

Pomelos: The largest cultivated citrus fruit with distinctly grown-up character

By [Vikram Doctor](#), ET Bureau | Oct 05, 2012, 05.36 AM IST

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Preparing ingredients for cooking is usually a boring, tedious and messy job that few enjoy. Yet there are some tasks that are so beautifully simple that you can actually look forward to them. Slicing zucchini for example, with the smooth creamy discs falling in front of your knife, or peeling almonds that have been soaked long enough to make the nuts shoot out when you rub their wrinkly brown skins.

Peeling [pomelos](#) is another such task. For all the aromatic delights of fruits in the citrus family, they can be messy to cut up, with the added danger of getting a stinging squirt of the juice in your eye. But pomelos are beautifully simple, from the moment you slice through its rind, the thickest of any citrus fruit, to expose the edible portions set inside the firm white coating, with the red and pink fleshed varieties almost glowing like jewels.

These sections need to be loosened from the albedo, as the inedible white portion is called, and they come out quite cleanly. As with all citrus fruits the edible parts are made of closely packed vesicles, thin-skinned containers for the juice and pulp, which are divided into a few sections by thin membranes. Remove these membranes and the vesicles separate cleanly, not breaking, as they would in oranges and most other citrus fruit, but not dried out either, because if you bite into them you get a crisp burst of juice and aroma.

The taste is sophisticated — sweet and acid, but neither in excess, with a faint bitter note that seems to highlight its appeal. In a family of fruits full of exuberantly strong flavours and explosive mouth sensations, pomelos, like mosambis, deliver elegant restraint. Their name *Citrus grandis* (or *Citrus maxima*) refers to their size, the largest among commonly cultivated citrus fruits, but I feel could also describe their distinctly grown-up character. In the West pomelos are best known for being one of the parents, along with oranges, of grapefruits.

This cross happened, oddly enough, not in any of the Asian countries where both pomelos and oranges have long been grown, but in the [Caribbean](#), as if these fruits were like all those people who suddenly turn amorous on vacation! Pomelos are said to have been taken there by a certain Captain Shaddock, which is why they are sometimes called by that name. But this story may be an invention, and [shaddock](#) could have a link to shatkora, another thick-skinned citrus variety, *Citrus macroptera*, which is found in [Bangladesh](#), where the peel is actually cooked like a vegetable.

India has proven to be oddly resistant to the grapefruit, but pomelo, while not widely consumed, has retained a niche appeal. [Emanuel Bonavia](#), in his book, *The Cultivated Oranges and Lemons of India and Ceylon* (1888), notes that it has two names — mahtabi, or batabi limboo in Bengal, and chakotra in North India. It has been suggested, he writes, that these names come from mahtab, which is a Persian word for moon, and chak, which is a term for wheel, both referring to its large size, but he suggests a more interesting derivation — that both terms refer to its possible origin in [Indonesia](#), with one coming from Batavia and the other from [Jakarta](#).

Bonavia also gives two ways in which pomelos could have come to India from Southeast Asia: "From experiments I have made, I found that most of the [citrus fruit](#) will float on water...But the best floaters of all are the large pummelos." This is because of the thick peel, which is also the reason behind the more prosaic explanation, that it was bought by sailors, who took it onboard because it stays good for an exceptionally long time for citrus fruits, the peel preserving it from going bad. There is a more contemporary benefit to this — since pomelo cultivation is limited, you're only likely to find it in the market, around this season, for short periods, but you can buy a fair amount and keep them for a while.

And the reason to do this is not so much to eat the pomelos by themselves, or as juice (which is, in truth, a bit disappointing compared to other citrus fruits), but because they are magnificent when made into a salad. One big problem with salads is getting the right amount of liquid in them - too little and they become tedious to chew, too much and they get soggy and unappealing. But by firmly keeping its juice




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inside its vesicles, pomelos allow you to mix a dry salad that releases its liquids when you bite into it, creating a perfect balance in your mouth.

When you consider that pomelos also have sourness and sweetness, but neither in amounts that will swamp other tastes, and that their bitterness [echoes](#) the bitterness of some salad greens and that, as a final bonus, the pink shreds of pomelo can look really pretty mixed with other ingredients in a bowl, you can see why pomelos are really one of the perfect salad ingredients. This makes the best use of it, mixing it with seafood or shredded chicken, peanuts, fish sauce and lots of chopped coriander. Vegetarian versions are as good and are proof of how pomelos, for all their general restraint, can sometimes deliver a citrus taste sensation that can be quite as big as their physical form.

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