

# THE POMEGRANATE

By Claudia Alarcon

*Long ignored as an edible fruit and relegated to fall floral centerpieces, the pomegranate is quite in vogue these days, touted as a potent antioxidant with numerous health benefits. However, this emblematic fruit is anything but new. In fact, excavations of the Early Bronze Age around 3,500–2,000 BC reveal that the pomegranate was one of the first cultivated fruits in the world.*



Scholars believe that pomegranates are native to Iran and the Himalayas in Northern India, and were brought from Syria to Egypt around 1,600 BC. Ancient Egyptians used the pomegranate in a variety of ways. The juice was believed to fight intestinal worms, the blossoms were crushed to make a red dye and the peel was used for dyeing leather. The fruit became so revered that representations were found on wall paintings in tombs, symbolizing life after death. By 700 BC, pomegranates were introduced to Rome, where it was named *Punicum malum*, which translates as “Phoenician apple.” Here, pomegranates grew in residential courtyards and were enjoyed as a summer fruit. They were depicted in Pompeian mosaics and figured prominently in Greek myths.

The mature pomegranate fruit is large, between three to five inches in diameter. The fruit of different cultivars are quite diverse in their color, taste and other traits. Peel color ranges from a light yellow to very dark red/purple. Internally, the fruit consists of a series of chambers that contain the seeds, which are coated with a fleshy outgrowth — known as aril — that contains the edible juice. The color of the arils also ranges from a light, virtually white color to very dark red or purple, with a flavor that can be tart, sweet or sweet-tart.

Pomegranates arrived in Spain during the Moorish conquest in 711 AD, and are depicted in the intricate archway designs and mosaics at the Alhambra in Granada, the city that bears the Spanish name of the fruit. Pomegranates made their way to the Americas in 1521, where they flourished and were eventually transported to missions in California and Texas. In 1896, a farmer from Porterville, California brought pomegranate cuttings from Florida to California and began propagating them. This new variety was sweeter and juicier than the others. He named it “Wonderful,” and is now the most widely grown commercial pomegranate today.

Pomegranate is a versatile ingredient working well in sweet and savory dishes, brightening salads, marinades, braised meats, cocktails and desserts. As expected, pomegranates figure prominently in Middle Eastern cuisine, especially couscous dishes. And in Mexico, the iconic *chiles en nogada*, arguably the national dish of our southern neighbor, cannot exist without the juicy, jewel-like seeds scattered on top.

Perhaps the greatest deterrent in using pomegranates is the daunting task of eating them. How on earth do we get those seeds out? There is a nifty trick to do it. Score the fruit around the middle lengthwise, cutting deep enough to pierce the skin. Put your thumbs into the cuts and pull apart the two halves, place them in a bowl of cold water and gently push the edges down and away to open the fruit. Turn the half upside down and tap it with a wooden spoon so the seeds drop into the water, releasing any stragglers with your hands. Scoop any floating pith out of the water with a slotted spoon or sieve and strain. The seeds are ready to use in your favorite recipe. Look for pomegranates that feel heavy for their size. The heavier they feel, the more juice they will contain. Give this superfood a try this fall and winter. ♦

Source: [www.foodreference.com/html/a-pomegranate-history](http://www.foodreference.com/html/a-pomegranate-history)