SUNSHINE AGRICULTURE
e-Newsletter

ISSN (E): 2583 – 0821

Sun. Agri.:e- Newsletter, (2026) *6*(7), 75-76

Article ID: 629

Integrated Management Practices in Sugarcane Farming: A Blueprint for Sustainability

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Open Access

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Available online at
www.sunshineagriculture.vitalbiotech.org

Article History
Received: 10.07.2026
Revised: 15.07.2026
Accepted: 20.07.2026

INTRODUCTION

The Sustainability Challenge

India is the world's second-largest producer of sugarcane, a vital crop for sugar, ethanol, and bioelectricity. However, traditional cultivation methods rely heavily on excessive synthetic fertilizers, vast quantities of seed setts, and inefficient flood irrigation. This intensive approach rapidly depletes groundwater reserves, degrades soil fertility, and ultimately threatens agricultural profitability. To secure the long-term future of this crop, the industry must pivot toward integrated, sustainable management practices.

The Sustainable Sugarcane Initiative (SSI)

A major breakthrough in cultivation is the Sustainable Sugarcane Initiative (SSI), which aims to produce "more with less." Instead of planting massive amounts of cane stalks directly into the field, SSI utilizes a single-bud chip technique. This dramatically reduces seed requirements by up to 90%, slashing upfront seed costs. Seedlings are raised in controlled nurseries and transplanted into the main field with a much wider spacing (typically 5 by 2 feet). This wide spatial geometry minimizes plant competition, improves canopy aeration, and maximizes sunlight interception, allowing individual plants to produce 20 to 25 millable canes compared to just 10 to 15 in conventional, crowded rows.

Integrated Nutrient and Water Management

Sugarcane is a long-duration, high-biomass crop, it extracts a massive amount of nutrients from the soil. Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) addresses this by balancing synthetic chemical fertilizers with rich organic inputs like farmyard manure and pressmud (a valuable sugar processing byproduct). Furthermore, incorporating biological inoculants such as *Azotobacter* and Phosphate Solubilizing Bacteria (PSB) enhances nutrient uptake naturally, restores the soil microbiome and reduces the crop's dependence on synthetic nitrogen.

Water scarcity is addressed by eliminating wasteful flood irrigation in favor of subsurface drip irrigation. Drip systems deliver moisture directly to the active root zone, elevating water-use efficiency to between 80% and 95%. Additionally, in arid regions, the application of superabsorbent polymers like Pusa Hydrogel acts as a subterranean reservoir, releasing moisture slowly and helping the crop survive dry spells during its long formative phase.

Carbon Farming via Trash Mulching

Harvesting sugarcane generates an immense 10 to 12 tonnes of crop residue per hectare. Instead of burning this trash which contributes to severe particulate air pollution retaining it as an undisturbed surface mulch is a highly effective carbon farming practice. Mulching physically suppresses weed emergence, cuts seasonal irrigation needs by up to 25% by preventing evaporation, and slowly decomposes to enrich the Soil Organic Carbon (SOC) pool, directly supporting global climate mitigation goals.

Biological Pest Control A continuous 12 to 18-month cropping cycle makes sugarcane highly vulnerable to pests like tissue-boring caterpillars and sap-sucking leafhoppers. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) limits the use of harsh, broad-spectrum insecticides in favor of biological control. Releasing natural enemies, such as *Trichogramma chilonis* wasps to destroy borer eggs, and *Epiricania melanoleuca* to manage the sugarcane leafhopper, provides highly effective, ecologically sound pest suppression.

CONCLUSION

Transitioning to these integrated practices ensures a resilient and profitable future for the Indian sugarcane sector. By combining the smart geometry of SSI, holistic nutrient cycling, precision micro-irrigation, and biological pest control, farmers can significantly lower their cultivation costs while boosting yields and safeguarding natural resources.