

Is Tea Sustainable? Three Questions, Not One

From the Teas.co.uk wiki

Is tea sustainable, in summary: Sustainability is three questions, not one: environment mixed, labour the hard one, packaging fixable. What the certifications actually deliver.

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for Is Tea Sustainable? Three Questions, Not One. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/is-tea-sustainable/>*

Is tea sustainable? In short, "it depends", and on three separate things, not one. Here is the non greenwashed answer. This sits at the centre of the ethics cluster beside [ethical tea sourcing](#).

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in May 2026.

It is three questions, not one

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Sustainability splits into labour and livelihoods, farming and environment, and packaging and carbon. A tea can be good on one and poor on another, so "is tea sustainable" has no single yes or no.

The environmental picture

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Tea farming can be relatively low impact compared with many crops, but monoculture, deforestation pressure, water and agrochemicals are real concerns where it is grown badly, and climate change is now a material risk to growing regions, see [tea and the environment](#).

The labour picture

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Tea is labour intensive and often grown in lower income regions with a documented history of low pay and poor conditions in parts of the industry, the issue marketing most often skirts, see [tea farming and workers](#).

The packaging picture

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Plastic in some tea bags, mixed material packaging and waste are the drinker facing impact, and the most directly improvable one, see [plastic in tea bags](#) and [compostable bags](#).

Do certifications fix it

Source: [Teas.co.uk](#). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Do certifications fix it, Is Tea Sustainable? Three Questions, Not One. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/is-tea-sustainable/>*

Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance and organic each help with part of it, none with all of it; a useful signal to prefer a product, not a total guarantee, see [Fairtrade](#).

What a drinker can actually do

Favour transparent, credibly certified brands, choose loose leaf or verified plastic free bags, pay a fair price rather than always the cheapest, do not waste tea, and be sceptical of single sweeping claims.

The clear takeaway

Tea can be reasonably sustainable or not depending on labour, farming and packaging; there is no single badge, only meaningfully better choices, and a drinker nudges it at the margin, see [ethical tea sourcing](#).

Is tea sustainable, at a glance

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Question	Answer
Three questions Environment, labour and packaging, not one "is it ethical"	
Environment	Mixed: land/water use and climate exposure, varies hugely by estate
Labour	The hardest issue: low wages and poor conditions persist in parts of the trade
Packaging	Plastic in some bags; loose leaf sidesteps it
Certifications	Help but do not fix it; useful signal, not a guarantee
Favour transparent sourcing in the loose leaf range or the full tea shop .	

Reference noted

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- [Fairtrade Foundation: Tea](#)
- [Ethical Tea Partnership](#)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · One good loose-leaf in a clean teapot beats five exotic bags drunk in a hurry.

More tea reading

- [International Tea Day](#)
- [Why is tea getting more expensive](#)
- [How to avoid plastic in your tea](#)
- [Loose leaf vs tea bags](#)

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