Fruits and Nuts in the Mediterranean

Many fruits and nuts grow in the Mediterranean region, such as lemons, limes, oranges, apricots, and pine nuts. Aromatic herbs such as oregano, thyme, rosemary and basil are native to the Mediterranean. Garlic and onions are other ancient crops that contribute to Mediterranean diets. In this handout, four famous and ancient nuts and fruits are described, all cultivated for thousands of years—all considered very healthy, and some considered sacred in Mediterranean cultures.

Walnuts

Walnuts and almonds are very nutritious tree nuts that were gathered by early humans and later cultivated in Asia, Europe and Africa, and were carried to other lands.

Walnuts (*Juglans regia*) grow on trees native to an area in Eurasia from southeastern Europe across Central Asia to China. As a deciduous tree, the walnut requires cooler conditions than tropical trees. The largest forests are found in the Jalal-Abad province of Kyrgyzstan at altitudes of 1000-2000 meters. The first historical account of walnut cultivation dates back to Babylon (now Iraq) circa 2000 B.C. However, archaeological excavation of Neolithic sites in southwest France has uncovered roasted walnut shells, indicating walnuts were being eaten in Europe at least 8000 years ago.

The selective breeding of walnuts may have begun with the Ancient Greeks, continued by the Romans, and spread to suitable climates in coastal North Africa. Walnuts are grown as far north as Scotland. Today, China, the United States, Iran, and Turkey are the leading producers. Walnut trees grow slowly and live for hundreds of years. In addition to nuts, the oil of the walnut tree, the hulls of its fruit, and its fine hardwood have many uses.

Walnuts are among the most nutritious of all nuts. Shelled walnuts provide protein, unsaturated (healthy) fat, carbohydrates, and dietary fiber. Walnuts contain vitamins and minerals such as thiamin, vitamin B6, folate, manganese, copper, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, iron, and calcium (Source: US Department of Agriculture).

Almonds

The almond is a species of tree that includes both bitter and sweet varieties. It is native to the Middle East and South Asia, but probably originated in Central Asia. Almond trees mature in 3-4 years, and can produce for 40-50 years, but some live much longer. They thrive in
Almonds are the edible seeds of the tree. Almonds are eaten raw or toasted, with the hull on or removed to leave the white embryo of the seed. They can be ground into a flour or paste that is used to make cakes and marzipan, a special sweet. Almond oil is also used in cosmetics and medicines.

Almonds are a rich source of energy, though they are not high in protein. They provide dietary fiber, unsaturated (healthy) fats, vitamins, minerals and healthy disease-preventing substances. Almonds contain lots of vitamin E, B-vitamins, folates, and minerals such as manganese, potassium, calcium, iron, magnesium, zinc, and selenium.

The history of the almond is mysterious, because wild almonds are not only bitter but highly poisonous, and chewing or crushing releases the fatal toxin cyanide. Scientists think that a genetic mutation occurs that produces a few non-toxic trees, and humans may have observed birds or other animals to detect these edible varieties for domestication by planting their seeds. Where it was first domesticated is also a mystery—perhaps in Armenia or Azerbaijan, from which it spread to the Mediterranean region. Almonds have been found in Bronze Age sites dating to 3000-2000 BCE, and they were found in Tutankhamun’s tomb in Egypt ca. 1325 BCE. Almonds are mentioned in Greek and Roman mythology and they are used in Jewish festivals and mentioned in the Bible.

**Figs**

The fig (ficus carica) is a cluster of single-seeded fruits that grows on a deciduous tree or shrub. The common fig tree grows wild in dry, sunny areas, with deep or light soil. It can also grow in poor soil or cracks in rock. Its long roots reach toward groundwater in dry areas. Fig blossoms need pollination by a type of wasp that enters the cluster through a small opening. Some varieties are self-pollinating. The Mediterranean climate is especially suitable for the fig tree, and some grow large enough to be shade trees.

Figs are very nutritious, high in sugars and dietary fiber, with some protein. They work to aid digestion. Dried or fresh, figs contain vitamins K, C, and the B vitamins. They are high in minerals such as copper, manganese, magnesium, potassium, and calcium, with other important nutrients, antioxidants. Figs are used to make syrups and jam, and they keep well when dried, for storage and trade.

The fig might be the first plant that humans cultivated as long ago as 9000 BCE, and have been found in Neolithic sites in Jordan, nearly a thousand years before people learned to cultivate grain crops. The Bible mentions that Adam and Eve covered themselves with fig leaves as clothing. The fig and the grape vine are symbols of peace and prosperity. In India, the fig is related to the Buddha as the tree under which he received enlightenment. Figs are part of Greek, Roman and Phoenician culture and literature.
Pomegranates

*Punica granatum*, or pomegranate, is originally a Central Asian fruit that has been cultivated in India and the whole Mediterranean since ancient times. It is a shrub with a large fruit that has a red rind and clusters of red or pink, juicy seed sacks inside, surrounded by yellow pulp. The pomegranates thrive in mild Mediterranean climates and dry conditions with cool winters and hot summers. It likes neither humidity nor cold temperatures. The tree or shrub can reach a height of 20-30 feet, but is usually smaller. It sometimes lives over a century but younger plants produce better than old ones.

Pomegranate juice and seeds have a sweet and acidic flavor, and provide carbohydrates and dietary fiber. They are rich in vitamin C and K. They contain many antioxidants that prevent or even cure disease. Pomegranate may help patients with high blood pressure and cancer, and may also help cure viral and antibacterial infections. In addition to its nutritional and medicinal properties, pomegranate rind can be dried to use in tanning leather, because it contains a lot of tannin.

The pomegranate has been found in Jericho and at early Bronze Age sites dated to 3000 BCE. The Latin name *punica* refers to the role of the Phoenicians in spreading it through trade and colonization. The fruit is mentioned in many ancient texts, notably in Babylonian texts, in mythology, in the Bible, in Homer’s Greek poetry, and in the Quran. It was included as grave goods in pharaonic tombs.