Tea Harvesting: Where Quality and Price Begin

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea harvesting, in summary:** How and when tea is picked is one of the biggest hidden drivers of quality and price. Hand-plucking the youngest growth, in the right flush, makes premium tea; indiscriminate machine harvesting makes commodity tea. It is largely a labour story.

How tea is harvested is one of the largest, least discussed determinants of its quality and price, so the most useful fact is blunt: the difference between carefully hand-plucked tea and bulk machine-harvested tea is enormous, and it is mostly a story about labour. Understanding harvesting explains a great deal about why some tea is cheap and some is not.

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

What harvesting actually involves

Good tea is made from only the tender new growth, classically the bud and the top one or two leaves, the "two leaves and a bud" standard, with one leaf and a bud, or just buds, taken for the very finest grades. Harvesting means repeatedly removing exactly that growth, again and again through the flushing season, without taking too much coarse mature leaf. A picker walks the rows of waist-high bushes, which have been pruned over many seasons to keep the fresh growth at a comfortable height, and selects the youngest shoots at the tip of each branch, dropping the leaf into a basket. The job is light-touch, repetitive and surprisingly skilled: a good picker recognises in a glance which shoots are at the right stage and ignores those that are too old, working fast enough to gather perhaps 20 to 30 kg of fresh leaf in a productive day. Harvesting is therefore not a single act but an ongoing, selective discipline, and its precision sets the grade before any processing happens.

Hand plucking versus machine

Hand plucking can select only the ideal tender shoots, leaf by leaf, so the pluck is even and the leaf intact, which is why almost all fine and specialty tea is hand-plucked. It is also slow, skilled and labour-intensive, a major reason such tea costs more. Machine harvesting, by walking shear or tractor-mounted unit, is fast and cheap but indiscriminate, cutting everything at a set height: young leaf, old leaf, stalk and sometimes flowers together. Processors then sort and waste more, giving lower-grade finished tea, which suits high-volume CTC and teabag tea that will be torn up anyway. Between the two extremes sit hand shears and tea-picking

gloves that scoop leaf at a controlled height, both mid-quality compromises. Neither approach is "wrong"; they serve different markets. But the quality gap is real, not snobbery, and price largely reflects which method the tea required.

Flush timing: when matters as much as how

Tea bushes grow through the year in distinct cycles called flushes, and timing feeds into grade and price as much as selectivity does. The first flush of the year (spring, roughly March to April in Darjeeling, April to May in Japan) gives the most prized tea: low yield, intense flavour and delicate aromatics, because the bush has been dormant through winter and pours its concentrated resources into early growth. The second flush (May to June) gives a fuller-bodied tea with characteristic muscatel notes, while monsoon and autumn flushes give lower-grade leaf that is often blended down. In Kenya, much of India and Sri Lanka, where there is no winter dormancy, picking is more continuous and quality varies less by season and more by altitude, weather and rainfall in the weeks before harvest. The wider tea flushes guide works through this in detail.

The labour reality

This is the part many guides skip. Hand plucking is enormously labour-intensive and is overwhelmingly done by low-paid workers, very often women, on plantations and smallholdings, and the economics of that labour are inseparable from the price of your tea. The work is hard: hours of walking the rows in tropical sun or monsoon rain, repetitive arm motion, the weight of the basket, and routine cuts and strain. Wages reflect a long structural pattern and are among the lowest in the formal economy, typically only a few pounds a day plus rations and housing on many Indian estates, with Japanese and some single-estate pickers earning considerably more and Fairtrade premiums giving a modest uplift where they operate without transforming the basic economics. Cheap hand-plucked tea almost always means someone was paid very little. Mechanisation is a genuine ethical tangle: machines remove the back-breaking part of the job but also displace income, so the right answer depends on what alternative work exists. This is the direct continuation of the colonial plantation history, and the tea ethics and sustainability thread takes it up.

Harvest urgency: hours, not days

Fresh tea leaf starts to lose quality the moment it leaves the bush. Cells break and enzymes begin oxidising the polyphenols, the same process that turns a sliced apple brown. For green tea this matters enormously: the processor wants to fix the enzymes with heat or steam before any browning starts, usually within a few hours of plucking. For black tea, controlled withering and oxidation is the goal, but uncontrolled bruising in transport ruins the leaf. This is why most quality factories sit on or beside the tea estate, often a short walk from the picking fields, and why harvest is logistics as much as agriculture: the leaf and the factory have to meet within hours.

Does harvesting change the health story?

Only marginally. Younger leaves, the two-leaves-and-a-bud picks, are somewhat higher in caffeine, theanine and catechins than older mature leaf, so in principle a finely picked premium tea has a slightly different chemistry from a commodity blend. In practice the difference is real but small at the cup level, and the result is still ordinary true tea: caffeine, polyphenols, some L-theanine, hydration, no miracle. Do not pay for

premium leaf because of health claims; pay for it because of taste, freshness and the labour behind it. This is general information, not medical advice.

Tea harvesting at a glance

Question	Answer
What part of the plant is harvested?	The youngest growth, ideally two leaves and a bud, sometimes one leaf and a bud for the finest grades.
How often is tea picked?	New growth every 7 to 10 days in active seasons, often several harvest cycles a year per bush.
Is it hand-picked?	Premium teas (Darjeeling, gyokuro, fine oolong) are still hand-plucked. Most commodity tea is machine or shear harvested.
What are flushes?	Distinct harvest periods; tea picked in different months tastes very different. First-flush spring tea is usually the most delicate and prized.
How fast must picked tea be processed?	Within hours. Picked leaf starts oxidising at once; quality drops if it sits.
How much does a picker collect a day?	About 20 to 30 kg of fresh leaf for a skilled hand picker, which becomes roughly 4 to 6 kg of finished tea after processing loses about three-quarters of the mass to water.
Is machine harvesting worse?	For quality, yes, since machines cut indiscriminately. For livelihoods the picture is mixed: mechanisation eases hard labour but can displace workers.

How to spot the marketing on harvesting

Three habits sort the meaningful claims from the decorative ones. First, "hand-picked" on a teabag of supermarket Earl Grey is essentially marketing language, because the picking method matters far less when the leaf is going to be cut to dust anyway. Second, "first flush" claims are real and worth paying for in Darjeeling and Japanese teas, but mostly meaningless elsewhere. Third, "ethically sourced" varies enormously: a Fairtrade-marked estate has independent inspection, whereas an unverified claim is just words, so look for specific certifications (Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, organic) or single-estate sourcing where you can actually see the producer. The teas where careful picking shows most are first-flush Darjeeling, premium green teas such as Long Jing and gyokuro, selectively picked oolong, and single-estate loose leaf more broadly; browse those in the full tea shop, where UK delivery is free over £35.

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