

## Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*)

Native to Central Asia, the pomegranate (from the Latin "seeded apple") is a small tree or shrub with attractive spring flowers. It is grown across the Middle East, in tropical Africa, and the drier parts of California.

The fruit of the pomegranate, actually a berry, naturally compartmentalizes into small bits of seed and pulp called "arils."

Though the best pomegranates cannot be grown here, some varieties tolerate Florida's conditions. Our variety is the clone of a tree that produced abundant and delicious fruit in North Florida, though it has yet to produce fruit itself.

**Soil:** Pomegranates prefer well drained soil that is not excessively calcareous. Most well-drained soils in N. Florida are excessively leached, so I recommend amending with lime and other minerals. A balanced fertilizer should be lightly applied through the growing season. They can be grown in containers.

**Water:** In arid regions, farmers water their pomegranates once or twice a week with drip irrigation. In Florida, irrigation should be unnecessary except in droughts.

**Sun:** Full

**Cold:** This deciduous plant can tolerate temperatures as low as 12 degrees F, but only when dormant. They can be severely damaged by late freezes if preceded by warm weather that triggered spring growth.

**Pruning:** For best results, the plants should be pruned to 3-5 trunks and arranged into an open vase shape to increase light penetration. Trunks that are falling can be tied to opposite trunks for stability. Pruning for height, shape, and trunk thinning should be done in the winter, though some thinning in the summer is usually necessary to keep the middle open. Old trunks can be replaced by allowing a sprout to grow from its base, and then removing the larger old trunk.

**Propagation:** Pomegranates are easily propagated from cuttings in the summer. New cuttings can fruit in as little as three years.

**Pests:** Pomegranates are vulnerable to many pests. Foliar damage can be caused by white flies, thrips, mealybugs and scale insects. Those can be controlled with insecticidal soap or neem oil. Fruit parasites may also be a concern. For more information on controlling pests, visit <http://ucce.ucdavis.edu/files/datastore/391-534.pdf>

**Other problems:** Fruit splitting is a major cause of production losses. Thinning is thought to reduce the rate of splitting. It also increases fruit size. In wetter areas (like here) they are prone to root decay and fungal diseases.

**Harvesting:** Pomegranates must be picked before they become overripe. When ripe, they will develop a distinctive crimson color and a metallic sound when tapped.

**Storage:** They can be refrigerated in the vegetable drawer for up to seven months. Storage can even improve the flavor.

**Preparation:** Picking the kernels out of a quartered pomegranate into a bowl of water can help separate the seeds and fruit from the bitter membranes. The kernels sink while the membranes float. Because of its distinctive sweet and tart flavor, pomegranate is wonderful eaten alone or added to sweet or savory dishes. The inner crunchy seeds can also be eaten and have a nut-like flavor. They are dried and used as a spice in India and Iran.

The list of possible culinary uses for this fruit is endless, and includes cakes, honey, vinegar, chutney, and, of course, grenadine. Pomegranate provides a delicious contrast of flavor in meat dishes, salads (especially with feta or bleu cheese), and guacamole.

**Medicinal Uses:** Though studies are still underway, pomegranate appears promising in the prevention of heart disease and breast cancer. It may also help to reduce blood-pressure and prevent viral infections.