

Q: I wanted to plant a Pomegranate, and found out that there are more varieties than I had ever heard of. What is the best variety for the Clayton area?



A: You should have no problem growing and fruiting Pomegranates in most of the inland areas of Central California if you have warm dry summers. Pomegranates (*Punica granatum*) have problems in areas with cool foggy summers. The trees will grow and flower, but fruit often fails to set, or if it does set, it fails to sweeten. Foliage in coastal areas is also more susceptible to fungal problems. The variety 'EverSweet,' is reported to produce better than most with cool summer temperatures.

Native to Persia and surrounding countries, humans have taken pomegranates around the world since prehistoric times, and one taste of the tart/sweet seeds in the fall can convince you why. The plethora of ruby red seeds packed in the round fruits have been symbols of fecundity, life and death and are referenced in ancient texts.

These small trees require full sun, good drainage, and loamy soils, although they have been found growing in a wide variety of soil types, including rock and gravel beds. Choose a good site; these trees have been known to live for over 200 years. The ideal pH is 6.0-7.5, which means they will do well with the alkaline soils found occasionally around Mt. Diablo, and the high pH water. Trees are very drought tolerant, but if you want good fruit, you will need to water once to twice a month during the dry months, depending on your soil type. If you maintain soil moisture content, the fruit are much less likely to split with fall rains.

Naturally multi-trunked, you can maintain a single trunk with regular removal of suckers that emerge from the crown, but little other pruning is required. The flowers are a bright show-stopping scarlet, and bloom in the early summer. This is a lovely ornamental tree as well as providing nutritious and sparkling fruit. The leaves turn gold briefly prior to dropping in the fall. The branches are slightly thorny, which makes them ideal as a hedge material. Deer do not appear to be a major problem.

The most popular fresh eating variety until recently has been 'Wonderful,' and for hot climates it is highly recommended. Look for the most interesting varieties at the scion exchange for the local chapter of the California Rare Fruit growers next winter, including some of the tart varieties that are used for Pomegranate molasses. The CRFG website has descriptions of a number of cultivars available in the state: <http://www.crfg.org/>, as does this UCCE publication http://homeorchard.ucdavis.edu/plant_pomegranate.pdf. The Master Gardener office in Contra Costa has a handout on Pomegranate Growing in Contra Costa.