



Tea Leaf Ironstone Value Guide

This value guide was created by Tea Leaf Club International in response to frequent inquiries from individuals needing to make decisions on the disposition of a Tea Leaf Ironstone collection for themselves, a family member or a friend. These individuals are often unfamiliar with Tea Leaf Ironstone or today's Tea Leaf Ironstone collecting market. This Value Guide is not intended to be all inclusive. It is intended to provide a high-level overview. "Tea Leaf Ironstone" refers to ironstone decorated with a traditional copper luster tea leaf motif as well as numerous copper luster or gold luster variant motifs.

For most individuals, given today's market, the value of Tea Leaf is probably more sentimental than monetary. If there are special Tea Leaf memories associated with family dinners or special times collecting and displaying Tea Leaf, we encourage individuals to keep and display as many Tea Leaf pieces as possible for their own personal enjoyment.

For those individuals who seek to learn more about Tea Leaf Ironstone, we encourage them to join Tea Leaf Club International. The club can be reached via their Facebook page "Tea Leaf Club International" or their website <http://www.tealeafclub.com/>.

What is Tea Leaf Ironstone China? Strictly speaking, Tea Leaf is considered to be any English or American ironstone china decorated with the traditional Tea Leaf motif consisting of three leaves and a bud, in copper or gold lustre. Today's collectors, however, have expanded that definition of Tea Leaf to include any white ironstone decorated with copper lustre motifs, whether those decorations are floral, botanical, geometric or simply lustre banded. Originally introduced by British potters in the mid-1850s, nearly 50 well-known English potters eventually adopted the Tea Leaf motif and used it on over 200 recognized ironstone body styles. Beginning in the 1880s several American potters also entered the ironstone market and several also employed the Tea Leaf (or close variant) motif.



Factors that determine the value of a piece of Tea Leaf Ironstone

Rarity

The rarity of any collectible item will drastically affect its value. Items with only a few known examples will

naturally bring higher prices from collectors than items that you can buy by the box or that frequently appear for sale on online auctions.

Demand

The second factor affecting the price of collectibles is demand. Even if you have an incredibly rare item, if collectors aren't competing to buy it, then the value will still be low. To achieve high prices, you need both rarity AND demand from collectors. Many people get hung up on the idea that something is rare without considering if there is anyone who actually wants to buy it. You'll sometimes see this on online auctions when someone has their "RARE" item priced at hundreds of dollars and it sits there for weeks or months without selling. Since 2008, demand for all collectibles, including Tea Leaf Ironstone, has dropped significantly which has impacted the value.

Body Style/Potter

Collectors have varying reasons for why they collect given pieces of Tea Leaf. High end collectors love to see attractive designs. For Tea Leaf, design includes body style (pattern embossed in the ironstone) and motif (copper lustre decoration). Motifs include traditional Tea Leaf and Variants. Variants such as Pre-Tea Leaf and Teaberry are often more prized than traditional Tea Leaf. The most valuable pieces almost always have beautiful body style designs such as Laurel Wreath, Hanging Leaves, Chinese, Lily of the Valley, Basketweave, Feather, New York, Ceres, Fig Cousin, etc. They are often manufactured by Clementson, Edward Walley, Elsmore Forster and Anthony Shaw, but may be manufactured by other potters. There are pieces of Tea Leaf that have rather simple body styles but are still very valuable because of their rarity (Jumbo teapot) but those are the exception rather than the rule. Generally speaking, Tea Leaf Ironstone manufactured by English potters is more desirable than Tea Leaf Ironstone manufactured by American potters (with a few exceptions for rarity). Similarly, copper luster decoration is more desirable than gold luster decoration.

Condition

As with all types of collectibles, condition is a key factor. For entry level items, it may make a difference whether the item will sell at all. The value of items in the entry level and mid level collecting categories are more significantly impacted by cracks, chips, hairlines, luster wear etc since it is relatively easy to find these items in near mint condition. Stained items can be cleaned, but once cleaned, hidden hairlines, cracks or repairs may become apparent so the value will most likely be impacted as the buyer is taking a risk. For very rare, one-of-a-kind items, minor condition issues are considered but will not usually impede the sale of the item, especially if the buyer works with a reputable restorer.

Age

Generally speaking, earlier Tea Leaf patterns are valued higher than later patterns, but this may be because earlier patterns have more ornate body styles and were not manufactured in the large quantities as later patterns so are more scarce. An Antiques Roadshow Appraiser once told me "I'm old, but that doesn't mean I'm worth anything". Age doesn't necessarily matter.



Collecting Categories

The collecting categories below will help you determine the general value of your Tea Leaf item.

Entry Level

Entry level items usually sell for \$20 - \$50 each and many can be found for under \$5. Almost all entry level items are very common and easily available. Therefore, damaged items in this category have little or no value. Many collectors begin by inheriting items in this category and then expand their collections as they become more knowledgeable.

These items include less ornate plates, platters, covered vegetable dishes, cups/saucers (handled or handleless), gravy boats, butter pats, nesting bowls, bone dishes, bakers, nappies (sauce dishes) etc. These items are often manufactured by Alfred Meakin, Mellor Taylor, John Edwards, Johnson Brothers, Furnival , Wedgwood, Wilkinson, and other potters.

Mid level items with condition issues or missing pieces (e.g. 2 pieces of 4 piece set) may also fall in this category. On the other hand, more desirable motifs, body styles and potters may move an item from Entry Level into the Mid Level category.

Mid Level

Mid level items often sell for \$50 - \$125 and include items that are somewhat scarce, have moderate demand or for whatever reason collectors are willing to pay elevated prices. These items include Tea pots, creamers, sugar bowls, covered butter dishes, egg cups, graduated pitchers, donut stands, 4 piece sauce tureens (base, lid, ladle and undertray), Ewers/bowls, chamber pots, tooth brush holders, shaving mugs etc.

Variants, more elaborate body styles and preferred potters mentioned on the prior page will generally command higher prices in this category depending on condition.

High End

High end collectibles are those that advanced and experienced collectors are actively looking for. This usually means that these items are rare and don't come up for sale very often. The combination of rarity and demand drives prices up to hundreds and sometimes even thousands of dollars. To bring top prices, the items need to be in good condition with bright copper lustre and without significant damage. These items include Master Waste Jars, Hot Water Jugs, Brush boxes, Spittoons, Soup tureens, Punch/Posset bowls, Posset cups, Miniature egg cups, Child Tea Sets, Spoon warmers, Jardineres, Frog mugs etc.

Many members of Tea Leaf Club International fit into the advanced collector category. If you have a high end item for sale, we strongly recommend consigning your item to the annual convention auction. You will need to become a club member to do so, but the dues are very reasonable. As noted above, you can contact the club through their Facebook page "Tea Leaf Club International" or their website <http://www.tealeafclub.com/>.



Want to learn more about your Tea Leaf?

Of course, the absolute BEST way to learn about Tea Leaf Ironstone China is to become a member of the Tea Leaf Club. Join with other collectors, read the newsletter, attend the national convention and regional meetings, and learn from our educational publications. The following printed materials are also available.

"Handbook of Tea Leaf Body Styles"

A project of the Education Committee of the Tea Leaf Club International, published in 1995 and updated in 2000 and 2006. Published by TLCI. Available for purchase from the Tea Leaf Club. Not a price guide.

"Grandma's Tea Leaf Ironstone"

By Annise Heavilin, c. 1981, republished 1996 with no changes or corrections. Not a price guide.

"American Tea Leaf: Manufacturers, Potters and Decorators"

By Julie Rich, c. 1992, Published by Tea Leaf Club International. Available online.

"Tea Leaf Readings"

The Official Newsletter of the Tea Leaf Club International, available to Tea Leaf Club members



Examples of Tea Leaf Ironstone China





Common Copper Lustre Decorative Motifs on White Ironstone



Tea Leaf



Thistle
and Berry



Pomegranate



Morning
Glory



Teaberry



Reverse
Teaberry



Pre-Tea Leaf



Pinwheel



Rose



Cinquefoil



Coral



Tobacco
Leaf



Pepper
Leaf



Botanicals

Drawings: c. 1988 - Dale Abrams