



Pomegranates

by Thea Fiskin, UC Master Gardener

Pomegranates are an exotic fruit that date back to ancient times. In Persia they were used as a carpet dye, and in India they were regarded as a symbol of fertility, most likely because the fruit is filled with hundreds of little fruits inside the membrane. In fact, the scientific name, *Punica granatum*, translates to "seeded apple," the name given to the fruit in the Middle Ages. Spanish settlers and missionaries brought pomegranates to California.

Pomegranates make an excellent ornamental landscape tree in the San Joaquin Valley. They are very heat tolerant and can survive in alkaline soils which would kill many plants. They have many uses, such as hedges, shade tree, fruit tree, container plant, and Bonsai. There are many cultivars to choose from, whether you need it for a container or a full size tree. What if you don't want to deal with fruit? They have that covered, too. There are some beautiful pomegranates with double flowers but do not set fruit.



Standard pomegranates form deciduous round shrubs or multi-limbed trees up to 20 feet tall. While the tried and true varieties are 'Wonderful' and 'Granada', there are now many new varieties for sale that are marketed as "seedless". While they still have seeds, they are very soft and edible. The new varieties should be available at your favorite nursery. If not, then ask them to order them for you. Here is a small sampling of what is available.

- 'Ambrosia' has the largest fruit, so if you want supersized fruit, this is it.
- 'Angel Red' contains more juice and the seeds are extra soft.
- 'Parfianka' has won the taste tests in numerous California venues, with great acid/sugar balance.
- 'Red Silk' with firm yet edible seeds that some say are berry flavored, is naturally semi-dwarf.
- 'White' has the highest sugar content and is more pink than white.

Dwarf pomegranates make excellent container plants and can be used as bonsai trees. There are several varieties, such as 'Chico' which is fruitless. 'Nana' and 'Purple Sunset' will bear small fruit which are used in many arts and craft projects.

Non-fruiting varieties are 'California Sunset' with double coral flowers, 'Toyosho' with double peach flowers, and 'Noshi Shibari' with double white flowers. These are all very showy, and because they do not set fruit, the bloom time is much longer. I have California Sunset, and I must add the blossoms are huge and the hummingbirds absolutely love it.

Plant pomegranates in the warmest and sunniest spot to get the best, sweetest fruit, but they will survive in partial shade, too. New trees should be cut back to one foot tall when they are about two feet high. From this point, allow 4 or 5 shoots to develop, which should be evenly distributed around the short trunk to keep the tree well balanced. Since fruits are borne only at the tips of new growth, it is recommended that for the first 3 years

the branches be shortened annually. This will encourage the maximum number of new shoots on all sides and help develop a strong framed tree. After the third year, only suckers and dead branches are removed.

New trees need sufficient water to get established. Regular watering helps fruit development and reduces thorns. Mature trees only need watering once every 2 to 3 weeks during the summer, and IF we get winter rain, there is no need to water during the winter. Flowers develop on new growth each spring and the fruit ripens in the fall.

Pomegranates have the usual problems with aphids, whiteflies and mealy bugs; however, predatory lady beetles and lacewings also lay their eggs on the leaves, so the pests are usually kept under control. A moth called the Omnivorous Leaf Roller can be a pest in our area. The larvae cause damage to the rind where they feed. After entering the fruit they feed on the seeds until they pupate. Meanwhile, the fruit rots where the pest entered and fed. Control is difficult because the worms are inside and difficult to see until the fruit is harvested. So be on the lookout for the first sign of worm damage on fruit, especially in July when they are most likely to cause the most damage to fruit. Weed control can reduce the insect population, and spraying *Bacillus thuringiensis* (an organic pesticide that targets worms) also helps. Fortunately there is usually enough fruit for both the home gardener and the moth to enjoy.

The pomegranate is self-pollinated as well as cross-pollinated by insects. Cross pollination increases fruit set, so encourage all those birds, bees and butterflies that are attracted to those bright scarlet flowers.

So there you have it. Great small ornamental trees that like sun and heat, have scarlet blossoms to attract birds in the summer, fall color and fruit besides.

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