

Pomegranate
Punica granatum
Punicaceae

Introduction

Though experiencing a renaissance in interest, for a long list of very modern reasons, the pomegranate is one of our most ancient fruits. It is native to the home of several ancient civilizations, and across the board, the pomegranate factored into ancient life.

For much of the year, the tree disappears into the landscape. It is at home in dry environments that tend to be on the drab side. Plants, to manage the lack of moisture, produce small inconspicuous leaves. Small leaves reduce the amount of moisture lost through evaporation and discourages grazing animals from heading towards the plant. Fading into the landscape serves a desert plant well.

However, in the spring, the pomegranate jumps into the limelight. At the first hint of spring, the tree explodes with fragrant electric yellow or orange flowers. The word electric is important here because the flowers are so bright they pop out at you, literally... this is especially true due to the colourless locales in which they exist. In summer, the tree is covered with bright red, larger than apple sized fruits. These searing red hot softballs are filled with hundreds of sweet tangy refreshing juice filled seeds.

The tree goes out of its way to attract the attention of the human eye. You would have to be blind to miss this one. The fruits electric colours and delectable juice scream... notice me! And that is exactly what ancient man did.

Desert people pounded the seeds of the pomegranate to produce a thirst quenching beverage. How long have they done this? A long time. Some seriously dried remnants of pomegranate peels were unearthed in the Neolithic city of Gezer!

Being very popular with one ancient people, the Israelites, it would pay to start the history tour there.

The pomegranate in the Biblical day.

Needless to say, the ancient Israelites took notice of this rather amazing plant. It grows freely in Israel and did so in the days the Bible events were happening. It gets mentioned time and again in the Bible, always in a very complimentary manner. If you are a Bible reader, you will find the pomegranate mentioned in the following chapters.

Exodus 28:33-34

Exodus 39:24-26

Numbers 13:23

Numbers 20:5

Numbers 33:19-20

Deuteronomy 8:8

Joshua 15:32
Joshua 19:7 and 13
Judges 20:45
I Samuel 14:2
II Samuel 4:2
I Kings 6:32
I Kings 7:18 and 20
II Kings 5:18
II Kings 25:17
II Chronicles 4:13
II Chronicles 3:16
Song 4:13, 6:7, 7:12, 8:2,
Joel 1:12
Haggai 2:19

To get a sense of the Israelites perspective on this fruit, let's look at a few quotes from the Bible.

Numbers 13:23

“And they came to the valley of Eschol, and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them, they brought also some **pomegranates** and figs.”

Song of Solomon 4:3

“Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a **pomegranate** behind your veil.”

The Hebrew word for the fruit is rimmon(singular) and rimmonim(plural). In fact, if you are familiar with contemporary synagogue practice, you will know this word. Rimmonin are the ornamental, decorative tops of the Torah scrolls. If you look closely, you will notice that these decorative tops are really pomegranates fashioned out of silver or gold

Silver pomegranates are placed on top of the Torah scrolls for a reason. The pomegranate was not a staple food, rather a rich treat enjoyed for a few weeks of the year. It was a highlight in the year. Like the pomegranate was a high light in the annual calendar, the Torah is meant to be the highlight in the day. Lore and legend gets very lyrical, but, the lore here is the pomegranate sits on top of the Torah, to remind people of this fact.

On a slightly less spiritual level, the Israelites loved the pomegranate because it contained sugar. And lots of it. To really appreciate this, you have to step back in time to a world where there was little sugar, little honey, and no canned fruit juice. A time when there were no bags of sugar, no bubbling sodas rich in corn syrup, no ice tea with a touch of sweetened lemonade. There was not much sweetness available in the Bible day, and this tree offered up sweet nectar for the cost of collecting fruit in the wild.

On top of that, being a desert climate, refreshing beverages were especially popular in the biblical day. Take a walk in Israel in the summer and after five minutes, you start dreaming of something wet to drink. Back in the biblical days, a tree that produced bucket after bucket of fruits that could be squeezed into a sweet, refreshing drink was a beloved tree.

When Moses sent the spies to the Promised Land to make sure it was really promising, the spies returned with pomegranates, proof positive that the Holy Land was worth the trip. A land rich in pomegranates was good land.

The trees are not very big, and in fact, bush may be a better description. They rarely get any bigger than a lilac bush. But, they are big in the production department. Each tree can produce up to 50 of the big apple sized fruits or 6 big pitchers of bright red nectar! Yes, the Israelites were familiar with this spindly little plant and the mother load of sweet juice it produced.

So popular was the fruit it ended up in much Bible history and lore. To begin with it is thought to be the tree of life in the garden of Eden and early Christians used the fruit as a symbol of eternal life. And that's just a beginning. Here is a more comprehensive list.

The fruit was carved into the stone of the Temple and was embroidered on priestly clothing. Pomegranates were carved out of gold and used to decorate the temple altar and the Torah scrolls. (Exodus 2:33-34.) It was listed as one of the pleasant fruits in Egypt (Numbers 20:5) and is mentioned as one of the promised blessings of the Promised Land, the land of Israel. (Deuteronomy 8:8) A spiced wine was made of its juice and it was frequently mentioned in the Song of Solomon as a source of fertility. (Song 8:2)

And here is a really fascinating fact. King Solomon's crown was designed after the pomegranate fruit. If you look at the bottom of the fruit it reveals a familiar shape. It seems that the crown shape that we know as the "crown" shape is really a replica of an upside down pomegranate. Though Kings always wore interesting things on their heads, King Solomon was the first king to wear a crown with the crown shape we all know. And.... it was designed after the pomegranate.

The Israelites were not the only people to associate the plant with their religion. Many that came before them and after them saw the plant as being a gift from god. At that time, gods and kings were closely related, and the pomegranate was used by other non-Israelite monarchs in their personal decorations.

Let's have a peak at what was happening with the pomegranate outside the Kingdom of Israel. For starters, in many instances, gods had the same name as this fruit or a name based on the fruit. Remember, the Israelites called the fruit Rimmon.

Rimmon mentioned in II Kings 5:18, was an Assyrian deity worshipped at Damascus. Rimmon, the Babylonian Adad, and the Assyrian Hadad were the gods of thunder and the tree sacred to them was none other than our little pomegranate. In Egypt it was considered

sacred to the gods and was carved into Egyptian sculpture and can be seen in inscriptions in the great tombs. The Persia kings had gold pomegranates as the head of their sceptres.

On the other side of the Mediterranean, the Greeks had the poor little fruit all tied up in a story that can only be described as a soap opera. A simple story line is that the pomegranate was associated with Jupiter. We know this because the ancient depiction of Jupiter shows him carrying a pomegranate in his hand. Oh, if it only stopped there. But alas it does not.

The longer Greek story would be this. Ceres, goddess of the earth, got mad when Zeus married off her daughter Prosperine to Pluto. It seems that Ceres left heaven in quite a huff. Apparently she was opposed to the marriage. Once out of heaven, and touring earth, those that came across her were in for a surprise. If they were nice to her she blessed them, if they were not, she cursed them. She is said to have carried a personal blow torch, would incinerate the person that irritated her, and start forest fires. Zeus was afraid Ceres would scorch the whole planet by the time she was finished with her war path. So, he took Prosperine away from her husband and gave her back to her mother.

Ceres was happy and put her blow torch away. But, Pluto was not equally pleased. Before Prosperine went home to her mother, He got Prosperine to eat a pomegranate that had been drugged. The drug made her return to hell, his home, six months out of every year. According to Greek legend, we have six nice months a year (when Prosperine is with her mother), and six nasty months a year (when Prosperine is visiting her husband). It is also said to have been sacred to Pluto. This is best described as one big Greek drama.

There are a few minor Greek myths regarding the pomegranate and they would include the following. According to Atheneus, it was first tree planted in Greece by the goddess Aphrodite. Alternatively, it is said to have sprung up in Greece from the spilt blood of Dionysius Zagreus.

However, there is something significant in this last paragraph. Whenever you see Aphrodite associated with a plant, you know it has ties to fertility and romance. This is not a single reference. The pomegranate gets mentioned in the Song of Songs, over and over again, in a very romantic and fertile context. The pomegranate, able to produce buckets of fruit, in the driest of locations, filled with hundreds of seeds, was seen as an ancient fertility aide.

Now, the Romans cannot be left out of the historical view of the pomegranate. Roman mythology states that the pomegranate came into being when a fortune teller told a nymph that she would wear a crown one day. Bacchus, god of the wine, thought he would play a trick on the royal hopeful and turned her into a pomegranate tree. The tree would spend eternity producing fruits that wear a crown on their bottom. I don't think this was the crown the nymph had in mind.

The historical record tells us it was raised in the gardens around Carthage. Darius Hystaspes, according to Herodotus, ate the fruit on a regular basis. Homer says the fruit was found growing in the gardens of Alcinous. The Romans brought the fruit from Carthage to Italy, which is why they called it Mala Punica, the Phoenician apple. Pliny talked about nine

different varieties in his day. This Roman name for the pomegranate is one we still live with. The scientific name for it is *Punicum granatum*. The Phoenician grain, referring to where the tree came from and the fact it is filled with hundreds of little juice covered grains.

All done and said, this is one ancient fruit. The ancients felt this was the best fruit for maintaining health, and, contemporary research is finding this very well may be the case.