

## The Pomegranate Fruit - its efficacious qualities and status in the Zoroastrian religion and folklore <sup>[1]</sup>

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*Punica granatum* (Punicaceae) or pomegranate is the traditional fruit of the central Iranian plateau where it originates. It is also one of the most ancient fruit trees to be domesticated and is known to have been grown in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The pomegranate grows from Iran to the Himalaya in northern India and was cultivated and naturalized over the whole Mediterranean region since ancient times. The field gene bank maintained by the Seed and Plant Improvement Institute (SPII) at Yazd in central Iran has over 700 different types of trees, some of which going back to antiquity. Its only related species in the wild is *P. protopunica*, which is endemic to the island of Socotra (Yemen) in the Indian Ocean. It is widely cultivated throughout India and the drier parts of Southeast Asia, Malaya, the East Indies and tropical Africa. Spanish settlers introduced the tree into California in 1769. In U.S. it is grown for its fruits mainly in the drier parts of California and Arizona.

There is no other fruit crop that has high medicinal value compared to that in pomegranate. It has some cultural significance in Iran (it signifies immortality, fertility, or reproductive energy), where is found in the central courtyard of every home on the Iranian plateau. The pomegranate flower is included in Zoroastrian religious rites. During the navjote and marriage ceremonies, a few '*danas*' grains of the pomegranate fruit are included in the '*ses*'. The child whose navjote is going to be performed is asked to chew a pomegranate leaf, after the purification bath. It is said that a dying Zoroastrian in ancient Iran was given a few sips of the '*haoma*' juice, but if no '*haoma*' was available, he was given some pomegranate juice or if already dead a few grains of the pomegranate fruit were placed in the person's mouth.

Pomegranate is also used during the '*navar*' ceremony whereby a young man is inducted in to Zoroastrian priesthood. A number of '*mobeds*' meet at the house of the candidate one day before the initiation. They prepare a crown and a '*vars*'. The crown is a turban wound to fit the candidate's head. It is decorated with gold and silver chains with hanging coins and has other ornaments that make it look like a crown. Each twig is wrapped with colored wool to make the '*vars*' multicolored. The twigs are made to make a circular pyramid in a plate. It is covered with a thin net. Four mirrors, dry fruit, candies, and a pomegranate fruit are also kept in the plate during the ceremony.

Because of its many seeds, the pomegranate has long stood as a symbol for fertility and included in marriage ceremonies. A refreshing delicacy, it is loved by those who dwell in hot, thirsty lands. The plant grows wild in Syria and Iran and is cultivated in Israel, where 3,000 tons a year are grown annually. It is a shrub or small tree that can grow as high as fifteen feet, with a straight stem, reddish bark and plenty of spreading branches. The dark green leaves are highly polished and the pomegranate flowers are red. When ripe, the fruit is about the size of an orange, has a thick maroon jacket enveloping the pulp. Syrup made from the

pomegranate seeds is known as grenadine. Grenadine is common in Northern India not only for desserts, but also to marinate meat; due to its content of proteolytic enzymes, it acts as a meat tenderizer. Pomegranate juice, either fresh or in the form of grenadine, is a common souring agent in Western Asia and may be used, e.g., in the Turkish or Arabic salad (*tabuleh*) made from precooked cracked wheat (bulgur), parsley and possibly raw vegetables. Lastly, dried pomegranate seeds make an interesting alternative for raisins in cakes and other European sweets.

From its origins in central Iran the pomegranate spread to West Asia and the regions bordering the Mediterranean Sea. It reached Spain and pomegranate orchards dotted the entire region that was termed as "Grenada". From Spain the missionaries took it to the New World when they landed in Mexico. Later, they traveled northwards in to California and the tree was established in the San Joaquin valley. Eastwards, the pomegranate spread to India along the marine and land-based trade routes. It spread to China through Samarqand. The pomegranate, along with the peach and the citron, was one of China's 3 blessed fruits. To the Chinese, it was a symbol of fecundity and a prosperous future. The many seeds represented numerous male offspring earning fame and glory. The first sherbet was made from snow mixed with pomegranate juice. In ancient times pharmacists made an astringent medication for treatment of dysentery from the blossoms.

Beginning around 200 B.C. great camel caravans of merchants and traders traveled by lonely and barren desert tracks and lofty mountain passes which became to be known as the Silk Road. Exchanges of goods, seeds, religious philosophy, and technology transformed every culture through which the great route passed. The Silk Road stretched 5,000 miles from Xi'an, the ancient capital of China to the very doorstep of Europe, Rome. Today, the Silk Road remains in the imagination of journalists, historians, anthropologists, and adventurers as a symbol of the joining of cultures of the east and the west. Many a bag of pomegranate seeds and cuttings were transported to new areas for cultivation.

Three pomegranates can be seen on the silver shekel of Jerusalem, the coin mentioned in the Bible. It was in circulation from 143 to 135 BC. Hiram of Tyre used the pomegranate in building Solomon's Temple. In fact, the walls of Solomon's Temple are reported as having been literally covered with decorations, in which, this fruit appears the most conspicuous. It is also mentioned in regards to the ephod (part of the gorgeous ceremonial dress of a Jewish high-priest) that was bordered at the hem with embroidered pomegranates.

In the Iranian city of Meybod there is the Narin Qal'eh, which used to be called the castle of pomegranate (Qal'ehi Anar) that is now lying in ruin. This six-storied castle can be seen from any angle in the city. The castle was said to have been erected at the time of King Solomon. Another story has it that this is the castle or white fortress (Dezhe Sefid) stipulated in Shahnameh epic of Ferdowsi. The history of this castle is

indeed considered to be older than the Achaemenid era. From a historic and architectural point of view this castle is of no less of significance than that of the Persepolis to many scholars of Iranian history.

The medicinal powers of the pomegranate are mentioned in Greek mythology as well. People of the Near East and the Greeks and Romans associated the pomegranate with fecundity. In Greece, the pomegranate was involved in the folkloristic story of the goddess of agriculture, Demeter, and her daughter Persephone. When Hades, the god of the underworld, abducted Persephone, Zeus promised to retrieve her if Persephone had not eaten anything in the underworld. When it was discovered that she had eaten a few kernels of a pomegranate given to her by Hades, a compromise settlement was made: Persephone was allowed to stay with her mother nine months of the year but was required to spend the remaining three with Hades. The story can be seen as an allegory representing the cycle of growth, decay, and regeneration of vegetation, the time in the underworld representing the resting period of the seed during the winter. The story of Persephone was reenacted every year at the temple of Demeter at Eleusis near Athens. In these rites, called the Eleusinian mysteries, the pomegranate was considered the mystic fruit. These ceremonies were the most important and impressive of all Greek religious celebrations and were later adopted by the Romans. Even the ancient Egyptians revered the pomegranate. Fragments of the pomegranate fruit rind and seeds were found buried inside the sarcophagus of Pharaoh Tutankhamen (1343–1325 BC). Due to its many kernels arranged in clusters, the pomegranate fruit has long stood as a symbol for fertility and the flower bud, sexuality. In fact, in the book on oriental lovemaking written by Sheik Nefzaui of Tunisia in 1500 AD, the pomegranate juice has been described as having several beneficial effects, especially for fertile women.

A refreshing delicacy, it is loved by those who dwell in hot, thirsty lands. The plant grows wild in Syria and Persia and is cultivated in Israel, where 3000 tons a year are grown annually. It is a shrub or small tree that can grow as high as fifteen feet, with a straight stem, reddish bark and plenty of spreading branches. The dark green leaves are highly polished and the pomegranate flowers are red. When ripe, the fruit is about the size of an orange, has a thick maroon jacket enveloping the pulp. Syrup made from squeezing the pulpy pomegranate kernels with the addition of sugar is known as grenadine. The juice is commonly used in Northern India not only for desserts and sweets, but also to marinate meat; due to its content of proteolytic enzymes, which acts as a meat tenderizer. Pomegranate juice, either fresh or in the form of grenadine, is a common souring agent in West Asia and North Africa and may be used, e.g., in the Turkish or Arabic salad (tabuleh) made from precooked cracked wheat (bulgur), parsley and possibly raw salad vegetables. Lastly, dried pomegranate kernels make an interesting alternative for raisins in cakes (muffins), ice creams and other sweets.

During the First World War, the French named their hand-tossing explosive as a hand "grenade", after the seed

scattering properties of the exploding pomegranate fruit at maturity. The French military division that wielded this lethal weapon in war was likewise called the "Grenadiers".

One can dry the fruit in the sun and use it in a potpourri bowl (which is placed in bath-rooms in America and Europe) or in the old times was hung on the door-back with a dried bulb of garlic, some cinnamon sticks and a horseshoe for good luck. They also used to break a pomegranate in front of the home entrance to ask the gods for prosperity. The leaves turn yellow in the autumn and give the tree a totally different look.

The Chinese mention pomegranate juice as a longevity drug. But the pomegranate, whose main attraction has been as a fruit, is now coming into its own as a modern medical resource. Two separate Israeli medical research groups, are developing a broad range of treatments and products derived from the fruit; At the Lipid Research Laboratory of Haifa's Rambam Medical Center, Dr. Michael Aviram, a biochemist for 20 years, has researched ways to prevent and break down the deposits of cholesterol in the arteries -- arteriosclerosis -- that cause strokes and heart disease. Searching for natural antioxidants, he says he tested "many different substances before focusing on the pomegranate". Its juice, he found, contains a particularly powerful antioxidant, a flavonoid, more effective at fighting heart disease than those known in tomatoes and red wine.

For the past year, he has tested the medicinal value of the juice by providing it to Rambam patients suffering from carotid artery stenosis, a narrowing of those arteries that bring blood to the brain. The results, he reports, have been rapid with improvements noticed as early as after the first month. The potential exists, Aviram says, for high-risk patients to be spared bypass surgery simply by drinking pomegranate juice. To make the consumption of pomegranate more palatable, he is working on developing a pill with the same medicinal attributes as the concentrated liquid. Dr. Ephraim Lansky, the founder of the Rimonest Company, is even more upbeat on the prospects for pomegranate. He suggests that research may prove the pomegranate is a virtual cure-all. Its juice, flesh, and even its skin, he believes, contain properties to counter not only cholesterol, but aging, and perhaps even cancer and AIDS, as well.

The primary shareholder and head researcher of Rimonest, Lansky is a University of Pennsylvania-trained physician, with a doctorate in psychology and biology. He is qualified as a homeopathic physician and acupuncturist. He is currently marketing Cardiogranate; a pomegranate juice concentrate that he says combats high cholesterol. He is also developing a cosmetic line of anti-aging creams, massage oils, masques and toners, using estrogen-rich extractions from pomegranate seeds and peel. As a practicing homeopathic professional, he prescribes pomegranate juice for fever and gives it to menopausal women for combating 'hot flashes'. Dr. Lansky is also about to begin tests on mice in Israel's Beilinson Hospital and the Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, in order to confirm the efficacy of pomegranate in counteracting the proliferation of human breast-cancer cells.

In India, the pomegranate has been regarded as a food-medicine of great importance. All parts of the tree, the roots, the reddish brown bark, leaves, flowers, rind and seeds, have featured in medicine for thousands of years. The medical authorities of ancient India have described it as a light food and a tonic for the heart. The ancient medical writers of Arabia regarded it as- a fruit that is good for the inflammation of the stomach and pain of the heart. The sweet varieties of the fruit are considered a good laxative, while those that are intermediate between sweet and sour are regarded as valuable in the stomach inflammations and heart pain.

The juice from the fresh fruit is an excellent cooling beverage for alleviating thirst in cases of fevers and sickness. It acts on the liver, heart and kidneys and tones up their functions. It supplies the required minerals and helps the liver to preserve vitamin A from the food. It increases the body's resistance against infections, particularly tuberculosis.