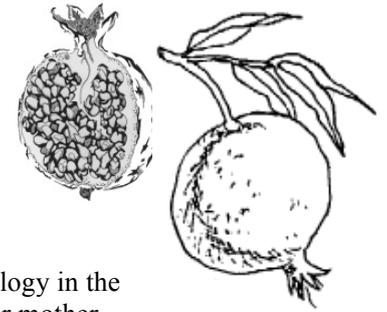


## Pomegranate

Pomegranate is the fruit of a small tree with multiple spiny branches, very attractive flowers, extremely long-lived, some specimens surviving for 200 years. Some fruitless varieties are grown for the flowers alone. The fruit is a berry, 5-10 cm in diameter with a rounded shape and thick, reddish skin. The seeds are embedded in a white, spongy, astringent membrane. Each seed has a surrounding water-laden edible pulp, ranging in color from white to deep red or purple.



Pomegranate is replete with history and symbolism. It is featured in Greek mythology in the story of Persephone, who was kidnapped and taken off to live in the Underworld. Her mother, the Fertility Goddess Demeter went into mourning for her lost daughter and stopped all green things to grow. Zeus could not allow the Earth to die, so he commanded the return of Persephone. It was the rule that anyone who consumed food or drink in the Underworld was doomed to spend eternity there. Persephone had no food, but was tricked into eating six pomegranate seeds, thus she was condemned to spend six months in the Underworld every year. During these six months, her mother mourned and did not give fertility to the earth. This became an ancient Greek explanation for the seasons. In the Bible, Moses told the Israelites, who longed for the fruit while wandering in the Egyptian desert, that they would have it in their Promised Land. There have been goblets in the shape of pomegranate, and kings and priests had pomegranates embroidered on their robes. It is said that Catherine of Aragon ate pomegranate seeds - a symbol of fertility - in hope of bearing Henry VIII a son. Persians believe Eve actually ate a pomegranate when she plucked from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, not an apple. Pomegranate is also featured in tradition as a symbol of good tidings. Greeks break open a pomegranate at wedding celebrations and the Chinese eat candied pomegranate seeds for good luck.

The fruits are ripe when they develop a rich red color and make a metallic sound when tapped. They must be picked before being over matured when they tend to crack open, particularly when rained on. Pomegranates are equal to apples in having a long storage life. They are best maintained at a temperature of 5 - 6°C and can be kept for several months within this temperature range without spoiling. They may even improve in storage, becoming juicier and more flavorful.



Even though pomegranate has been cultivated and appreciated since antiquity, its seeds and the fact that the fruit is 'messy' to consume held it back from universal popularity. Indeed, opening a fresh pomegranate takes some practice. Slice the fruit in half and pry out the seeds with your hands or slice the crown end off and slit the rind vertically in several places from top to bottom. After you open one, you'll find hundreds of seeds packed into little compartments that are separated by bitter-tasting, whitish membranes. Place the fruit in a bowl of water, and break the sections apart. The seeds will sink to the bottom while the rind and membrane will float. Collect the seeds, drain off the excess water, and use a food processor to turn the seeds into fresh

juice then strain the results through a fine mesh sieve. Another way is to ream the halved fruits on an ordinary orange juice squeezer. Another approach is to start with warming the fruit slightly and rolling it between the hands to soften the interior. A hole is then cut in the stem end which is placed on a glass to let the juice run out, squeezing the fruit from time to time to get all the juice, now you will be rewarded with a most refreshing drink! Pomegranate juice can also be made into jellies, sorbets, cold or hot sauces, as well as to flavor cakes, baked fruits, etc. Pomegranate syrup or molasses is made from pomegranate juice, a reduction cooking from the juice of a tart variety, evaporated to form a thick, dark red liquid. It is popular in Middle East cuisines. The juice can also be made into a wine. If you'd rather eat the fruit, it can be luxuriously eaten straight out of hand: just deeply score it several times vertically and then breaking it apart, lift the clusters of juice sacs out then eat them. Many of us would compare the taste to that of cranberries or sour cherries. The sacs make an attractive garnish when sprinkled on salad or various cold and hot dishes. 'Grenadine' syrup, a very popular ingredient in cocktails, is characterized by a flavor that is both tart and sweet of pomegranate, and by a deep red color.

Pomegranates are very popular around the Mediterranean and throughout the Middle East as far as India. Until recently they have been largely ignored by the English-speaking world. The best eating fruits nowadays are almost seedless - unfortunately these varieties are only available in selected ethnic stores. While good eating pomegranates have plenty of juicy pulp with a sweet and slightly astringent taste, inferior fruits, especially those from wild trees, contain mostly seeds and membranes, what pulp they have is very astringent; but they have their uses as they can be boiled and reduced to make syrup or molasses, a thick dark sauce to add flavour and colour to food. Their seeds can be pickled into a sour condiment.

Apart from providing us with a most delicious fruit juice - I couldn't have enough of it when we travelled in Turkey and the countries of the Caucasus recently - pomegranate also makes a very attractive ornamental plant. The tree blooms in spring and continues on to midsummer. The flowers have crinkled sepals, similar in appearance to tissue paper; they may be scarlet, reddish orange, or a variegated mixture of two or more colours, most attractive!