

## How Tea Is Grown: Field to Cup, Without the Romance

From the Teas.co.uk wiki

**How tea is grown, in summary:** Agronomy is where quality and price are really decided. Altitude and plucking fineness matter most, terroir is real but over-romanticised, the labour behind the bush is the under-credited factor, and none of it changes the modest health story.

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for How Tea Is Grown: Field to Cup, Without the Romance. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-is-grown/>*

Most tea writing jumps straight from the plant to the cup and skips the field, so the most useful move is to explain how tea is actually grown, because the agronomy genuinely shapes flavour and quality and explains why some teas legitimately cost more. This is not romance, it is the real, physical reason a high-mountain spring tea differs from a lowland bulk one.

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

### The basics: bush, pluck, regrow

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The basics: bush, pluck, regrow, How Tea Is Grown: Field to Cup, Without the Romance. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-is-grown/>*

Tea is a perennial evergreen shrub, kept pruned to a low, flat "plucking table" so workers can repeatedly harvest the tender new growth, the bud and top one or two leaves, by hand or machine. A single bush stays productive for decades. The plant flushes, putting out fresh shoots, in cycles through the growing season, and only that young growth becomes good tea; mature leaf is coarse and bitter. So tea growing is essentially the disciplined management of repeated tender growth on a long-lived bush, and the cup's quality begins with what is plucked and when, not with anything that happens later in the kitchen. Everything downstream, the processing, the brewing, can only work with the leaf the field produced.

### Why altitude genuinely matters

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Why altitude genuinely matters , How Tea Is Grown: Field to Cup, Without the Romance. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-is-grown/*

The "high mountain" story is part marketing and part real, and the clear version separates the two. The reality: at higher altitude temperatures are cooler and growth is slower, light is often diffused by cloud and mist, and the plant accumulates more of the amino acids and aromatic compounds that give sweetness and complexity while producing less harsh bitterness. Slower growth concentrates flavour. That is a genuine, physiological reason high-grown teas, high Ceylon, Darjeeling, Taiwanese gao shan and many Chinese mountain greens, are prized, and it is why "high mountain" is a meaningful quality signal when truthful rather than pure poetry. The name is never proof, though, and the [cup still decides](#), which is the consistent standard this whole cluster applies.

## Climate, soil and terroir

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Climate, soil and terroir , How Tea Is Grown: Field to Cup, Without the Romance. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-is-grown/*

Beyond altitude, the main factors are climate (rainfall, temperature, humidity and season), soil and drainage, and the overall site, what wine calls terroir. These genuinely influence the leaf, which is why the same cultivar tastes different in different gardens and different years. The caveat is the same as for wine: terroir is real but routinely over-romanticised and used to justify any price, so treat it as a genuine influence to be verified in the cup, not a mystical guarantee printed on a label. Real terroir shows up as distinct, consistent character year on year; asserted terroir shows nothing, and learning to tell them apart is a core part of buying well, the same scepticism the [single estate versus blended](#) question needs.

## Pruning, plucking and the human factor

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Pruning, plucking and the human factor , How Tea Is Grown: Field to Cup, Without the Romance. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-is-grown/*

The most under-credited factor is labour. The fineness of plucking, just bud and top leaves versus coarser machine harvest, is one of the biggest determinants of grade and price, and skilled hand-plucking is intensive, expensive work. This ties agronomy directly to the ethics and history of tea: the cost and quality of what you drink are bound up with how, and by whom, the leaf is picked. An honest agronomy page does not hide the human story behind the bush, which the wider [tea ethics and sustainability](#) thread takes up. When a tea is genuinely cheap, fine hand-plucking is usually the first thing that was sacrificed to get the price down.

## Does how it is grown change the health story?

Not fundamentally. Altitude, terroir and plucking change flavour, complexity and price, and shift the balance of compounds modestly, but the result is still ordinary true tea: caffeine, polyphenols, some L-theanine, hydration, no miracle. "High grown" or "single garden" is a flavour and quality statement, not a health upgrade, and any wellness framing of agronomy is the usual marketing. The reason to understand how tea

is grown is to read quality and price clearly, not to chase wellness. This is general information, not medical advice.

## What each growing factor changes

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Factor	What it actually changes
Altitude	Slower growth concentrates sweetness and aroma with less bitterness; a real quality signal
Climate & season	Shifts character flush to flush and year to year
Soil & site (terroir)	A real influence, often over-romanticised; verify it in the cup
Plucking fineness	Bud-and-top versus coarse; one of the biggest grade and price drivers
Pruning & flush timing	Only young growth makes good tea; mature leaf is coarse
Health	Unchanged; still ordinary true tea, no upgrade

## Reading a growing claim on a label

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Reading a growing claim on a label , How Tea Is Grown: Field to Cup, Without the Romance. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-is-grown/*

The practical payoff of understanding agronomy is a quick filter for the marketing language on the pack. "High mountain", "single garden", "first flush" and "hand-plucked" each point to a real, physical mechanism, slower concentrated growth, traceable site character, the prized early harvest, fine selective picking, so none of them is empty by definition. The discipline is to treat each as a checkable claim rather than a guarantee: a true high-grown tea shows concentrated sweetness and aromatic length, a genuine single garden shows distinct, consistent character year on year, and real fine plucking shows in even, whole, tippy leaf rather than coarse broken material. When the cup does not back the words, the words were decoration and the price was a story. Used that way, knowing how tea is grown is the single best defence against paying a premium for a label rather than for what is actually in the leaf, the same verify-in-the-cup scepticism the [how to judge tea quality](#) guide trains.

Taste the field-to-cup difference for yourself across a high-grown [Darjeeling](#), the [green tea](#) range, or the full [tea shop](#), where UK delivery is free over £35.

## Reference noted

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

**FROM THE CURATOR** *teas* · Altitude and fine plucking are the parts of "premium" that are real. If the cup doesn't back the label, you paid for a story, not the leaf.

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### More from the tea wiki

- [How to judge tea quality](#)
- [Tea harvesting](#)
- [Tea plucking standards](#)
- [Tea flushes](#)
- [Single estate vs blended](#)
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