

Uncommon Invertebrates

Soldier Beetles, by Ceil Rochevot

Common Name: Soldier Beetle, Goldenrod or Pennsylvania Leatherwing,

Latin Name: *Chauliognathus pennsylvanicus*.

Family: Cantharidae

During the summer, when my plants are in bloom, I frequently find beetles, resembling lightning bugs on my flowers. I was once told that they were Soldier Beetles. Given the name, I just assumed that they were “bad” bugs out to harm my plants. I’m glad I did some research prior to getting out the jug of soapy water! This is some of what I found about the Soldier Beetle.



The Soldier Beetle are also known as a Leatherwing. The one pictured is a Goldenrod/Pennsylvania Leather wing. It is a closely related cousin of the Margined Leatherwing, which has slightly larger black markings. The reason it looks similar to the lightning bug is because they are related, but do not have the light-producing organ.

Most Soldier Beetles are orange with black markings, but some are black with orange markings. An interesting fact is that when the insect was first described, the species had a color pattern reminiscent of the red coats of the early British soldiers, giving them the name Soldier Beetle (so they are not out to attack my plants after all!). Like all beetles, the Soldier Beetle has chewing mouthparts. They are elongated in shape with hardened front wings that meet down the middle of the back. Both the adult and the larvae are about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch in length. They have long straight antennae. Soldier Beetles have what is called “complete metamorphosis”, meaning their life cycle consists of the egg, larval, pupal and adult stages. The female lays her eggs in moist soil or leaf litter. The larvae are found on the ground in leaf litter and under rocks and logs.

Both the larvae and adults are predacious and feed on small soft bodied insects such as caterpillars, worms, slugs, snails and aphids. The adults also feed on nectar and pollen. In turn, birds, bats and spiders feed on the Soldier Beetle. So, unless you are growing a butterfly garden where you have to protect the caterpillars, (most references suggest you enjoy nature's cycle of life) the Soldier Beetle is not considered a pest, but rather is considered to be a beneficial visitor to your garden. I guess I’ll put the jug of soapy water away.

Photo by Ceil Rochevot

References:

www.uky.edu

www.gardenswithwings.com

Wikipedia