Tea and the Environment: What Actually Counts

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea and the environment, in summary:** A UK guide to tea's environmental footprint: the kettle dominates per-cup carbon, supply chain still matters, what habit changes help most.

Tea's environmental footprint is real but often misrepresented in both directions. Here is the breakdown. This sits in the ethics cluster beside is tea sustainable.

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

Farming impact

Tea can be relatively low impact per cup compared with many drinks, but intensive monoculture, agrochemicals, soil and water pressure are real where it is grown poorly, see organic tea.

Land and biodiversity

Plantation expansion has historically pressured forests and habitats in some regions; shade-grown plots preserve more than full-sun ones, and certification schemes target exactly this, see Rainforest Alliance.

The kettle is part of it

A complete footprint includes use: boiling more water than you need is a recurring, avoidable energy cost, and on a UK grid it is often the single biggest per-cup contributor (roughly 50-100g CO2 just for the boil), larger than the tea itself, see best kettle for tea.

Packaging and waste

Plastic in some bags, mixed packaging and over wrapping are the most drinker visible and improvable impacts, see plastic in tea bags and compostable bags.

Transport

Shipping is usually a smaller share of tea footprint than farming or kettle energy, because bulk sea freight is so efficient; "food miles" alone is a weak proxy here.

What genuinely helps

Boil only the water you need, choose loose leaf or verified plastic free bags, avoid waste, compost used bags, and support credibly certified transparent brands, see loose leaf vs bags.

The clear takeaway

Tea's environmental footprint is moderate and improvable; the biggest everyday levers are kettle energy and packaging waste, not vague guilt, see is tea sustainable.

The essentials: Tea's environmental footprint

Element	Footprint detail
Tea growing	Plantation agriculture with associated land-use, pesticide use (varies), and water use; modest compared to coffee or cocoa per kilo
Processing	Energy for withering, firing, drying; small per-cup contribution
Transport	Sea freight from origin countries to UK; relatively low per-cup CO2 because of bulk efficiency
Packaging	Cardboard outer plus tea bag material; plastic content largely phased out by 2025
The kettle	Surprisingly significant; boiling water for one cup of tea uses 50-100g CO2 equivalent depending on grid mix
Waste	Used tea bags compost well; outer packaging mostly recyclable
How tea compares	Per cup, tea is lower carbon than coffee (especially espresso) or fizzy drinks; comparable to plain water boiled in a kettle

Lower-footprint picks

For certified, lower-footprint tea, Clipper, Pukka or Teapigs; loose leaf in larger packs cuts packaging, and used bags compost well. But the single biggest lever is your kettle: boil only what you need, and descale it. Browse the full tea shop.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Free UK delivery starts at £35, which is two or three good bags. Build a small order rather than a single splurge.

More tea reading

For broader context see the zero waste tea guide and is tea sustainable. For Fairtrade context see the Fairtrade guide. For loose-leaf packaging-reduction see the loose-leaf tea overview. For tea growing context see the tea growing regions.

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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