

Pomegranates: the fruity panacea  
By Jini Reddy

## **Pomegranates are being hailed as a super-food which can protect the heart.**

Scientists in Israel have shown that drinking a daily glass of the fruit's juice can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

"Pomegranate juice contains the highest antioxidant capacity compared to other juices, red wine and green tea," said Professor Michael Aviram, who led the team.

This is good news, for antioxidants are the naturally occurring substances in plants that protect the body from free radicals - 'bad' chemicals in the blood.

Free radicals alter cholesterol in a process known as oxidation, which is thought to speed up the hardening of the arteries.

In studies at the Rambam Medical Center in Haifa, the juice of the fruit was found to slow down cholesterol oxidation by almost half, and reduce the retention of LDL.

That is the 'bad' cholesterol which forms atherosclerotic lesions, the fatty deposits which narrow the arteries and lead to heart disease.

"Antioxidants can protect us against the oxidative stress in our industrialised world, such as pollution, chemicals, viruses and bacteria, and consequently cardiovascular diseases and cancer," said Professor Aviram.

The theme is being taken up by a team at London's Hammersmith Hospital, who are launching a study to see if they can replicate the Haifa findings.

Their work will focus on people whose arteries are currently healthy.

Researcher Dr Richard Bogle said the fruit contained polyphenolics, tannins and anthocyanins - all compounds that could have a beneficial effect.

Dr Bogle said: "This study will test the idea that drinking a glass of pomegranate juice every day improves the function of blood vessels, reduces hardening of the arteries and improves heart health."

"Preliminary studies suggest that pomegranate juice may contain almost three times the total antioxidant ability compared to the same quantity of green tea or red wine."

## **Many vitamins**

The round, leathery fruit is full of edible seeds nestled in tiny juice sacs.

Brimming with vitamins A, C, E and iron, the pomegranate has been cultivated since

pre-historic times.

Thought to be native to Persia, the fruit is now grown everywhere from Spain to California.

It features richly in mythology, as a symbol of birth, eternal life, and death, owing to its abundance of seeds and ability to 'bleed'.

The deep red skin of the pomegranate was thought to link it to the blood of the earth, a taboo colour. Hence the fruit's association with forbidden desire.

"Iranians believe that Eve was tempted with a pomegranate in the Garden of Eden," said Margaret Shaida, culinary historian and author of *The Legendary Cuisine of Persia*.

"King Cyrus, who created the Persian Empire, was reputed to have wished for a number of good generals equal to the seeds of a pomegranate.

"Later again, the Prophet Mohammed is said to have urged his followers to eat the fruit in the belief that it purges the system of envy and hatred."

## Ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptians were buried with pomegranates in the hope of re-birth, while in Greek mythology, Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, was offered a seed of the fruit by Hades.

Tempted by its jewel-like appearance, she took it, thereby condemning herself to spending a portion of every year with Hades in the underworld.

These days, Greeks traditionally break a pomegranate at weddings, as a symbol of fertility.

In China, a sugared version of the seed is eaten on the day to bless the newlyweds.

The fruit has long been used in folk medicine in the Middle East, Iran and India. Healers have used the bark, leaves, skin and rind as well as the edible bits of the fruit to cure everything from conjunctivitis to haemorrhoids.

A boiled infusion of the rinds is said to soothe a sore throat, and a paste of the leaves, massaged into the scalp, can, apparently, reverse baldness.

"When I lived in Iran, I used to be given a bowl of pomegranates to recover from a bout of 'Tehran Tummy'," said Ms Shaida.

"Over there, pomegranate juice is recommended for pregnant mothers as it is rich in iron. It's also cooling and good for cleansing the system."

## Asian cookery

Central Asian and Middle Eastern cooks always have a supply of the fruit on hand.

In Azerbaijan, a pomegranate sauce called Narsharab is served with sturgeon fillet, while Georgians use the seeds as a salad garnish or to flavour meat dishes.

In Iran, a dish known as Fesenjan is prepared with pomegranate concentrate.

"No Iranian kitchen will be without a bottle," said Ms Shaida.

"Fesenjan consists of ground walnuts, fried until brown, which are added to fried onions and duck, or chicken along with the pomegranate sauce. It has a wondrous flavour, but very rich."

In the West, the fruit is still regarded as a novelty, but food writers like Rosemary Stark are keen to change this.

She said: "I find it has one of the finest sweet/sour balances of any fruit.

"Try sprinkling some over your breakfast muesli, or lunchtime hummus."

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