Will There Be a Tea Shortage?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The short version:** A UK guide to tea supply: no empty-shelf shortage expected, gradual price rises continuing, climate-disrupted harvests. Why stockpiling doesn't work.

"Will there be a tea shortage?" The answer is less alarming than the headlines. Read it with our climate and cost pages, starting with climate change and tea.

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

Supply and climate details reflect public reporting as at May 2026; every figure is an estimate and may shift. Not financial advice.

UK tea shortage 2026 at a glance

Question	Answer
Will UK shelves run out of tea?	No; mass-market black tea broadly available
Will tea cost more?	Yes; gradual price rises continuing through 2020s
Will quality drop at the cheap end?	Likely; cheaper grades may shift to less premium leaf
What's causing supply pressure?	Climate-disrupted Assam/Kenya/Sri Lanka harvests, cost inflation, trade-policy shocks
2024 India tea output	Fell meaningfully vs prior year due to rainfall pattern shifts
Yield reduction in bad years	Reporting suggests up to ~30% yield cuts in drought-hit Assam
Climate projection (mid-century)	Substantial proportion of current tea-growing land may be unsuitable
Should consumers stockpile?	No; tea fades, hoarding wastes money
Premium/single-origin scarcity	Varies a lot from year to year; expect availability gaps for specific teas
Practical response	Buy what you'll drink in a few months from transparent sources

The short answer

A real shortage that empties UK shelves of tea looks unlikely for now. The global supply chain is diversified across many producer countries and UK demand volume is softening, so the pressure shows up as price

and quality rather than empty aisles. Think "more expensive", not "unavailable", and the right response to gradual price rises is quite different from the right response to actual scarcity.

What is actually tightening

Several pressures are stacking at once. Climate disruption: Assam, Kenya and Sri Lanka are seeing erratic rainfall, droughts and extreme heat that cut yields and dent quality, and India's output fell meaningfully in 2024 on rainfall-pattern shifts. Cost inflation: freight, packaging, energy and labour have all risen sharply since 2020. Trade-policy shocks: new tariffs and restrictions add friction. And demand is softening, but not as fast as supply pressure rises, so the net effect is upward on price. None of it is a single dramatic event; it is steady tightening that surfaces as smaller packs, fewer offers and gradual price rises. See why tea costs more.

Why no empty shelves

The structural conditions for a category-wide UK shortage simply are not there. Tea is grown across India, Kenya, Sri Lanka, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Argentina and several African producers, so a bad harvest in one region does not collapse global supply. The big brand parents (Tata, ABF, Lipton Teas and Infusions, Bettys and Taylors, Unilever) have the scale to shift sourcing between countries as needed. And softening UK demand keeps the supply-demand balance from turning catastrophic. The upshot is gradual cost and quality pressure, not product unavailability.

Where scarcity is genuinely real

The exception is specific premium and single-origin tea. Particular high quality teas (premium Darjeeling first flush, named estate gyokuro, specific Wuyi rock oolongs, vintage pu erh) really do vary year to year with a single region's harvest. A poor Darjeeling first-flush year means that tea really is scarce, and a named estate may be unavailable until the next harvest. That is the opposite of the mass-market pattern: scarcity hits specific products rather than the category. Anyone committed to a particular premium tea should expect occasional gaps and not treat one harvest as guaranteed. See single origin.

Why stockpiling doesn't work

Stockpiling against a shortage does not work, for two reasons. First, tea fades: black tea loses flavour over a year or two even stored well, green faster (six to twelve months), white and oolong in between, and only fully-fermented Pu-erh actively improves with age, so multi-year hoards just mean drinking progressively stale tea. Second, the pressure is cost, not availability, so buying now does not hedge the real concern: if tea costs ten per cent more next year that is manageable, whereas a stale hoard is often the worse outcome. Buy what you will drink in three to six months and replenish. See how long tea lasts.

What might trigger an actual shortage

For balance, what could actually cause a real UK shortage rather than continued cost pressure? A coordinated, multi-country disruption, climate catastrophe or conflict hitting India, Kenya, Sri Lanka and China at once, since single-country trouble does not. A single severe season hitting Indian and Kenyan

harvests together could dent global supply for a quarter or two, with recovery in seasons not years. A severe import-restriction shock, rather than gradual tariffs, could hit specific suppliers, though the UK could source elsewhere. Or a sharp currency devaluation making imports briefly very dear. None looks likely in mid-2026, but the cumulative tail risk is not zero, which warrants general food-security awareness, not tea-stockpiling.

What to buy

For reliable supply through the pressure buy mainstream brands with scale, Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips or Tetley. For better per-cup value as bag prices rise buy loose-leaf tea. For ethical buying buy Clipper, Pukka or Fairtrade tea. For single-origin (accepting year-to-year variability) buy single-estate tea.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (cultivation and trade)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · If a tea on this page appeals, try it once while it is available. You learn more from one cup than from twenty supply forecasts.

More tea reading

For the cost analysis see why is tea getting more expensive. For climate context see climate change and tea and tea and drought. For tariff effects see tea tariffs explained. For storage and shelf life see how long does tea last. For sustainable buying see is tea sustainable.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
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