gaps hinder the widespread adoption of biodegradable nanomaterials in agriculture. One critical gap lies in the lack of standardized protocols for assessing the degradation kinetics, long-term environmental fate, and bioavailability of these materials under diverse field conditions. Most existing studies are limited to laboratory-scale evaluations, which often fail to capture the complex interactions that occur in real agroecosystems. Another gap pertains to the limited understanding of how these nanomaterials influence soil microbial communities and nutrient cycles over time. Although initial findings suggest minimal toxicity, comprehensive risk assessments and life cycle analyses are needed to ensure their safety for soil biota, crops, and ultimately, human health. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to develop cost-effective and scalable production technologies that can enable farmers especially those in developing countries to access biodegradable nano-based agricultural inputs. The socio-economic implications, including market readiness, farmer perception, and policy support, also remain underexplored.

The overarching objective of this chapter is to explore the role of biodegradable and eco-friendly nanomaterials in promoting sustainable agricultural systems, emphasizing their synthesis, functionality, and environmental implications. It seeks to analyze the scientific basis for their effectiveness in enhancing crop productivity while maintaining ecological integrity and resource efficiency. Moreover, this discussion aims to identify the existing challenges and research priorities that need to be addressed to facilitate the safe and large-scale implementation of these technologies. By highlighting both the potential and limitations, this chapter endeavors to provide a holistic understanding of how biodegradable nanotechnology can be strategically integrated into modern agricultural practices, aligning with the global vision of achieving sustainable food production, environmental restoration, and climate resilience.

Synthesis and Nature of Biodegradable Nanomaterials

Biodegradable nanomaterials are defined by their ability to degrade into environmentally harmless products through microbial, enzymatic, or physicochemical pathways. The primary objective in their synthesis is to ensure that degradation occurs after they have fulfilled their agricultural function. These nanomaterials are typically derived from biological feedstocks such as chitin, starch, cellulose, plant extracts, proteins, and microbial polymers. The use of green synthesis methods employing plant extracts, bacterial or fungal cultures, or natural reducing agents eliminates toxic reagents and reduces energy consumption (Kumar *et al.*, 2022). For instance, plant-mediated synthesis of zinc oxide or silver nanoparticles utilizes phytochemicals as both reducing and stabilizing agents, yielding particles that are more biocompatible and less ecotoxic than their chemically produced counterparts.

Another major approach involves polymeric and biopolymeric nanoparticles, such as those made from chitosan or polylactic acid (PLA). These nanomaterials act as carriers or encapsulating agents for fertilizers, micronutrients, or pesticides. Their degradation rate can be tuned by modifying polymer composition, molecular weight, and environmental conditions such as pH and temperature. According to Verma, Sarkar, and Saha (2025), biodegradable polymeric particles not only improve the release efficiency of agrochemicals but also enhance soil health and microbial diversity. This dual functionality supporting productivity while protecting the environment makes them essential tools in sustainable agriculture.

The following diagram conceptually summarizes the life cycle and functional role of biodegradable nanomaterials in farming systems:

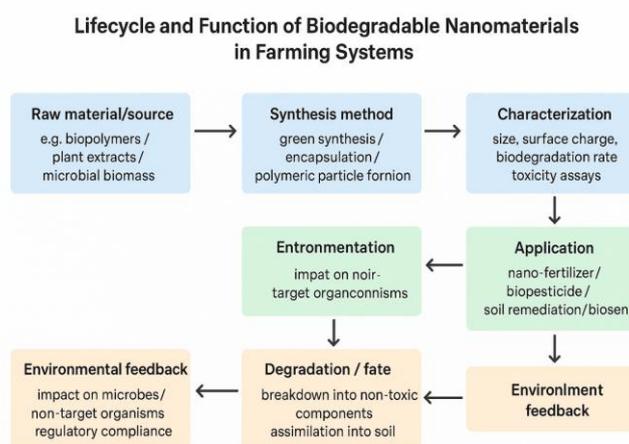


Fig. 1. Lifecycle and Functions of Biodegradable Nanomaterials in Agriculture. *(Textual description for insertion).*

- 1. Raw Material Sources:** Plant biomass, polysaccharides, microbial polymers
- 2. Synthesis Routes:** Green reduction, encapsulation, or polymerization
- 3. Agricultural Applications:** Nutrient delivery, pest control, soil remediation, biosensing
- 4. Functional Phase:** Enhanced nutrient uptake, stress resistance, improved yield
- 5. Degradation Phase:** Conversion into water, CO₂, and biomass without toxic residues

Applications in Sustainable Farming Systems

The practical applications of biodegradable nanomaterials in agriculture are broad and interlinked with sustainable farming goals. One of their most studied uses is as nanofertilizers, which improve nutrient-use efficiency by ensuring a slow, targeted release of essential macro- and micronutrients. Nanofertilizers based on biodegradable carriers like chitosan or starch nanoparticles can adhere to root zones and release nutrients in synchrony with plant uptake, significantly reducing nutrient losses to leaching and runoff. Studies in African and Asian agroecosystems demonstrated that biodegradable nanofertilizers enhanced yield by 20–30% while decreasing chemical fertilizer requirements (Khundi *et al.*, 2025).

Another key application is in the formulation of biopolymeric nanopesticides. These are eco-friendly carriers for botanical pesticides, microbial biocontrol agents, or essential oils. Encapsulation within biodegradable nanopolymers such as alginate or cellulose protects the active ingredient from degradation due to light and temperature while ensuring sustained release. This minimizes non-target toxicity and environmental contamination. Kumar *et al.* (2022) reported that chitosan-based nanopesticides were effective in controlling fungal diseases at half the conventional dose while exhibiting negligible toxicity to beneficial soil organisms.

In soil remediation, biodegradable nanomaterials offer solutions to one of agriculture's greatest challenges: polluted soils. Green-synthesized metal oxide nanoparticles, carbon-based nanomaterials, and polymeric composites can immobilize or degrade pesticide residues and heavy metals. Their porous structure enhances adsorption capacity, while their degradability ensures they do not persist in soil ecosystems (Singh *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, nanomaterials synthesized through green routes promote microbial activity, improve soil aggregation, and enhance nutrient cycling, thereby contributing to long-term soil fertility.

Emerging studies also indicate the potential of biodegradable nanomaterials in plant stress management. Biogenic silicon or carbon nanomaterials have been shown to increase plants' resistance to drought and salinity by modulating antioxidant enzyme activity and maintaining osmotic balance (Giri *et al.*, 2023). Finally, these materials are being integrated into biosensors for real-time monitoring of soil nutrients, pathogens, and pollutants. The combination of biodegradability with high sensitivity makes them ideal for precision agriculture systems where sustainability and efficiency must coexist.

Environmental and Ecotoxicological Considerations

While biodegradable nanomaterials offer promising benefits, their environmental fate and potential ecotoxicological effects warrant critical attention. The assumption that “biodegradable” equates to “safe” is not universally valid; the degradation process may yield intermediate products whose impact on soil and water ecosystems remains underexplored (Wang *et al.*, 2021). The rate and mechanism of degradation depend on numerous factors, including polymer composition, soil moisture, microbial activity, and temperature. For instance, chitosan nanoparticles may degrade rapidly under moist, acidic conditions but more slowly in alkaline soils. Therefore, context-specific studies are required to determine optimal formulations for different agroecological zones.

The interaction with soil microbiota is another key concern. Soil microorganisms drive nutrient cycling and organic matter decomposition, and their balance can be disturbed by nanoparticle exposure. However, studies comparing biodegradable and non-biodegradable nanomaterials have consistently shown lower toxicity for the former. Biodegradable nanocarriers such as polylactic acid or starch-based nanoparticles generally enhance microbial biomass and enzymatic activity, indicating that they are assimilated as carbon sources during decomposition (Biotech Sustainable Materials, 2024).

Another issue relates to the bioaccumulation and translocation of nanomaterials within plants. Although most biodegradable nanoparticles degrade before uptake, certain formulations especially metal-based nanocomposites can translocate from roots to shoots and grains. Comprehensive risk assessments, therefore, must consider both the benefits and possible trade-offs of each formulation. Regulatory frameworks currently lag behind scientific advances, with only a few guidelines addressing nanoformulations explicitly in agricultural settings. Agencies worldwide are beginning to adopt risk assessment protocols based on life-cycle analysis and safe-by-design principles (Verma *et al.*, 2025).

The following table provides a concise summary of commonly studied biodegradable nanomaterials, their sources, agricultural applications, observed benefits, and challenges.

Table 1: Examples of Biodegradable and Eco-friendly Nanomaterials in Sustainable Agriculture.

Nanomaterial Type	Source / Synthesis	Agricultural Function	Benefits Observed	Challenges / Limitations
Chitosan nanoparticles	Derived from chitin via ionic gelation	Nutrient and pesticide carrier	Enhanced germination, stress tolerance, minimal toxicity	Cost of extraction, variable degradation rates
Starch or cellulose nanoparticles	Green synthesis from plant biomass	Controlled nutrient release, biopesticide delivery	Reduced fertilizer runoff, biodegradable packaging	Susceptibility to moisture, stability under UV
Polyhydroxyalkanoate (PHA) composites	Microbial fermentation products	Slow-release fertilizer coating, mulch films	Excellent biodegradability, good mechanical strength	High production cost
Green-synthesized metal oxide NPs (ZnO, Fe ₂ O ₃)	Plant/microbial reduction methods	Nano-fertilizers, biosensors, soil remediation	Improved nutrient uptake, antimicrobial activity	Potential metal ion accumulation
Polylactic acid (PLA) nanocarriers	Biopolymer from corn starch fermentation	Encapsulation of micronutrients and pesticides	Safe degradation into lactic acid, eco-friendly packaging	Limited field-scale testing

Sources: Verma *et al.* (2025); Kumar *et al.* (2022); Singh *et al.* (2023); Khundi *et al.* (2025)

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES AND CONCLUSION

The integration of biodegradable and eco-friendly nanomaterials into sustainable farming systems aligns closely with the global objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to zero hunger, clean water, responsible production, and climate action. Future advancements will depend on interdisciplinary collaboration between materials scientists, agronomists, environmentalists, and policymakers. The most promising direction is the development of “safe-by-design” nanomaterials engineered from renewable resources with predetermined degradation profiles and minimal environmental persistence. These materials could be combined with digital tools such as precision sensors and AI-driven data analytics to optimize input use and reduce waste.

Equally important is the establishment of standardized protocols for toxicity testing, field validation, and certification of nano-enabled agricultural products. Long-term studies under real field conditions are necessary to assess cumulative effects, persistence, and economic viability. Furthermore, scaling up green synthesis using agricultural residues and waste biomass could lower costs while closing the loop between production and waste recycling, enhancing the circular economy in agriculture.

Public awareness and policy frameworks must evolve simultaneously to encourage adoption while ensuring safety. Transparent communication of benefits and risks can improve social acceptance of nanotechnology in agriculture. Institutions could incentivize farmers through subsidies or credits for adopting biodegradable nano-inputs that reduce chemical load and enhance soil health.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, biodegradable and eco-friendly nanomaterials stand as a cornerstone technology for sustainable farming in the twenty-first century. Their capacity to increase input efficiency, reduce pollution, and support ecological balance makes them integral to the transformation of global agriculture. The path forward lies in coupling innovation with responsibility developing nanomaterials that serve both productivity and planetary health. As Verma *et al.* (2025) aptly note, biodegradable nanotechnology offers not just a scientific advancement but a philosophical shift toward harmony between technology and nature.

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