The pomegranate is native from Iran to the Himalayas in northern India and was cultivated and naturalized over the whole Mediterranean region since ancient times. It is widely cultivated throughout India and the drier parts of southeast Asia, Malaya, the East Indies and tropical Africa. The tree was introduced into Arizona by Spanish settlers in the mid 1700's. In this country it is grown for its fruits mainly in the drier parts of California and Arizona and is a very minor crop in Yuma.

The pomegranate is a neat, rounded shrub or small tree that can grow to 20 or 30 ft., but more typically to 12 to 16 ft. in height. The trunk is covered by a red-brown bark which later becomes gray. The branches are stiff, angular and often spiny. There is a strong tendency to sucker from the base. Pomegranates are also long-lived. There are specimens in Europe that are known to be over 200 years of age. The vigor of a pomegranate declines after about 15 years, however.

The fruits are ripe when they have developed a distinctive color and make a metallic sound when tapped. The fruits must be picked before over maturity when they tend to crack open, particularly when rained on. The pomegranate is equal to the apple in having a long storage life. It is best maintained at a temperature of 32° to 41° F and can be kept for a period of 7 months within this temperature range and at 80 to 85% relative humidity without shrinking or spoiling. The fruits improve in storage, becoming juicier and more flavorful.

Packed inside are hundreds of ruby-red arils – sweet, tart, gem-like juice sacs, bursting with pure flavor. Inside each aril is a tiny edible seed that provides valuable fiber and can be enjoyed along with the aril. Enjoy these little beauties as is, toss them into savory or sweet dishes, or use them as a brightly colored garnish. Pomegranates contain 840 arils that are compartmentalized between shiny, tough membranes. The arils range form pink to dark red. Whether you swallow the seeds or spit them out is a matter of personal preference.

When the hard fruit is split open, a mass of red seeds in a spongy white membrane is revealed. Only the seeds, with their sweet-tart flavor and juice squirting texture, are edible.

Pomegranates are shipped ripe and ready to eat. They can be held at room temperature for reasonable periods of time, out of direct sun. For longer storage, refrigerate at 32°-41° F. For home use, the whole fruit or seeds can be refrigerated in plastic bags or the seeds can be frozen separately.

The pomegranate has appeared in myths, legends, art and history for centuries. Associated with health and rebirth, some scholars even place the pomegranate in the Garden of Eden, instead of an apple. Known as one of the earliest cultivated fruits, they may date back to 2000 B.C. and are still a fruit of fascination today.

Some varieties can be available as early as August, while the Wonderful variety, the majority of the commercial harvest, is in season from October through January.

Pomegranates are picked when ripe. When you see them in stores, they are ready to enjoy. When selecting a pomegranate, consider that the heavier the fruit is, the juicier it will be.

Cut the fresh pomegranate in half as you would a grapefruit. It’s best to use a hand-press juicer to juice a pomegranate. If you use an electric juicer, take care not to juice the mem-
brane, so that the juice remains sweet. Strain the juice through a cheesecloth-lined strainer or sieve. Caution, pomegranate juice stains.

- The name pomegranate derives from Middle French, pomme garnete, literally "seeded apple"; it is sometimes referred to as Chinese apple. The pomegranate's botanical name, Punica Granatum, translates as "Apple with many seeds."

- The pomegranate's rustic beauty has long been an inspiration for poets, writers, painters and sculptors. The Bible and writings of Homer mention pomegranates. Ancient myths cite this fruit as favored by the gods. Pomegranates, bursting with seeds, symbolize fertility in Chinese, Greek, Persian, Roman and Hebrew lore. They symbolize hope in Christian art. According to Jewish tradition, pomegranates are a symbol of prosperity.

- Pomegranates add color, flavor and texture to appetizers, salads, entrees and desserts. Pomegranate juice tastes delicious when sweetened. Reducing the sweetened juice makes syrup. Unsweetened juice adds tart flavor and color to beverages, glazes, sauces, dressings and desserts.

- To dry, arrange whole pomegranates in a single layer on a rack. Keep them in a cool place a few weeks for use in centerpieces and for decoration. Rotate the fruit periodically to prevent flattening on one side. Once dried, pomegranates can last many years.

- Only their beauty rivals the flavor of pomegranates, fresh or dried. Fresh whole pomegranates add a creative touch to centerpieces, wreaths and garlands, on mantels and bookshelves and as place cards at the table.

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