Assamica vs Sinensis: Two Varieties, One Plant

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Assamica vs sinensis, in summary:** One species, two varieties. Small leaf, delicate sinensis versus large leaf, sturdy assamica, and why the variety sets the broad flavour palette before cultivar and processing fine tune it.

Before cultivars, there are two big botanical varieties, and this distinction is foundational. This sits in the cultivar cluster beside what is a tea cultivar.

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

One species, two varieties

All tea is Camellia sinensis, with two principal varieties. Var. sinensis is small-leaf, more cold- and altitude-tolerant, and associated with many Chinese and Japanese teas and finer, more delicate styles. Var. assamica is large leaf, tropical and vigorous, and linked with Assam and many strong, brisk black teas. The split is partly history: small-leaf sinensis is the older cultivated form of cooler hills, while large-leaf assamica was identified growing wild in Assam in the nineteenth century and became the engine of the milk-friendly black teas that built the British cup. They are not rival species but two forms of one plant put to different uses. See what counts as tea for the species basics.

	var. sinensis	var. assamica
Leaf	Small leaf	Large leaf
Climate	Cold- and altitude tolerant	Tropical, vigorous
Leaning	Delicate, refined styles	Strong, brisk styles
Associated with	Many Chinese and Japanese teas	Assam and strong black teas
Same species?	Yes, both are Camellia sinensis, two varieties of one plant	

Why the variety sets the palette

The two varieties matter because they fix the broad character before anything else gets a vote. A small-leaf sinensis bush grown slowly in cool, high conditions tends toward finer, more delicate, more aromatic leaf; a large-leaf assamica bush thriving in tropical heat tends toward bold, brisk, full-bodied leaf with the structure to stand up to milk. That is why a classic Assam and a fine Chinese green do not just taste different because

of processing, they started from different raw material. Cultivars then fine-tune within that, the layered logic the tea cultivar guide sets out. Knowing the variety is the first and cheapest guide to where a tea sits between delicate and strong.

Hybrids and clones blur the line

The neat two-variety split is real but not absolute. A great deal of modern tea is grown from selected clones and from hybrids between and within the two varieties, bred for yield, hardiness, budding time or a target flavour, which deliberately blurs the strict botanical line. This is not a flaw in the distinction; it is breeders using the palette rather than being limited by it. The takeaway is that variety is the base layer, not the finished cup: a hybrid grown well and processed skilfully can outperform a pure-variety tea grown carelessly, the same point the processing guide keeps making.

Common questions

Are sinensis and assamica different species? No. They are two varieties of one species, Camellia sinensis. Same plant, two broad forms.

Does assamica always mean strong tea? It leans strong and brisk, but processing and terroir still decide the actual cup. The lean is a tendency, not a guarantee.

Which makes better tea? Neither. They suit different styles: sinensis the delicate ones, assamica the strong. Quality is set by the maker, not the variety.

Why does my single origin vary by year? Variety sets the palette, but harvest, weather and processing change the painting each season. That variation is normal.

Using it when buying

Treat variety as a quick first filter, not a verdict. If you want a brisk, full, milk-friendly cup, an assamica-based tea, a classic Assam or a breakfast blend built on it, is the rational starting point; if you want delicacy, florality or a fine green, you are almost always in sinensis territory. You will rarely see "var. assamica" printed outright, but origin and style tell you the variety reliably enough to predict the lean before you spend. What it cannot tell you is whether a specific tea is well made: the same assamica leaf can become a brisk CTC bag or a refined orthodox single estate, and the same sinensis bush can yield a green, a white or an oolong, so processing has the last word. The two recurring errors are treating the varieties as different species, and assuming assamica is automatically "stronger and better" or sinensis "finer and superior"; both are leanings, not rankings. Use variety to predict the half of the map you are in, then judge the cup. See black tea for the strong end.

The teas that come up around this subject: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. The whole tea range is here, and postage within the UK is free at £35 and up.

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