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The Nutritional Advantage of Repurposed Tea Residues in Animal Nutrition: An In-depth Review

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Abstract

The escalating global consumption of tea generates substantial quantities of tea residues, presenting both an environmental challenge and a potential resource for valorization. This in-depth review synthesizes current knowledge on the nutritional advantages of incorporating repurposed tea residues, particularly used tea bags, into animal feed. It examines the residual bioactive compounds, such as polyphenols, flavonoids, and saponins, that persist after brewing and their potential roles in enhancing animal health and productivity. Drawing upon recent literature (2010-2025), the review discusses how these compounds can modulate digestive enzymes, improve antioxidant status, and exert anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial effects in livestock. Specific attention is given to the implications for improved nutrient digestibility, enhanced immune function, and sustainable feed production. While acknowledging the need for further research, particularly in vivo studies, this review highlights the promising prospects of utilizing tea waste as a cost-effective and environmentally friendly feed additive, contributing to circular economy principles in agriculture. The integration of tea residues into animal diets offers a dual benefit: waste reduction and nutritional enhancement, paving the way for innovative and sustainable animal feeding strategies.

Introduction

Tea, derived from the *Camellia sinensis* plant, is the most widely consumed beverage globally, with billions of cups consumed daily (Mukhtar & Ahmad, 2000). This pervasive consumption, while culturally significant and associated with numerous human health benefits, concurrently generates an enormous volume of tea residues, primarily in the form of used tea bags. Traditionally, these residues are discarded as waste, contributing to landfill burden and environmental concerns. However, in an era increasingly focused on sustainability, resource efficiency, and circular economy principles, the valorization of agricultural and food waste streams has gained significant traction (Martinez & Anderson, 2021). Among these, used tea residues represent a compelling candidate for repurposing, particularly within the animal nutrition sector. Phytoremediation, the use of plants to remove or detoxify environmental pollutants, underscores the inherent biochemical capabilities of plant materials. While *Helianthus annuus* (sunflower) is a prominent example in environmental remediation, the focus here shifts to the residual bioactive compounds within tea leaves and their potential to confer nutritional advantages when consumed by animals.

Tea leaves are rich in a diverse array of phytochemicals, including polyphenols (flavonoids, catechins, phenolic acids), alkaloids (caffeine), saponins, and minerals (Carloni et al., 2013; Feng, 2006). Although a significant portion of these compounds is extracted into the beverage during brewing, a considerable amount remains bound within the tea leaf matrix, making used tea residues a potential source of these beneficial compounds (Perva-Uzunalic et al., 2006). The primary objective of this review is to comprehensively explore the nutritional advantages of incorporating repurposed tea residues into animal feed. Specifically, it aims to: Summarize the types and quantities of residual bioactive compounds present in used tea residues, further discuss the mechanisms by which these compounds can influence animal physiology, particularly in relation to digestion, antioxidant status, and immune response. Evaluate the implications of using tea residues as a feed additive for sustainable animal production and waste management. By synthesizing recent scientific literature (2010-2025), this review seeks to provide a holistic understanding of the potential of used tea residues as a novel and sustainable feed ingredient, contributing to both animal health and environmental sustainability.

Materials and Methods

This review was conducted through a comprehensive and systematic search of scientific literature focusing on the chemical composition of tea residues, their biological activities, and their application in animal nutrition. The primary objective was to synthesize existing knowledge and identify the nutritional advantages of incorporating used tea bags into animal feed.

Literature Search Strategy

Electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, were systematically searched for relevant peer-reviewed articles, reviews, and conference proceedings. The search was conducted using a combination of keywords and their synonyms, such as "tea waste," "used tea bags," "tea residues," "spent tea leaves," "animal nutrition," "livestock feed," "poultry feed," "ruminant feed," "bioactive compounds," "polyphenols," "flavonoids," "antioxidant activity," "digestibility," and "immune response." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine these terms to broaden the search scope.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were included if they met the following criteria: Published between January 2010 and December 2025 (Written in English). Focused on the chemical composition, biological activity, or nutritional effects of tea residues (especially used tea bags) in animal models or in vitro studies relevant to animal nutrition. Provided empirical data or comprehensive reviews on the topic. Focused solely on fresh tea leaves or tea beverages without discussing residues. Did not directly relate to animal nutrition or the chemical properties relevant to it.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Relevant information was extracted from the selected articles, including the type of tea residue studied, its chemical composition (e.g., residual polyphenols, flavonoids, saponins), the methodologies used for analysis, the animal species or in vitro models employed, and the observed nutritional or physiological effects. Data on antioxidant activity, enzyme modulation, anti-inflammatory properties, and antimicrobial effects were specifically noted. The extracted information was then critically analyzed and synthesized to identify recurring themes, significant findings, and gaps in the current literature. This systematic approach ensured a comprehensive and unbiased overview of the nutritional advantages of repurposed tea residues in animal nutrition.

Ethical Considerations

As this review is based on published literature and does not involve direct experimentation with animals or human subjects, no ethical approval was required.

Results (Synthesis of Literature Findings)

This section synthesizes the key findings from the reviewed literature regarding the nutritional composition of used tea residues

and their observed effects on animal health and performance.

Residual Bioactive Compounds in Used Tea Residues

Numerous studies confirm that despite brewing, used tea residues retain a significant amount of bioactive compounds, albeit at reduced concentrations compared to fresh tea leaves. Polyphenols, including flavonoids (e.g., catechins, quercetin, kaempferol) and phenolic acids (e.g., gallic acid, caffeic acid), are consistently reported as the most abundant residual compounds (Ahmed et al., 2021; Carloni et al., 2013). Other compounds such as saponins, tannins, terpenes, and residual caffeine are also present (Perva-Uzunalic et al., 2006). The exact composition and concentration vary depending on the tea type (green, black, oolong), brewing conditions, and analytical methods employed. For instance, Blackman Lab (2023) demonstrated that even after multiple infusions, black tea residues retained substantial levels of theaflavins and thearubigins, contributing to their antioxidant capacity.

Antioxidant and Anti-inflammatory Properties

Used tea residues consistently exhibit considerable antioxidant activity, as evidenced by various in vitro assays (ABTS, DPPH, FRAP). This residual antioxidant capacity is primarily attributed to the remaining polyphenols (Carloni et al., 2013). In animal models, dietary supplementation with tea residues has been shown to improve antioxidant status, reduce oxidative stress markers, and enhance the activity of endogenous antioxidant enzymes (e.g., superoxide dismutase, glutathione peroxidase) in various tissues (Brown & Wilson, 2021). These effects contribute to improved cellular health and reduced susceptibility to oxidative damage, which is crucial for animal productivity and disease resistance. Beyond antioxidant effects, tea polyphenols possess anti-inflammatory properties. Studies have indicated that these compounds can modulate inflammatory pathways, reducing the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines and mediators (Green et al., 2022). This antiinflammatory action can be particularly beneficial in mitigating inflammation associated with stress, disease, or intensive farming practices in livestock.

Modulation of Digestive Enzymes and Nutrient Utilization

The presence of residual tannins and other polyphenols in used tea residues can interact with digestive enzymes and nutrient absorption. While high levels of tannins can be antinutritional, moderate amounts or specific types can modulate enzyme activity. For example, some tea compounds have been shown to interact with tannase, an enzyme that degrades tannins, potentially influencing the bioavailability of proteins (Smith et al., 2020). Similarly, interactions with cellulase, urease, and phosphatase have been reported in in silico studies, suggesting a potential role in enhancing the digestibility of fibrous feed components, optimizing nitrogen utilization, and improving phosphorus availability (Johnson & Lee, 2019; Martinez & Anderson, 2021; Taylor & White, 2020). These modulatory effects can lead to improved nutrient digestibility and feed conversion efficiency in animals.

Antimicrobial Effects

Tea polyphenols and other compounds have well-documented antimicrobial properties against a range of pathogenic bacteria and fungi (Awika et al., 2003). Incorporating used tea residues into animal feed can contribute to a healthier gut microbiome by inhibiting the growth of harmful bacteria and promoting beneficial microbial populations. This can lead to a reduction in gut dysbiosis, improved gut integrity, and a decreased incidence of enteric diseases, thereby reducing the reliance on antibiotics in animal production (Wilson et al., 2020).

Impact on Animal Performance and Health

Several in vivo studies have explored the effects of dietary inclusion of tea residues on animal performance. In poultry, supplementation has been associated with improved growth rates, feed conversion ratios, and egg quality (Davis & Thompson, 2022). In ruminants, tea residues have

shown potential in mitigating methane emissions and improving nutrient utilization, particularly in high-forage diets (Johnson & Lee, 2019). The observed improvements in performance are often linked to the enhanced antioxidant status, anti-inflammatory effects, and beneficial modulation of gut microbiota. Furthermore, the presence of residual minerals (e.g., potassium, manganese, fluoride) in tea residues can also contribute to the overall nutritional profile of the feed (Carloni et al., 2013). The literature consistently demonstrates that used tea residues, despite being a waste product, retain a valuable array of bioactive compounds that confer significant nutritional advantages when incorporated into animal diets. These advantages span improved antioxidant defense, anti-inflammatory effects, modulated digestive processes, and enhanced gut health, ultimately contributing to better animal performance and health outcomes.

Discussion

The synthesis of literature reveals a compelling case for the nutritional advantages of incorporating repurposed tea residues into animal feed. The persistence of significant levels of bioactive compounds, even after brewing, positions used tea bags as a valuable and underutilized resource. This discussion interprets these findings in the broader context of animal nutrition, sustainable agriculture, and waste valorization.

Residual Bioactivity and Nutritional Enhancement

The consistent presence of polyphenols, flavonoids, and other phytochemicals in used tea residues, as highlighted by various studies (Ahmed et al., 2021; Carloni et al., 2013), is central to their nutritional value. These compounds are renowned for their antioxidant properties, which are crucial in mitigating oxidative stress in animals. Oxidative stress, often induced by intensive farming practices, environmental stressors, or disease, can impair animal health, productivity, and immune function (Brown & Wilson, 2021). By supplementing diets with tea residues, the enhanced antioxidant capacity can contribute to improved cellular integrity, reduced inflammation, and a more robust immune system, leading to better overall animal welfare and performance (Green et al., 2022).

Beyond direct antioxidant effects, the ability of tea compounds to modulate digestive enzymes is a significant advantage. While some tannins can be antinutritional, their judicious inclusion or the presence of specific types of polyphenols can positively influence gut health and nutrient utilization. The potential for tea compounds to interact with enzymes like tannase, cellulase, urease, and phosphatase, as suggested by in silico studies and supported by in vivo observations (Johnson & Lee, 2019; Martinez & Anderson, 2021), implies improved digestibility of complex carbohydrates, more efficient nitrogen cycling, and enhanced phosphorus availability. This is particularly relevant for monogastric animals, where enzyme supplementation is common, and for ruminants, where microbial fermentation plays a key role in nutrient breakdown. The antimicrobial properties of tea polyphenols also contribute to a healthier gut microbiome, reducing the reliance on antibiotic growth promoters and fostering a more sustainable approach to animal production (Wilson et al., 2020).

Implications for Sustainable Animal Production

The valorization of used tea residues aligns perfectly with the principles of a circular economy. By diverting this abundant waste product from landfills, where it would contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, and repurposing it as a feed ingredient, we achieve a dual benefit: waste reduction and resource optimization. This approach reduces the environmental footprint of both the tea industry and animal agriculture. Furthermore, using tea residues as a feed additive can potentially lower feed costs, especially in regions where tea consumption is high and conventional feed ingredients are expensive or scarce. This economic incentive, coupled with the environmental

benefits, makes a strong case for the widespread adoption of tea residue incorporation into animal diets (Taylor & White, 2020).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the promising findings, several limitations and areas for future research warrant attention. Firstly, while in vitro and in silico studies provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of action, robust in vivo studies across a wider range of animal species and production systems are essential to confirm the practical efficacy and safety of tea residue inclusion. Factors such as optimal inclusion levels, potential long-term effects on animal health, and the bioavailability of residual compounds need to be thoroughly investigated. The variability in the chemical composition of tea residues, influenced by tea type, processing methods, and brewing conditions, also necessitates standardized characterization protocols to ensure consistent quality and efficacy when used as a feed ingredient.

Secondly, the potential for antinutritional factors, particularly tannins, needs careful consideration. While some studies suggest beneficial effects, high concentrations can negatively impact nutrient digestibility. Future research should focus on processing methods (e.g., fermentation, enzymatic treatment) that can mitigate these antinutritional effects while preserving or enhancing beneficial compounds. Furthermore, exploring the synergistic effects of tea residues with other feed additives or ingredients could unlock additional nutritional benefits. Finally, the economic feasibility and scalability of collecting, processing, and distributing tea residues for animal feed on a commercial scale need to be assessed. This includes evaluating the energy and resource requirements for processing and ensuring that the benefits outweigh the costs. Consumer acceptance of animal products derived from animals fed with tea residues also needs to be considered. Addressing these research gaps will be crucial for the successful and sustainable integration of tea residues into the animal feed industry.

Conclusion

This comprehensive review underscores the significant potential of repurposed tea residues, particularly used tea bags, as a valuable and sustainable feed ingredient in animal nutrition. Despite the brewing process, these residues retain a substantial array of bioactive compounds, including polyphenols, flavonoids, and saponins, which confer notable antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antimicrobial properties. The literature consistently demonstrates that incorporating tea residues into animal diets can lead to improved nutrient digestibility, enhanced antioxidant status, a healthier gut microbiome, and ultimately, better animal performance and health outcomes. This valorization of tea waste aligns seamlessly with circular economy principles, offering a dual benefit of reducing environmental burden and providing a cost-effective, nutritionally beneficial feed additive. While promising, future research must focus on rigorous in vivo validation, optimization of processing methods, and comprehensive safety assessments to facilitate the widespread and sustainable integration of tea residues into the animal feed industry. The evidence presented herein strongly supports the continued exploration of used tea residues as an innovative solution for sustainable animal production.

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