

How to Grow & Prepare Your Own Tea

Camellia sinensis, the tea camellia, is a slow-growing, evergreen, broadleaf shrub famous as the source of all types of tea. The new growth, called a “flush,” is picked and processed in various ways to make black, green, oolong and other styles of tea. For the first few years, you may only be able to harvest enough tea to make a cup or so. If you would like to make a quantity of tea, we recommend that you plant a hedge, spacing the plants about three feet apart.

‘Sochi’, ‘Korean’, ‘Blushing Maiden’, and ‘Teabreeze’ are all cultivars of *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis* which is hardy outdoors in coastal BC down to zone 7 and perhaps even 6. The leaves of these cultivars can be used to make white, green, yellow, and oolong tea. Most black teas from India and Sri Lanka are made with *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica* which has larger leaves and is not hardy on the west coast. Darjeeling tea is an exception. It is an Indian tea made with plants originally from China. For those beginning to grow their own tea at home, the impact of cultivar on flavor is probably subtle.

Growing Conditions and Terroir – The tea camellia grows well in evenly moist, well-drained, slightly acidic soil. Though plants will grow faster in full sun, they can also be grown in part shade. Japanese teas such as Kabusecha and Gyokuro are shaded for the final weeks before plucking. The amount of light is just one variable in shaping the flavor of tea. Provide a top dressing of Sea Soil or compost each spring. You can use a fertilizer such as GardenPro’s Rhododendron and Azalea food but err on the side of fertilizing lightly to avoid fertilizer burn and since slower growth may result in better flavour. Teas may be sought after because they are grown in mineral rich soil or high in the mountains where they grow more slowly, improving flavour. There are very many tea reviews online offering a rich picture of flavours and cultural conditions.

Picking Tea – Pick only the top trio of newly emerging leaves. The rule of thumb is that you pick “two leaves and a bud,” the bud being the youngest terminal leaf. The act of picking leaves will encourage a compact, multi-branched habit with lots of leaf production so it is a good idea to pick your tea! Leaves from the top of the plant are favoured for picking and in pictures of tea terraces you can see that the plants are kept a few feet tall for ease of harvest and shaped so that they do not shade the lower leaves. A healthy tea plant will flush new growth multiple times through the growing season allowing you to harvest through the season. Just allow some leaves to remain on the plant to keep it healthy. A warm sunny morning is a good time to pick tea, after the dew has burned off. The most sought after flush is the first one in the spring.

Processing Tea – After picking, tea leaves must be dried in the sun or in a cool place and cured either by heating or steaming. The method of processing is what determines the different styles of tea differentiating white from green from black from oolong, etc. White tea might be left to wither a day or more while green tea is left for only eight hours before the oxidizing process is stopped by heating. Green tea, Japanese style, is steamed and then at least partially dried in a pan while the Chinese style is not steamed but just dried in a pan. Oolong tea is tossed in a basket after withering to begin oxidation at the edges of the leaf with varying levels of force applied depending on the desired result, then it is rolled. Black tea is treated forcefully to bruise the entire leaf releasing juice and causing oxidation.

Cassie Liversidge, in her book *Homegrown Tea*, recommends six leaves to a cup, and provides a recipe for green tea. Simple recipes for white and green tea are also available at www.teaflowergardens.com and other sites on the internet. Production of quality tea has traditionally been a highly localized practice, really an art form of interpreting conditions, and that kind of skill has not yet been translated to those beginning to grow their own tea in North America. Try different methods and see what tastes best to you!

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