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Pomegranate

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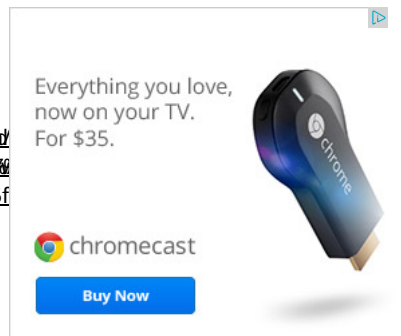
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The pomegranate is a fruit with a very long history, both as a culinary staple and as a cultural symbol.

Pomegranate cultivation began in the ancient Middle East, and from there it spread out far and wide, reaching territories as far flung as China, Korea and the Mediterranean basin. Naturally, the fruit acquired numerous and varied symbolic meanings on its travels, but there are certain threads that run through multiple locations and time periods. The pomegranate's most widespread meaning is that of a fertility symbol and aphrodisiac; its shape, color, juicy pulp and large amount of seeds all contribute to these associations. Pushing those themes a little further, the pomegranate has also come to symbolize blood and, in some cases, flesh as well. The overall list of symbolic associations is very extensive, but here is a selection of meanings across specific cultures:

A photograph of a pomegranate. On the left is a whole, ripe pomegranate with a deep red, slightly textured skin and a small green leaf attached. To its right is a pomegranate that has been cut open, revealing the interior. The inside is filled with numerous bright red, juicy seeds (arils) that are clustered together. A few green leaves are also visible near the cut fruit. The background is plain white.

DISCLAIMER: THIS LIST OF SPECIFIC CULTURAL EXAMPLES IS LIMITED AND SELECTIVE.

BUDDHISM: along with the peach and citrus, the pomegranate is one of the “Three Blessed Fruits” of Buddhist tradition. The story goes that there was a powerful female demon (known as Hariti in India and Kishimo-jin or Karitei-mo in Japan) who kidnapped young children and feasted on them. The Buddha, however, managed to placate her ferocious desire by offering her pomegranates. Soothed by the Buddha’s compassion,



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she acquired a gentler nature and became the patron goddess of children. She is sometimes depicted holding a pomegranate in one hand a suckling a baby with the other.

GREECE: in its capacity as a fertility symbol, the pomegranate was strongly associated with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, as well as Dionysus, the god of wine, pleasure and merriment. The most famous appearance of the pomegranate in Greek mythology is in the story of Hades and Persephone. Hades kidnapped Persephone, daughter of the fertility goddess Demeter, and made her his queen in the Underworld. Demeter was so upset about her daughter's fate that she refused to allow any crops to grow on the earth, and people began to starve. When Hades was ordered to release Persephone, he complied, but before she returned to her mother, Persephone had eaten a number of pomegranate seeds (the number varies depending on which version of the story you hear). Since pomegranates were the fruit of the Underworld, this bound Persephone to her husband and required her to spend a certain part of every year with him, which resulted in the cold and barren seasons on earth (i.e. winter), since her mother Demeter was in a state of mourning at this time.

JUDAISM: the pomegranate is featured as a symbol many times in the Old Testament. To give a few examples; the robes of the High Priest of the Temple of Jerusalem were supposedly embroidered with them, and the fruit's common association with fertility earned it a place in the famous Song of Solomon. The Book of Deuteronomy describes pomegranates as being one of seven key crops associated with the land of Israel (along with wheat, barley, grapes, figs, olives and dates), and to some extent this particular symbolism has never been lost; even in Israel today, pomegranate imagery is fairly common and can be seen throughout the country.

ROME: in ancient Rome, the status of the pomegranate as a fertility symbol was on full display. Not only was the juice of the fruit popular as a cure for infertility, but wreaths and crowns woven from pomegranate leaves were often worn by brides at wedding celebrations, the implication obviously being an expectation of children.

SPAIN: the city of Granada in southern Spain, famous as the last stronghold of Islamic rule in the country from the 13th to the 15th century, has a curious association with the fruit. Not only does it appear on the city's flag and coat of arms, but the Spanish-language word for pomegranate is, in fact, "granada", indicating a strong symbolic link between the fruit and the city itself. Even after the Muslim rulers were exiled from the city in 1492, the symbolism of the pomegranate remained strong among the local population. For example, when Katherine of Aragon left Spain to marry into the royal family of England, she chose the pomegranate as her personal heraldic device.

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