

# A multi-purpose tree

The pomegranate, the 'tree of life', is food, medicine, ornamental and serves as a hedge

By Francis Gachathi

Continuing with our series "Trees of the Bible", and having written on *Commiphora myrrha* (Miti 8), *Boswellia sacra* (Miti 10), *Olea africana* (Miti 11), here comes *Punica granatum*.

The pomegranate, *Punica granatum* L, previously placed in its separate own family *Punicaceae*, is currently classified under the family *Lythraceae*. It is native of the region of Persia up to the Himalayas and has been cultivated and naturalised since ancient times throughout the Mediterranean region as a fruit tree. It was one of the pleasant fruits in Egypt (Numbers 20:5). In various legends, the pomegranate was the "tree of life" in the Garden of Eden. It was venerated in most religions and traditions in the Middle East. So popular was the fruit it ended up in much Bible history and lore.

Pomegranate fruits are mentioned many times in the Bible. God gave orders to Moses to put embroidered pomegranates on the hem of the high priest's ephod (Exodus 28: 33-34). They are one of the fruits that the scouts brought to Moses to show that the Promised Land was fertile (Numbers 13:23). Images of pomegranates formed part of the decoration of the capitals upon the two pillars of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (1Kings 7: 20).

Pomegranate is a multi-stemmed, somehow spiny, shrub or small tree with pale brownish bark that grows up to 6m high. The buds and young shoots are orange-red or pink, leaves lanceolate<sup>1</sup>, almost sessile<sup>2</sup>, smooth and glossy. Flowers are bright orange-red with ruffled petals.

The pomegranate fruit is globose<sup>3</sup>, about 5 - 10cm across, with tough, leathery rind, that turns shiny reddish-yellow when mature. The fruit is filled with large quantities of seeds, each encased in a juicy pulp, ranging in colour from white to deep red or purple. The fruit has a prominent and persistent calyx that resembles a little crown.

King Solomon compared the cheeks of his beloved to halves of a pomegranate fruit (Song of Solomon 4: 3) while the calyx is said to have been the inspiration for the design of his crown and hence other crowns in Europe. A spiced wine was made of the juice of the pomegranate fruit and it was frequently mentioned in the Song of Solomon as a source of female fertility (Song of Solomon 8:2). The fruit was said to have 613 seeds, which corresponds to the 613 commandments that are specified in the Torah.



Pomegranate flowers (Photo: KEFRI)



Maturing fruits of pomegranate (Photo: KEFRI)



Pomegranate shrub in garden (Photo: KEFRI)

In East Africa, the pomegranate is grown both as a fruit as well as an ornamental tree. It is very attractive in appearance and is found in residential estates in most towns, but does best in warmer areas. Propagation by cuttings is quite easy.

Pomegranate may have been introduced quite early in East Africa by Asians and remains a popular plant in their compounds. In Nairobi you find it in compounds in old Asian estates like Ngara, Parklands, Eastleigh and Westlands. The plant is also common in Machakos, Kitui and Thika. It is called *mkomamanga* in Swahili. Propagation by cutting is quite easy.

In addition to its edible fruit with thirst-quenching juice, the pomegranate has been used as a traditional remedy. Preparations of the flower, fruit juice, fruit rind, bark and root have been used to treat a wide variety of conditions including diarrhoea and dysentery and to expel tapeworms. The fruit juice has been found to have powerful antioxidant properties.

All parts of the tree have tannin for curing and dyeing leather. The yellow wood is very hard and durable, and is used for walking-sticks and woodcraft.

*Punica granatum nana*, the dwarf variety of *Punica granatum*, is popular as ornamental in gardens or in containers, and makes a most attractive hedge.

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<sup>1</sup> Lanceolate: Narrow and tapering towards both ends.

<sup>2</sup> Sessile: Leaf sitting on the twig without a stalk.

<sup>3</sup> Globose: Approximately spherical.