

## Soldier Beetles

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Soldier beetles are very common insects that resemble lightning bugs but do not have light-producing organs. They also may be confused with blister beetles which can be serious pests in forage crops and vegetables. But blister beetles have a square-shaped head and a very visible "neck" due to the narrow thorax relative to the head and abdomen.



Figure 1. The Pennsylvania leatherwing is a common soldier beetle in Kentucky.

### Identification

Soldier beetles, also known as leatherwings, get their name from the soft, clothlike wing covers, which when brightly colored are reminiscent of military uniforms of previous centuries. These beetles are elongate, soft-bodied and about 1/2 inch long. Colors of soldier beetles vary from yellow to red with brown or black wings or trim. A common and easily-spotted species is the Pennsylvania leatherwing, which is yellow with one large black spot on each wing.

### Biology

Adult females lay their eggs in clusters in the soil. The larvae are velvety, covered with dense bristles, and have antenna-like projections on their head. Most larvae are carnivorous, feeding on insects in

the soil. Larvae overwinter in damp soil and debris or loose bark.



Figure 2. Soldier beetle larvae can be predacious and feed on a wide variety of insects.

The adults are also predators, eating caterpillars, eggs, aphids, and other soft-bodied insects. They will alternatively eat nectar and pollen if no insects are around. They do not damage plant foliage. Adults are often found on flowers such as goldenrod, where they lie in wait for prey, feed on pollen and mate.



Figure 3. Soldier beetles are commonly misidentified as fireflies.

Since soldier beetles are mostly beneficial, it is inadvisable to kill them unless they are a problem. They may be a nuisance in the fall, if large numbers of larvae enter a house in search of a place to overwinter. Weather-stripping and caulking will pest-proof a home. A vacuum cleaner will safely remove soldier beetles that are found inside. Soldier beetles have been reported to on occasion feed on soft-skinned fruits such as raspberries and cherries, but this is generally uncommon.



*Figure 4. Soldier beetle damaging a cherry.*