

Punica granatum

[Synonyms : *Malum granatum*, *Punica sempervirens*]

POMEGRANATE is an evergreen (deciduous in temperate regions) shrub or tree. Native from south-eastern Europe to the Himalayas it has small scarlet-orange (occasionally white) flowers with many yellow stamens.

It is also known as *Anardana* (Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), *An-ar* (Persian), Apple of Carthage, Carthaginian apple, *Cortezade Granada* (Spanish), *Daan* (Kashmiri), *Dadima* (Sanskrit), *Dalamb* (Gujarati), *Dalim* (Assamese), *Dalima* (Javanese), *Dalimb* (Bengali, Marathi), *Dalimba* (Oriya), *Dalimbari* (Kannada), *Dannima pandu* (Telugu), *Delima* (Malay), *Delun* (Singhalese), *Granaatappel* (Dutch), *Granaatappelbloesem* (Dutch), *Granaattiomena* (Finnish), *Granada* (English, Spanish), *Granado* (Spanish), *Granat* (German), *Granatäpple* (Swedish), *Granatapfel* (German), *Granatbaum* (German), *Granato* (Italian), *Granátové jablko* (Czech), *Granátovník obecný* (Czech), *Granátovník púnsky* (Slovak), *Granatpuniko* (Esperanto), *Grenade* (French), *Grenadier* (French), *Maathulai* (Tamil), *Marhaník granátový* (Czech), *Marhaník obecný* (Czech), *Mathalam pazham* (Malayalam, Tamil), *Melogranato* (Spanish), *Melograno* (Italian), *Punischer Apfel* (German), *Rodiá* (Greek), *Roidiá* (Greek), *Rum-an* (Arabic), *Rummien* (Maltese), *Scorzo del melogranato* (Spanish), *Shek lau* (Chinese), *Thap-thim* (Thai), and *Zakuro* (Japanese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of concord (fruit), democracy, elegance, ‘the female principle’ (fruit), foolishness (blossom), hope (fruit), immortality (fruit), love (fruit), mature elegance (blossom), perfection (blossom), union (fruit), and virginity (fruit).

Warning – overdoses of stem and root bark can cause nausea, headaches, dilated pupils, partial blindness, purging, cramps, vomiting, diarrhoea and paralysis. These should only be taken internally under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. In Britain the drug is only available through a registered pharmacist. Chewing the flowers turns saliva violet.

Granatum means ‘many-seeded’.

One of its earliest names was Apple of Carthage which in Latin is *malum punicum*, while another Latin name it acquired *poma granata* means ‘apple with many seeds’.

Pomegranate cultivation is believed to have begun from about 4000 to 3000 BC and the fruit were part of the diet of the peoples in the Indus Valley in what was then northern India from at least 2500 BC. By about 1000 years later the trees had been introduced to Egypt from the area around the southern Caspian Sea, but they did not reach China until the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) was in power – many earlier historians believe it reached there around 150 BC whereas modern authorities subscribe to the view that it arrived in China in the early years AD.

Archaeologists found a large dry pomegranate (dating from about 1470 BC) in the tomb of a butler to Queen Hatshepsut. It was depicted in murals of about 20 years later at Karnak in the temple of Thutmose III (who ruled from 1479-1425 BC), and its fresh leaves had been woven into a 15 in. long wreath and included in an intricate collar found in the tomb of Tut’ankhamun (who died in c.1340 BC).

In ancient Egypt where the pomegranate was depicted in temple carvings the fruit was used with other ingredients to make a strong wine (which would have had a raspberry-like

taste) – and in Europe today a gentler version called ‘grenadine’ is prepared. This is a sweetened fermented pomegranate cordial that can be diluted with water to made a refreshing drink or added to puddings particularly fruit salads. Grenadine and a concentrated pomegranate juice also used in cookery and cocktails are popular in the Middle East where Muhammad (c.570-c.632) the Arabian prophet and founder of Islam, recommended that the fruit be eaten to ‘purge the system of envy and hatred’.

A quite widely held belief in the Middle East (still subscribed to in some areas even now) contended that one seed in the pomegranate has come from the Garden of Eden or Paradise and it was also thought once that the devil could be expelled through scourging with pomegranate branches. Still today in parts of the Mediterranean children can be seen wearing necklaces of threaded fallen blossoms not only to ease stomach disorders but also as a protection against evil.

For the Chinese the sacred pomegranate was a symbol of fertility and a prosperous future and its seeds were representative of many male offspring who would earn fame and glory. The fruit appears in many ancient Chinese paintings.

The relationship with fertility was also upheld by both the ancient Greek and the Roman civilizations and countries in the Near East. In the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament of the *Bible* the fruit is compared with the joys of a beguiling lover, and some people believe that it is the Tree of Knowledge referred to in earlier Old Testament books. Whereas Greek legend uses the pomegranate in an allegory of nature’s cycle. This was in the story of Persephone that was performed yearly in the Eleusinian Mysteries which took place at Eleusis near Athens at the temple of Demeter. (The Mysteries were the basis of a secret cult that focussed initially on Demeter and her daughter Persephone and were a highlight of the Greek religious calendar. Later they were to be adopted by the Romans.) In the legend (of which there are several versions – all involving the pomegranate) Hades, god of the Underworld, has kidnapped Persephone. Zeus agrees to rescue her if she has not eaten anything but unfortunately Hades has given her a few pomegranate seeds and an alternative arrangement has to be negotiated. New terms were successfully agreed and these allow Persephone to stay with her mother, Demeter (goddess of agriculture) for nine months of the year providing the remaining three are spent with Hades.

In the *Bible*, when the Israelites were wandering in the desert in their search for a new home after their escape from Egypt, Moses (who lived in the 13th Century and early part of the 12th Century BC) the Hebrew prophet and lawgiver who led them gave his assurance that there would be pomegranates in the Promised Land. Three to four centuries later the pomegranate was to appear as decoration on the pillars of King Solomon’s temple in Israel. (The early 21st Century saw ongoing debate among some scholars as to the actual existence of Solomon’s temple for which apparently archaeological evidence was slim to that date if not non-existent although evidence of similar temples elsewhere in the Middle East had been found.) It also formed part of the design embroidered into the hem of the ephod (linen surplice) worn by the High Priest. Between 143-135 BC Jerusalem’s currency included a silver shekel that bore an engraving of pomegranates. The fruit still features today in Jewish ceremonies and can be found in their architectural and needlework designs.

The Romans imported pomegranates from Carthage where some believe they were introduced by the Phoenicians. However it was not until the Saracens re-introduced them (after the fall of the Roman Empire) via Sicily and then southern Spain that they spread much further into Europe. By the 13th Century agronomist Ibn-al-Awam (still known today for his *Book of Agriculture*) when writing from Andalusia in southern Spain reported that there were ten varieties growing there at that time.

The pomegranate became the emblem of the city of Granada, where the Moors planted an avenue of the trees and it appears in the City's coat of arms. In Britain it was also incorporated into the device adopted by Henry IV of the House of Lancaster, who reigned from 1399-1413, with the accompanying words

Sour, yet sweet.

Later in the 15th Century Henry VIII's first wife, Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536) assumed the pomegranate as an emblem as did her daughter, Mary I (1516-1558) (Mary Tudor), with white and red roses. It also features in the national coat of arms of Columbia representing New Granada.

Depiction of the fruit is not limited to heraldry however. It has been noted that they have been the inspiration for a fabric design popular during the Italian Renaissance. This was a pattern based on the compartmentalized fruit flesh with its embedded seeds.

There are 14th Century French recipes that include the pomegranate as an ingredient. And the fruit was also part of what is understood to be one of the earliest known English manuscripts on cookery which dates to about 1390 and according to a note on the vellum was compiled by Richard II's (1367-1400) master chefs. Today the fruit are a commercial ingredient for fruit drinks, cocktails and syrup.

It is known that the trees were being cultivated in Britain in 1548 and there are reports of them growing in tubs in Wimbledon in 1649.

The fruit skin was used in ancient Egypt for tanning (producing a fine quality leather) and it can still be employed commercially for this purpose today. The skin has also yielded a fabric dye and has provided an ingredient in one of the blackest and most durable writing inks. (In Java which is now part of Indonesia an infusion of the leaves in vinegar has also been used to obtain an ink.) The flowers yield a red dye as well.

Its hard wood has been used to make small objects.

Pomegranate is mentioned in two or three of the plays of the English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) including *Romeo and Juliet*.

..... it is not yet near day;
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear;
Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate-tree:

Then the poet, Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) referred to the fruit in *Song of the Emigrants in Bermuda*

..... in a green night,
And does in the pomegranates close
Jewels more rich than Ormus shows:

It is not surprising to learn that it was the Spanish conquistadores who introduced the fruit to the Americas and it seems to have become naturalized in the southern states of North America by the mid-18th Century. It was discovered thus in 1773 by William Bartram (1739-1823), the celebrated American naturalist, in Georgia. North American Navajo Indians made necklaces with the blossom.

Many ancient records from the beginning of Egyptian history witness the fact that the pomegranate (fruit rind and root bark) has been used medicinally for thousands of years. The stem bark has been used as a remedy for tapeworm, a practice mentioned for example in the *Ebers* papyrus going back to about 1552 BC. (The papyrus is believed to have been discovered in about 1862 and purchased in Thebes in 1873 by the German egyptologist, Georg Moritz Ebers (1837-1898). Today Professor Ebers (professor of egyptology at Leipzig from 1875-1889) is said to be best known for his novels set in ancient Egypt, while his papyrus is thought to be the oldest preserved medical document.) Yet despite this the root bark was then overlooked for roughly 2000 years until the 18th

Century. However European herbalists used to recommend the use of the fruit or seeds for treating ulcerated ears or nose, for securing loose teeth and for treating period problems – and the fruit and the flowers have also been employed in a remedy for fever. (The dried flowers, used medicinally, have attracted the name Balustine flowers.) In India dysentery and diarrhoea have been treated with the skin. Today in Europe pomegranate can still be prescribed in remedies for tapeworm.

The blossom is the birthday flower for 10th June.