Each year at Christmas time The Cloisters is decorated with plants grown in its own garden. To these the pomegranate, a fruit popular in the Middle Ages and common in the symbolism, both pagan and Christian, of mediaeval and earlier times, adds a particularly festive touch, with its bright red against evergreen branches. The Madonna by Vittorio Crivelli illustrated here, which can be seen during the holidays in the special Christmas exhibition at The Cloisters, shows the pomegranate used, as it so often is, for decorative effect as well as symbolic meaning.

The pomegranate seems to have been in existence ever since the earth was created. Some scholars of antiquity assume that the pomegranate was the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, and according to a number of legends it was the fruit of this tree rather than the apple with which Eve tempted Adam. The two fruits are alike, at least on the outside.

Although the pomegranate is of such ancient origin and cultivation, there are only a few varieties. There are sour and sweet kinds, another is said to be seedless, and there is one improved form which is supposed to have fruit the size of a human head. The double-flowering types are non-fruiting and are grown solely for ornament. Yellow and white and striped flower specimens are listed, but they are rarer. Both non-fruiting varieties are very decorative. All grow best in warm climates, as the fruit requires a long ripening season. In this country, they are fairly common in the South. Excellent fruit is grown around Augusta, Georgia, but they are not hardy farther north than Maryland.

Plants are successfully grown in pots at The Cloisters, but they stay small when cultivated in this manner. They thrive best in rather heavy loam. Late in the fall they lose their leaves and have to be stored in a cool place indoors. Early in the season, around the middle of February, they start sprouting again.

The double-flowering species are favorite hedge plants in the South of this country.
and also in Italy. In northern Mexico the pomegranate was introduced by the Jesuit missionaries. It now grows there to perfection and in great abundance. A fiery liquor, *aquardiente*, is made from the fruit.

The pomegranate, or *Punica granatum*, is a small tree that can grow to a height of about twenty feet. It is usually more of a bush, very closely branched and twiggy, but it can be trimmed into the shape of a tree. The branches are slender and frail and somewhat spiny. The leaves are small, lanceolate, light green, and thin. New shoots appear reddish bronze. The flowers are bell-shaped, borne on the new growth of the previous year’s wood. They are very showy bright orange-red in color with a thick crownlike calyx having five to seven points and ruffled scarlet petals. The fruit ripens late in September and is round, or sometimes a little flattened, red and greenish yellow outside with the calyx persisting. It is said that the crowns worn by kings were inspired by the design of this calix. The part of the fruit that is eaten is the seeds, which are surrounded by a deep red, juicy flesh; they are set close together like the cells of a honeycomb and are embedded in a white or pinkish leathery pulp.

*Punica granatum* is native throughout most of the Orient and the Mediterranean regions, but because of its long history it is pretty difficult to establish its real first home. It is the sole genus in the family Punicaceae and has only two species. The botanical name *Punica* is derived from the Latin *punicus*, meaning scarlet or red but also referring to the so-called Punic Wars. The Romans called it the Punica apple because it came from Carthage. Other early names were *Malum punicum* (apple of Carthage) and Lybian or Carthaginian apple. Pomegranate is from the Latin *pomum*, meaning fruit. The specific name *granatum* was given because of the many hard seeds.

Having been brought from Carthage by Roman soldiers, it was later introduced into southern Europe and Spain. A small branch with an open pomegranate is on the coat of arms of Granada, and the province actually took its name from the fruit. During the time of Henry VIII the pomegranate was introduced into England through his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, who had it for her emblem. In one of the festivals held in honor of their marriage, a bank of roses and pomegranates was planted to symbolize the union of England and Spain. The pomegranate is mentioned occasionally by Shakespeare. A line in *Romeo and Juliet* reads “The nightingale sings on yon pomegranate tree.” John Gerard, a physician and famous amateur herbalist of sixteenth-century England, had pomegranates in his garden.

The Hebrew word for pomegranate is *rimmon*, and many references containing it are found in the Old Testament. They are usually associated with the fruitfulness of the land, along with grapes, figs, olives, barley, and wheat. Those were the riches Moses pledged to his people when he led them out of Egypt into the promised land. To this day the Jews employ pomegranates in certain religious ceremonies.

Already in those very early days, the flowers and fruit of the pomegranate served as designs in architecture, weaving, and needlework. The hem of the sacred robe of Aaron, older brother of Moses and first High Priest of Israel, was embroidered with blue, purple, and scarlet pomegranates alternating with golden bells which were probably patterned after the shape of the flowers. Robes with similar adornment are said to have been worn by ancient Persian kings. Carved representations of the fruit along with lilies were sculptured on the capitals of King Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem. They also appear frequently in old Assyrian and Egyptian monuments and on Pompeian wall paintings.

Many legends are associated with the pomegranate. One is the well-known Greek myth of Persephone, who could not return from the Underworld because she had eaten the seeds of the pomegranate. But a compromise was made—Pluto, the god of Hades, kept her only half the year. Beginning each spring, he released her to spend the other half with her grieving mother. Thus mortal men were granted the beauty of springtime and the pomegranate became a symbol of rebirth and the awakening of nature.
Most legends associate the pomegranate with fertility. In Turkey, after the marriage ceremony, a fruit is thrown on the ground by the bride and the number of seeds that fall out indicate how many children she will have. Chinese women offer pomegranates to the Goddess of Mercy when they pray for children. Good fortune and riches come to persons dreaming
of pomegranates. In the case of married people, this also means children. To a young man in love, it implies that his sweetheart is devoted and loyal to him.

In Christian art the pomegranate, often split and showing the seeds, was interpreted as a symbol of fertility, hope of immortality, and the Resurrection. The infant Jesus is frequently seen in paintings and sculpture presenting the pomegranate to his mother. In the last of the famous Unicorn tapestries at The Cloisters the symbolic meaning of marriage and fertility is illustrated by showing the Unicorn chained to the pomegranate tree, with the red seeds of a bursting fruit spilling on him.

It was not only for its symbolic significance that the pomegranate was regarded so highly in the early days and all through the Middle Ages; it was also much esteemed for its many uses. Aside from the seeds' serving as food, all parts of the plant, which is highly astringent, could be used for some purpose and were formerly much employed in medicine. They are now rarely used.

Tannin is especially abundant in the rind of the fruit and still more in the root bark. From the rind a jet black ink was and still is made which according to Parkinson is durable to the end of the world. Pliny mentions a dye made from the flowers to color cloth a puniceous shade. The bark is still used in tanning and dyeing Morocco leather. All medicines made from the pomegranate had to be taken with caution. Even slight overdoses would cause nausea and vomiting. Given moderately in the form of powder, or preferably, in a decoction, they were powerful. For generations the bark of the stem, the roots, and, to some extent, the skin of the fruit were used to make a well-known vermifuge, particularly effective for tapeworm. The fresh bark was considered to produce the best results. In India the rind is often combined with opium for chronic dysentery and diarrhea.

The flowers were called "baloustia." When dried, it is said they kept their strength for two years. Mediaeval herbalists considered them good for many things, biliousness, vomiting of gall, and other stomach disturbances. The rind of the fruit and some of the flowers were chopped up and soaked in vinegar, and a sponge saturated in this solution was placed on the stomach or chest. This was a sure cure. Chewing dried flowers would stop bleeding of the gums and strengthen "wagging" teeth. Dioscorides recommends the juice of sour pomegranates, pressed out and mixed with honey, as being good for ulcers in the mouth and pains in the ears and nostrils. Whoever could swallow three flowers or more would not be bothered with eye trouble all year.

Theophrastus and Pliny consider the pomegranate a valuable plant both for beauty and for its medicinal properties. Pliny lists twenty-six remedies made from it. Theophrastus, besides describing the virtues of the pomegranate, goes into great detail on its culture. He says that a branch with fruit on it set into a squill (Urginia maritima) will store and keep longer. Cuttings will also strike root quicker if set into a squill bulb.

A spiced wine was made by the ancients from the juicy seeds of the pomegranate. Even today a very refreshing drink called grenadine is made from the seeds with the addition of water and sugar. This is supposed to be very cooling and especially good in cases of fever. The seeds eaten fresh have a soothing quality. In Syria they are eaten sprinkled with rose water and sugar, and they are said to be good flavored with rum or eaten dried as confectionery.