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.

Is tea sustainable? In short, "it depends", and on three separate things, not one. Here is the non greenwashed answer. It is the hub of the ethics pages, next to ethical tea sourcing.

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

It is three questions, not one

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Fairtrade Foundation: Tea
- Ethical Tea Partnership

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · One tea you finish beats five exotic bags left to go stale in the cupboard.

More tea reading

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

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea

- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
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