Tea Flushes: When the Leaf Is Picked Changes the Cup

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea flushes, in summary:** A flush is a wave of new growth on the bush, a natural seasonal cycle, not a brand. Each flush yields tea of genuinely different character, which is why first-flush Darjeeling, shincha and pre-Qingming green command the prices they do.

"First flush" is one of the most marketed phrases in fine tea, and the most useful fact is that a flush is simply a wave of new growth on the bush, a natural seasonal cycle, not a brand or a grade. The tea plant does not grow continuously; it pushes out fresh shoots in distinct periods, and each of those periods yields tea of genuinely different character. Understanding flushes as growth cycles, not slogans, is what makes the prices and the hype legible.

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What a flush actually is

After a period of dormancy or slower growth, winter, dry season, or simply the rest after a previous harvest, the bush sends out a wave of tender new shoots more or less at once. That wave is a flush. Pickers move through the garden harvesting it, the bush rests for a week or two, and then it flushes again. Across a season a garden therefore produces several distinct harvests, and because the plant's chemistry changes with the season, temperature and rainfall, each flush's leaf differs in sweetness, body, aroma and astringency. Flush is, in effect, a vintage-and-season marker for tea, real and meaningful rather than invented. How sharply the flushes separate depends on climate: in Darjeeling, with a cold winter dormancy followed by spring rains, they are distinct and well defined; in Assam, with no winter dormancy but a brutal monsoon, they blur while quality still varies through the season; and in Kenya and Sri Lanka, with no winter at all, "flush" is a less useful word because picking is more continuous.

The Darjeeling flushes

Darjeeling is the classic flush example. First flush (mid-March to mid-April) comes from bushes waking from winter: tender, low-yield, intensely aromatic leaf that finishes as a pale-gold, light-bodied tea with a "muscatel" hint, the grape-like note characteristic of the region, and less astringency than later flushes. It is usually the priciest tea of the year. Second flush (May to June) is where the muscatel character peaks: a fuller, amber-to-copper infusion with more body, the classic "champagne of teas" profile that many drinkers

consider the platonic Darjeeling. Monsoon flush (July to September) grows fast under heavy rain with less aromatic concentration, giving a plainer, more astringent tea used mostly for blends or sold at a discount. Autumnal flush (October to November), the final harvest before dormancy, is mellow, woody and slightly sweeter, and some specialists prize it for a rounded cup.

Japanese and Chinese flushes

The principle is universal, but each country has its own vocabulary. In Japan, picking starts in late April or early May with shincha, "new tea", the celebrated first pickings often released around the 2nd of May, the 88th day from the spring equinox and considered auspicious; shincha is bright, sweet and intensely grassy. Its formal name is ichibancha (first flush, used for most premium gyokuro and high-grade sencha), followed by nibancha (second flush, June to July, more astringent and cheaper) and later autumn pickings used for bancha and bottled teas. In China, reverence centres on the Qingming festival around the 5th of April: tea picked "Ming-qian" (before Qingming) is the most prestigious, with limited yield and intense flavour, while "Yu-qian" (before the spring rains, around the 20th of April) is the next tier. Pre-Qingming Long Jing, Bi Luo Chun and Huang Shan Mao Feng are the headline products.

Tea flushes at a glance

Flush	What it means
First flush (Darjeeling)	Mid-March to mid-April. Lightest, most aromatic, palest infusion, muscatel hint. The most expensive flush.
Second flush (Darjeeling)	May to June. Full muscatel character, amber infusion, more body. The classic Darjeeling profile.
Monsoon flush (Darjeeling)	July to September. Lower quality, used mostly for blends.
Autumnal flush (Darjeeling)	October to November. Mellow, woody, the final harvest of the year.
Shincha / ichibancha (Japan)	Late April to May. The first Japanese green of the year; intensely fresh and grassy.
Nibancha (Japan)	Second flush, June to July. Lower price, fuller body.
Pre-Qingming (China)	Before about 5 April. Premium Chinese green tea such as Long Jing.

Why first flush costs more

Three reasons, and all of them are genuine rather than pure hype. Yield: the first-of-season picks give the lowest weight per bush of any flush, a fraction of what a productive monsoon flush yields. Labour intensity: first flush requires the most selective picking, often one leaf and a bud, and the most careful handling. Demand: the world's tea-buying community competes for limited first-flush supply each year, which drives auction prices, so premium first-flush Darjeeling sells for many times the price of a monsoon flush from the same estate. The caveat is that the prestige is also heavily marketed, and "first flush" on a label is not by itself proof of quality; poor first flushes exist, and plenty of drinkers genuinely prefer the richer second flush.

The premium is real in cause but never a guarantee, and the cup still decides.

Drink it fresh

Flush only matters if the tea is reasonably fresh, which is the part the marketing tends to skip. A premium first-flush Darjeeling or a shincha is prized partly for freshness, and the volatile aromatic compounds that define those flush characters degrade within roughly 12 to 18 months even in good storage. Buying prestige first flush and leaving it for a year defeats the point. Buy named-flush tea from the current harvest year, store it sealed, cool and dark, and drink it within six to twelve months for the best of it. Older flush-marked tea is not bad tea; it simply no longer reflects the flush character printed on the label.

Does flush change the health story?

Only modestly. Earlier, slower-grown flush leaf is relatively richer in some amino acids, catechins and aromatics, and caffeine is slightly higher in young growth, but every flush is the same ordinary true tea: caffeine, polyphenols, some L-theanine, hydration, no miracle. The differences at the cup level are real and small. Choose a flush for flavour and season, not for health. This is general information, not medical advice.

How to judge a flush claim

A few habits separate the meaningful labels from the decorative ones. "First flush" on a teabag of generic supermarket tea is essentially meaningless, because the leaf has been cut, blended and bagged; the term belongs on whole-leaf, named-estate, single-origin product. The year matters too: "first flush 2026" tells you how old the tea is, while "first flush" with no year is suspicious. And "spring tea" is vaguer than "first flush" but can be reasonable, since from a Japanese producer it often means ichibancha. Reach for loose leaf single-estate tea that states its harvest openly, in the full tea shop, where UK delivery is free over £35.

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