



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Pomegranates in the Valley: Harmony and Sweet Success (March 15, 2025)

By Susan Franciskovich, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Before we get to the business of growing pomegranates, I'd like to mention one of the many "bonus" pleasures of being a Certified Master Gardener. (Certified Master Gardeners complete a 6-month UC training course, pass a test, and continue learning at local monthly meetings. Most importantly, we volunteer our time in many different kinds of activities to teach responsible gardening and growing information to the public.) Now, about the "bonus pleasures" mentioned above. Master Gardeners get to meet and share ideas and learn with lots of experienced "masterful gardeners." There are many of you out there growing and nurturing healthy and beautiful flora and fauna in private gardens, yards, and spaces everywhere.



As I began researching pomegranates, I asked one such "masterful gardener" about her affection for her beautiful pomegranate tree. This dear, green-thumbed expert explained to me why she so enjoys her pomegranate tree.

"The hummingbirds just love the beautiful red blossoms in the spring, and lots of birds are attracted in the summer. When we break open the fruit in the fall, we scoop out the ariels. What a fun mess! We wear old clothes around the pomegranates because the stain is permanent. Also, I leave a few fruits on the tree for the winter. The fruit splits open, and small birds have a long winter feast. The pomegranate tree is a real fall standout in my backyard...a bit like a tree decorated with fall jewelry."

In addition to this fun and informative pomegranate testimonial from a "masterful" gardener, it's the well-substantiated fact that pomegranate trees are truly an excellent ornamental landscape tree for the San Joaquin Valley. Pomegranates reach their highest quality in the arid regions of California, Arizona, and northern Mexico. They are a long-lived tree. (Some varieties in France have lasted over 200 years.)

Pomegranate trees are scrappy and tough once established, requiring little attention. They produce brilliant orangish-red flowers (each consisting of 5-8 crumpled petals) in the early summer and beautiful rounded and thick fruit with a reddish husk in the fall. Inside the fruit, the membrane is filled with juicy edible kernels called ariels, which are flavorful and high in nutrition. In each ariel, there is one angular soft or hard seed. We are used to eating the flesh of fruits; pomegranates, however, are prized for the hundreds of delicious ariels in each fruit. The scientific name for pomegranate is *Punica granatum*, which roughly translates to "seeded apple," the name the fruit was given in the Middle Ages. Spanish settlers and missionaries brought pomegranates to California.



Pomegranates form deciduous rounded shrubs or multi-trunk trees which grow 15 to 20 feet tall. For the best fruit, plant your tree in the sunniest and warmest part of your yard. The tree grows best in deep, loamy soils, but you will have satisfactory results in sandy as well as clay soils. Pomegranate trees are deciduous in interior valley and desert regions. The only negative characteristics of the tree are spines along the limbs and suckering at the tree's base. These suckers need to be pruned during the growing season. When dormant, pomegranate trees are quite resistant to cold, down to 10 F. A pomegranate tree is, however, very sensitive to frost before it

reaches full dormancy in late fall and after buds have begun to swell in early spring. The trees can take drought conditions, but for the best fruit, water deeply every couple of weeks during the summer.

When your newly planted tree is about 2 feet high, cut it back to one foot tall. Allow about 4 to 5 shoots to develop, which should be evenly distributed to keep the tree balanced. The fruits are borne at the tips of new growth. Try to encourage new shoots to grow on all sides to develop a strong, well-framed tree. As the tree grows, prune away dead and crossing branches in late winter or early spring. Your tree might also need some gentle shaping.

Pomegranate trees are self-pollinated and cross-pollinated by insects. The fruit set is increased by cross-pollination. A pomegranate tree may begin to fruit one year after planting, but 2-3 years is more common. It takes 5-7 months after bloom for the fruit to ripen. The fruit is ripe in the fall when its reddish color appears. As the fruit ripens, the skin will appear a little less shiny. With the first fall rains, the fruit often begins to crack. Pomegranates do not continue ripening off the tree, so keep the fruit on the tree longer for optimal flavor.

With pomegranate trees, there is little worry about insect pests and diseases. There can be minor problems with aphids, white flies, and mealy bugs, but since predatory lady beetles and lacewings also lay their eggs on the leaves, the detrimental insect populations rarely become a real problem. At most, it might be necessary to hose the branches off with water to control the pests.

While there are at least 500 different pomegranate cultivars, a local prominent nursery will offer, among others, these three popular varieties this fall season: 'Wonderful,' 'Parfianka' and 'Salavatski.' The 'Wonderful' variety produces up to three sets of blooms and large, juicy red kernels filled with small seeds, which are usually tender. 'Parfianka' is sweet with a hint of acidity and consistently receives high praise for overall flavor. The 'Salavatski' variety can withstand extremely cold temperatures. The seeds are harder than other varieties. Its fruit is medium-sized with pink fruit and ariels.

If you are short on space, there is a dwarf pomegranate variety, 'Nana.' It grows to 2-4 feet tall. Its distinctive miniature pomegranate fruits are ornamental, and the characteristic pomegranate vivid orange-red flowers are a charming attraction for pollinators. This dwarf also can be used to create an outstanding bonsai specimen.

So, it seems that pomegranate trees and their cultivation have more than earned their place in our Valley gardens due to their success and ancient proving grounds. Pomegranates were likely grown as early as the 5th millennium BC, one of the first fruit trees domesticated in the eastern Mediterranean region. Throughout history and across many cultures and religions, pomegranates have been considered a sacred fruit that symbolizes fertility: the "many-seeded apple." In Greek mythology, the pomegranate represented life, fertility, and rebirth.

So, there you have it! It might be a good time to plant a pomegranate tree, adding a touch of the exotic to your garden, one that dates back to ancient times. Yes, and all that is possible right here in the San Joaquin Valley.

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 am

Visit our website for past articles, sign up for our e-newsletter, or email us with your questions:

http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mgtularekings14/>; Instagram at: @mgtularekings

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse