



Earth911®  
More Ideas, Less Waste

[How to Recycle](#)

[Where to Recycle](#)

[Food & Beverage](#)   [How & Buy](#)

Reading time: 3 mins

## What's the Tea? Brewing a More Sustainable Cuppa



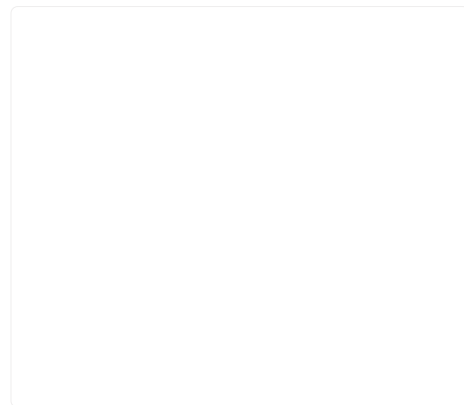
By [Gemma Alexander](#)

© MAY 13, 2021   [tea](#)



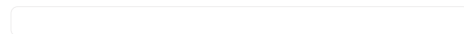
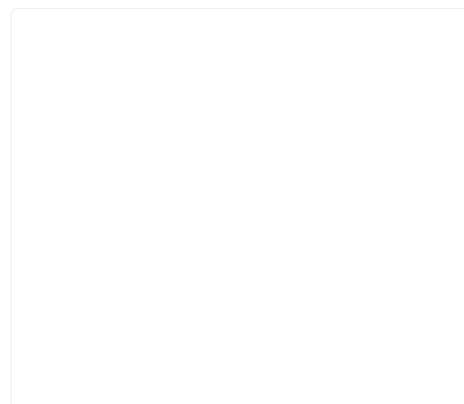
A standard cup of tea requires [one-eighth as much water](#) as a cup of coffee, but tea is no eco-beverage. In fact, the carbon footprints of tea and [coffee production](#) are almost identical. But producing tea contributes less to its footprint than how you drink it. Brewing a truly sustainable cuppa might be impossible, but a little education about your tea choices makes it easier to [shop your values](#). Here's what you need to know about tea.

### Farm



Never miss an update!

[JOIN OUR LIST](#)



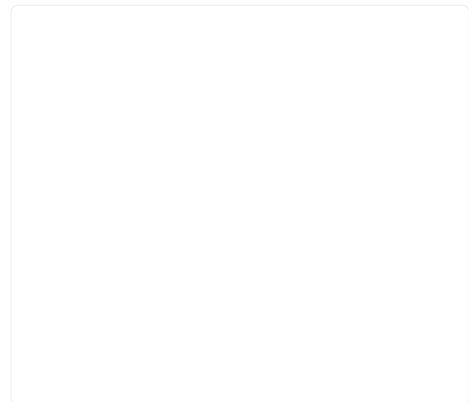
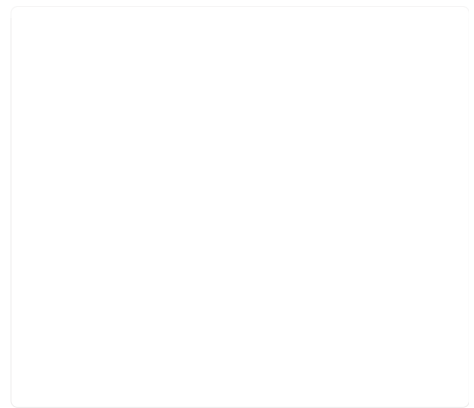
The UN FAO [launched a project](#) in Kenya last year to support the production of carbon-neutral tea. Another initiative, [Tea2030](#) crosses all sectors of tea production. But for now, most tea is grown on chemical-intensive farms that contribute to [deforestation](#), erosion, and [pesticide contamination](#). Monoculture farms [damage soil health](#) and make plants more susceptible to disease, leading to more intensive use of chemical pesticides and fertilizer. Half of the 62 teas tested by the FDA in a 2015 study contained [pesticide residues](#).

Using biological controls instead of fumigants against soil nematodes; site-specific fertilization plans or organic farming; and the introduction of shade trees to plantations are all [methods](#) for reducing the impact of tea cultivation.

## People

A labor-intensive crop harvested by hand, tea is grown all [around the world](#) with China, India, Kenya, and Sri Lanka as the [largest producers](#). China produces half the world's tea on [15 million small farms](#) where there is little awareness of the dangers of agrochemicals. Two-thirds of Kenyan tea farmers are also smallholders with few employees (some of whom may be children). By contrast, three-quarters of Indian tea (particularly Assam) is still produced on [near-feudal](#) plantations with a history of human rights abuses that particularly [impact women](#). But everywhere, low wages, pesticide exposure, and brutal working conditions are rampant.

The vast majority of tea is still [purchased in bulk](#) by multinational corporations. Only Sri Lanka has developed much local processing, but this has not led to direct trade options or improved [conditions for workers](#).

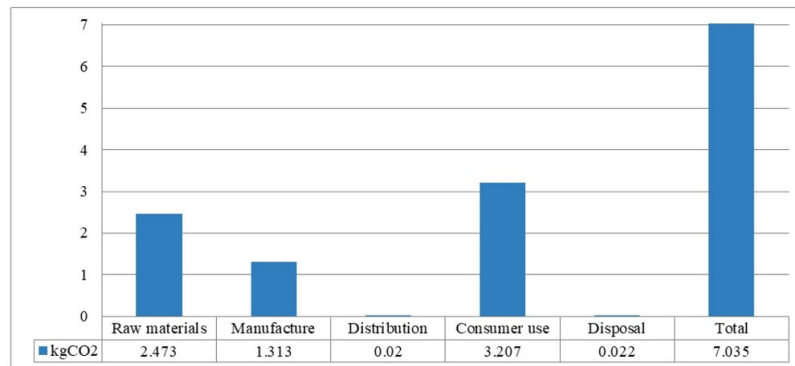




Workers harvesting tea in Vietnam

## Processing

Processing the tea produces slightly more than [half as much](#) carbon as growing the tea.



Overall carbon emission contribution of Dongshang tea. Source: [mdpi.com](https://www.mdpi.com)

Withering, drying, grading, and packing tea requires [more energy](#) than producing a kilogram of steel. This is often due to the use of old, inefficient machinery powered by diesel generators or even fuel wood. Market mechanisms such as fair trade that shift profit down the supply chain could improve efficiency.

## Certifications

International programs like the [Ethical Tea Partnership](#) work to improve the lives of tea farmers and their cultivation methods but are invisible to consumers. [Choosing certified teas](#) is the best way for consumers to encourage sustainable tea cultivation and processing.

### [USDA Certified Organic](#)

Organic certification ensures that tea is grown and processed without the use of synthetic chemicals. In 2020, the USDA [proposed](#) strengthening oversight and enforcement all along the supply chain, which could have significant impacts on products like tea. Organic standards do not explicitly protect farmers or regulate waste produced by farms and processors.



Source: [ams.usda.gov](https://ams.usda.gov)

### Rainforest Alliance

After merging with UTZ in 2018, the Rainforest Alliance developed a new system that emphasizes context and progress over standards. Its new certification guarantees tea farmers a "Sustainability Differential" payment, forbids deforestation, and encourages sustainable farming techniques.



Source: [rainforest-alliance.org](https://rainforest-alliance.org)

### Fair Trade USA

Fair Trade USA was the American affiliate of Fairtrade International until 2011. Despite flaws, Fair Trade USA has directed nearly \$7 million in premium payments to improve tea-producing communities. It prohibits child and forced labor, but cannot provide a 100% guarantee.



Source: [Just-food.com](https://www.just-food.com)

## [Fairtrade America](#)

Fairtrade America became the American affiliate to Fairtrade International in 2013. It focuses on a handful of food products, [including tea](#). There is [significant overlap](#) between Fairtrade America's standards and those of Fair Trade USA. Fairtrade [tea farmers](#) receive a minimum price that varies by location and production method as well as a premium for reinvestment in the farm.

## Drinking Habits

The environmental impact of your afternoon tea doesn't end with what you [choose to buy](#). The biggest source of carbon emissions from the [six billion cups](#) of tea drunk each day is [how you drink it](#). Because cattle production is [so carbon intensive](#), you can eliminate [two-thirds](#) of your tea's carbon emissions by eliminating milk.

The [energy source](#) for boiling water makes a difference, but more important is how much water you boil. Boiling more water than you need can [double](#) the climate impact.

Perhaps surprisingly, waste disposal is [not a major factor](#) in the impact of your tea. It's still best to [reuse tea bags](#) where you can. But be warned that unless they are specifically labeled for composting, most "paper" tea bags contain [up to 30% plastic](#). To avoid waste, loose-leaf tea is preferable.

Finally, the production of tea, like coffee, not only contributes to climate change, it is also [threatened by climate change](#). So don't stop at the cup – every action you take to [reduce your carbon footprint](#) makes the world a better place for tea.

Feature image by [StockSnap](#) from Pixabay

---

advertising

---



Reading time: [3 mins](#)

[6 Compostable Picnic  
Cutlery and Tableware  
Choices](#)