# 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.

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 grown, because the agronomy shapes flavour and quality and explains why some teas rightly 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

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

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 real, 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

Beyond altitude, the main factors are climate (rainfall, temperature, humidity and season), soil and drainage, and the overall site, what wine calls terroir. These all shape the leaf, which is why one cultivar tastes different from garden to garden and year to year. 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 real influence that has to be checked 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

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. A truthful 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 very cheap, fine hand plucking is usually the first thing sacrificed to reach that price.

## 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 describes flavour and quality, nothing more, and any bigger claim built on agronomy is the usual marketing. The reason to understand how tea is grown is to read quality and price clearly, not to chase miracle claims. This is general information, not medical advice.

## What each growing factor changes

| 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

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 claim you can check: a high grown tea that

earns its label shows concentrated sweetness and aromatic length, a single garden shows distinct, consistent character year on year, and 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 orders over £35 are delivered without a charge.

**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.

### More from the tea wiki

- How to judge tea quality
- Tea harvesting
- Tea plucking standards
- Tea flushes
- Single estate vs blended
- Tea ethics and sustainability


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