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Pomegranates

The pomegranate tree, *punica granatum*, is a small tree reaching a height of about 20 to 30 feet. Ancient artwork reveals that the fruit adorned the sash of high priests and was carved into the walls and pillars of Solomon's temple. According to biblical scholars, the pointed lobes of the fruit probably served as the inspiration for Solomon's crown and for many crowns since then. The Hebrew word in the Old Testament passages is "rimmôn."

During ancient times the pomegranate was a sacred plant and, curiously, a symbol of fertility or fruitfulness due to the large number of seeds. Early Christians believed that the pomegranate tree was the "tree of life" in the Garden of Eden. As time progressed it became the symbol of eternal life in early Christian art. This unique fruit was used as an ornament on the walls of the Jewish temple at Capernaum in which Jesus preached. Even today, we see pomegranate adornments in Christian churches as a symbol of the eternal life given to us through Jesus Christ.

The pomegranate tree grows mostly as a shrub or small tree about 10 to 15 ft. high with fresh green, oval leaves that fall in winter. It has brilliant scarlet blossoms (the beauty of an orchard of pomegranates is referred to in Song 4:13). The apple-shaped, reddish fruit ripens around September. Under the hard rind you'll find hundreds of seeds. The juice squeezed from seeds is made into a kind of syrup for flavoring drinks. During Jesus' time it was made into wine as we learn in Song of Solomon 8:2: "I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine, of the juice of my pomegranate."



Today, pomegranates are becoming more popular because of their reputed antioxidental powers.

Focus on Scripture

Pomegranates

Exodus 28:34—"A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, upon the hem of the robe round about."

Exodus 39:26—"A bell and a pomegranate, a bell and a pomegranate, round about the hem of the robe to minister in; as the Lord commanded Moses."

1 Samuel 14:2—"And Saul tarried in the uttermost part of Gibeah under a pomegranate tree which is in Migron: and the people that were with him were about six hundred men . . ."

Song of Solomon 4:3—"Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks."

Song of Solomon 6:7—"As a piece of a pomegranate are thy temples within thy locks."

Song of Solomon 8:2—"I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother's house, who would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate."

Joel 1:12—"The vine is dried up, and the fig tree languisheth; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree, even all the trees of the field, are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men."

Haggai 2:19—"Is the seed yet in the barn? yea, as yet the vine, and the fig tree, and the pomegranate, and the olive tree, hath not brought forth: from this day will I bless you."

History

Botanical experts believe that this attractive fruit tree of Syria was probably indigenous to Persia, Afghanistan, and the neighborhood of the Caucasus, and was introduced to the Holy Land in very ancient times. The spies who reported to Moses upon first entering the Promised Land brought specimens of figs and pomegranates, along with grapes from the Vale of Eshcol Vines (Numbers 12:23). Figs and pomegranates are mentioned again in Numbers 20:5 as fruits the Israelites missed in the wilderness. We also recall that the Promised Land was to be one "of wheat and barley, and vines and fig trees and pomegranates."

Over centuries the pomegranate has been used in ornamentation by both Egyptian and Hebrew artists. For example, it was embroidered in many colors on the skirts of Aaron's garments, together with golden bells. Hiram of Tyre introduced the pomegranate into his brass work ornamentation in the temple as we note from this Scripture in 1 Kings 7:20: "And the pomegranates were two hundred, in rows round about upon the other capital."

Further research tells us that the pomegranate was cultivated as early as 3000 B.C. It is native to Iran and to the Himalayas in northern India and today is still widely cultivated throughout the Middle East and even into tropical Africa. Supposedly, early Spanish settlers brought this tree to the United States where it is grown commercially today for its fruit in California and Arizona.

Growing and Harvesting Tips

Pomegranates should be placed in the sunniest, warmest part of the yard, although they will grow and flower in shade. The attractive foliage, flowers, and fruits of the pomegranate make it an excellent landscaping plant. Pomegranates do best in well-drained ordinary soil, but also thrive on acidic loam or rocky gravel. Once established, they can take considerable drought, though for adequate fruit production they should be irrigated every 2 to 4 weeks during the dry season. Pomegranate lovers say that trees should be given 2 to 4-ounce applications of ammonium sulfate or other nitrogen fertilizer the first two springs. After that, very little fertilizer is needed,

although the plants respond to an annual mulch of rotted manure or other compost.

Pruning helps to keep plants within bounds. Cut back when they are about 2 feet tall. Then, allow 4 or 5 shoots to develop evenly distributed around the stem to keep the plant well balanced. These should start about 1 foot from the ground, to show a short but well-defined trunk. Remove shoots above or below and any suckers. Fruits are borne only at the tips of new growth, so the first few years prune branches annually to encourage the maximum number of new shoots on all sides. After the third year, remove just suckers and dead branches.

Fruits are ripe when they have developed a distinctive color and make a metallic sound when tapped. If left on the tree too long fruit tends to crack open. Pomegranates rival apples for a long storage life. They can keep at a temperature of 32°F to 40°F up to 6 months. Stored fruits improve, becoming juicier and more flavorful. Pomegranates tend to be messy to eat. For eating out of hand, deeply score several times vertically and then break the fruit apart and lift out clusters of juice sacs. These also make an attractive garnish for beef or duck dishes, and are delicious sprinkled over vanilla ice cream.

Pomegranate fruits are most often consumed as juice. Simply remove the sacs and put through an ordinary orange juice squeezer. Or you can roll a fruit between your hands to soften the interior, then cut a hole in the stem end, place on a glass, and let the juice run out, squeezing from time to time to get all the liquid. You can drink it or use it to make jellies, to flavor cakes or baked apples, or to make into wine.

As you think about growing pomegranates, consult mail order firms for the best varieties. If you don't have appropriate outdoor growing conditions, consider container culture with dwarf varieties that provide nice flowers and some fruit, though not much to eat. Recommended outdoor varieties include Cloud from the University of California pomegranate collection, a medium-sized fruit with a green-red color with sweet juice. Or try Early Wonderful, a large, deep-red, thin-skinned, delicious fruit on a medium-sized bush with large, orange-red fertile flowers that is very productive. Granada, King, Utah Sweet, and Wonderful, a Florida introduction, also do well.

Pomegranate trees are common in the tropics, subtropics, and subtemperate regions and is well adapted to areas with hot, dry summers. It is considerably more cold hardy than citrus and some varieties can tolerate temperatures as low as 10°F. For best results, pomegranates should be grown in full sun.

Basically, pomegranates are well-adapted to practically any soil that has good internal drainage and favors a slightly acidic pH range. For most home gardeners in much of America, pomegranate plants will most likely be container-grown in soil-less media. To start, wash an inch or so of the *potting medium from the root ball* to expose the peripheral roots to the soil mix. The plant should begin growth soon after planting, in contrast to those that are simply planted intact from the nursery container.

Water thoroughly at planting and again every few days for the first couple of weeks. Then water every 7 to 10 days. Outdoors, construct a ring of soil several inches high and a couple of feet in diameter around the newly planted tree. Then just fill the ring with water as necessary to direct the moisture to plant roots. Growers suggest you fertilize lightly after growth begins: about 1 to 2 cups of ammonium sulfate in the first year should be sufficient, split into three to four applications. Use about twice as much fertilizer in the second year and three times as much in the third year and do applications in February, May, and September. Mulch to eliminate weed competition and conserve soil moisture.

A warning: as seedlings, a pomegranate may undergo severe fruit drop during its first couple of years of production, but this will change as the plant matures. Fruit drop lessens with vegetatively propagated pomegranates. In temperate climates, fruit maturity should begin in summer and extend for several weeks in the fall.

Cooking Tips and Recipes

The sweet, juicy taste of the pomegranate has made it a favorite fruit in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cooking. Pomegranate arils make a striking garnish on everything from salads to desserts. And the juice, whether straight or boiled down into an intense, syrupy molasses, adds an exotic twist to the most basic foods. Pick or buy a few pomegranates and tap into them for the arils and juice. Use juice as flavoring or to drink, and arils as garnish on salads for eye appeal and flavor.

CHICKEN SALAD WITH ALMONDS

- 1 cup arils from 1 large fruit
- 1/2 cup golden raisins
- 1 pound cooked chicken breast meat, cut into 1-inch chunks
- 1/3 cup toasted sliced almonds
- 1 chopped apple
- 1/2 cup chopped or thinly sliced celery
- 1 tablespoon chopped Italian parsley
- 1/4 cup chopped green onion
- 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon curry powder (optional)
- 1/3 cup extra-virgin oil
- 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- Salt and pepper to taste

► Score 1 fresh pomegranate and place in a bowl of water. Break open the pomegranate underwater to free the arils (seed sacs). The arils will sink to the bottom of the bowl and the membrane will float to the top. Sieve and put the arils in a separate bowl. Reserve 1 cup of arils from fruit and set aside. (Refrigerate or freeze remaining arils for later use.) In a large mixing bowl combine the pomegranate arils, raisins, chicken, almonds,

apple, celery, parsley, green onion, and curry powder. In a small bowl whisk together the olive oil and vinegar. Pour in chicken mixture, mix well. Add salt and pepper to taste. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

ZESTY POMEGRANATE LEG OF LAMB

- Medium semi-boneless leg of lamb (2 to 3 lbs.)
 - 3 cups pomegranate juice
 - 1/4 cup Dijon mustard
 - 4 cloves of garlic, minced
 - 1 tablespoon of rosemary, minced
- Combine juice, mustard, garlic, and rosemary in a large bowl or dish. Mix well. Place lamb in mixture and cover tightly. Marinate for 2 days. After lamb has marinated, place in a roasting pan or glass baking dish in an oven pre-heated at 350°F. Roast for 1 to 1 1/2 hours depending on oven and your own preference. Once lamb is in the oven, strain the marinade through a mesh sieve. Simmer liquid in a saucepan for one hour, or until reduced to a thick glaze. Serve glaze over lamb.