

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, robust assamica, and why the variety sets the broad flavour palette before cultivar and processing fine-tune it.

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for Assamica vs Sinensis: Two Varieties, One Plant. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/assamica-vs-sinensis/*

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

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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 associated with Assam and many robust, 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.

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	var. <i>sinensis</i>	var. <i>assamica</i>
Leaf	Small leaf	Large leaf

	var. sinensis	var. assamica
Climate	Cold- and altitude tolerant	Tropical, vigorous
Leaning	Delicate, refined styles	Robust, brisk styles
Associated with	Many Chinese and Japanese teas	Assam and strong black teas
Same species?	Yes, both are <i>Camellia sinensis</i> , two varieties of one plant	

Why the variety sets the palette

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Why the variety sets the palette , Assamica vs Sinensis: Two Varieties, One Plant. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/assamica-vs-sinensis/*

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, cheapest predictor of where a tea sits on the delicate-to-robust axis.

Hybrids and clones blur the line

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Hybrids and clones blur the line , Assamica vs Sinensis: Two Varieties, One Plant. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/assamica-vs-sinensis/*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Common questions , Assamica vs Sinensis: Two Varieties, One Plant. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/assamica-vs-sinensis/*

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 robust 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* for delicate, *assamica* for robust. 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

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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 robust end.

Reference noted

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- [EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine \(2015\)](#)

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, free UK postage kicks in at £35.

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