# Tea and Drought

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The short version:** A UK guide to tea-and-drought: up to 30% yield reduction in bad years, Kenya/Assam/Sri Lanka affected, gradual cost rises, climate adaptation lagging.

Of all climate pressures on tea, drought is the most direct. This sits in the climate and cost cluster beside climate change and tea.

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

*Market and climate information based on public reporting, accurate as of May 2026; figures are estimates and change. Not financial advice.*

## Drought and tea at a glance

| Detail | Fact |
|---|---|
| Why drought matters most | Tea bushes need consistent moisture; drought reduces flush volume substantially |
| Drought yield impact | Up to ~30% reduction in bad years (Assam, Kenya reporting) |
| Major drought-affected regions | Kenya, Assam (India), Sri Lanka, parts of southern China |
| Kenya production volatility | Multi-year droughts 2017-2022 caused significant yield variability |
| Assam 2024 issue | Rainfall pattern shifts produced substantial output decline |
| Workforce affected | Tea industry employs ~13m people globally; large rural populations |
| Flavour impact | Drought-stressed leaf produces less consistent character |
| Mitigation approach | Drought-resistant cultivar selection, irrigation, agronomy |
| Mid-century projection | Substantial proportion of current tea-growing land may become unsuitable |
| Consumer-level effect | Gradual cost rises, occasional supply tightness for specific regions |

## Why drought matters most

Of all the climate pressures on tea, drought is the most direct. Tea (Camellia sinensis) is a moisture-loving plant that needs consistent rainfall through the growing season, because it is harvested in repeated flushes and each flush requires the bush to push fresh leaves using soil water. Drought forces the bush into

conservation mode, slowing growth, dropping older leaves and halting new flushes, so you get fewer cups per acre and less consistent chemistry in the leaves that do form. Bad drought years can cut yields by up to around 30%. It is also harder to mitigate than heat: irrigation at the scale of a major region is expensive, and drought-resistant cultivars exist but are adopted slowly. Recovery to full production takes a season or two after good rain returns.

### Where it has hit hardest

Several regions have taken the worst of it. Kenya saw multi-year drought from 2017 to 2022 with significant yield variability, especially 2017 and 2021. Assam suffered an output decline in 2024 from rainfall-pattern shifts, unseasonable drought followed by intense rain. Sri Lanka's drought combined with its 2022 economic crisis to disrupt production, and changing rainfall is affecting Yunnan and Fujian in southern China. Each region has hundreds of thousands of workers dependent on the harvest, so these are local economic crises as much as supply-chain problems. See Kenya and climate.

### The flavour effect

Drought-stressed leaf brews to a less consistent character. Reduced, irregular flush means you cannot rely on year-on-year similarity, so the same named blend can taste meaningfully different season to season. The stressed leaf's chemistry shifts, catechins, theaflavins and amino acids change proportion, often giving a flatter, less complex cup. And drought followed by heavy rain produces a kind of flush whiplash, abnormal leaf volume without normal development time, which brews thin. For drinkers it shows as gradual change in a familiar blend rather than a dramatic single-year jump, and brand recipe tweaks can mask but not erase it. See taste shifts.

### The knock-on cost

Lower supply against steady demand pushes prices up through ordinary economics. Producer-level auction prices rise first (Mombasa, Kolkata, Colombo), then flow through wholesale and retail with a typical six-to-twelve-month lag, which is part of why UK shelf prices climbed through the early 2020s. Brands respond differently: the big scale brands absorb more of it, smaller brands pass more through, and supermarket own-brand often hits hardest because its price-competitive positioning leaves the least margin to absorb. See why tea costs more.

### The response, and the 2050 outlook

Adaptation is emerging across the chain: drought-resistant cultivars, drip irrigation where feasible, planting at higher elevations, and better soil-water retention at origin; premium contracts for climate-resilient estates and certification-funded adaptation programmes among buyers; and, for drinkers, supporting transparent ethical brands that fund that work. It is improving but lagging the pace of change, which is the source of the continuing volatility. Looking to 2050, modelling suggests a substantial share of today's tea land could become marginal, with production likely shifting to higher elevations and cooler areas over the next 25 years. That is planning-relevant agricultural adaptation rather than doom, but the timeline is tight. See the future of tea and is tea sustainable.

### What to buy

For brands with diversified supply better-placed to ride regional drought buy Yorkshire Tea, Twinings, PG Tips or Tetley. For ethical buying that funds resilience buy Clipper, Pukka or Fairtrade tea. For origins relatively less drought-pressured buy Darjeeling or Chinese tea.

### Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (cultivation and trade)

FROM THE CURATOR

*teas* · Match the tea to the moment. A 6am cup and a 4pm cup do not need to be the same brew.

### More tea reading

For broader climate context see climate change and tea. For country impacts see Kenya tea and climate and the Assam tea region. For the cost analysis see why is tea getting more expensive. For the shortage question see will there be a tea shortage. For future projections see the future of tea 2050.

### More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag


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