

Garden Good Guys – Soldier Beetles

By Nanette Londeree

The word soldier can evoke images of militant, aggressive, tough, warrior like beings – hardly something you'd want to have in your peaceful garden, right? If you're referring to beetles however, you absolutely DO want them - lots of them, helping you combat unwanted garden visitors (the insect type of visitor that is).

While the name may suggest something less than desirable, soldier beetles (Order Coleoptera, Family Cantharidae) are beneficial insects. These garden good guys are predators to a host of bad bugs including aphids, cucumber beetles, spider mites, various caterpillars, grasshopper eggs, beetle larvae and other insects and their eggs.



Also known as leather-winged beetles, adults are relatively soft bodied, straight-sided beetles about one-half inch long with a red, orange or yellow head and abdomen. Their black, gray or brown soft, cloth-like wing covers are reminiscent of uniforms. They are similar in appearance to a firefly (they are related to the Lampyridae or firefly family) but are unable to produce light. Over 100 different species call California home.

The flat, elongated, dark colored larvae are covered with velvety looking hairs, and go through a complete metamorphosis. The immature stages of soldier beetles look similar to the immature forms of lady beetles but are larger and more slender. Both the larvae and immature forms are rarely visible, feeding primarily on eggs and larvae of beetles, butterflies, moths, and other insects on bark or in soil or litter.

Adults lay eggs in clusters in the soil, producing one or two offspring during the season. The larvae overwinter in the soil and pupate in the spring. Adults appear in mid-spring and are often observed feasting on aphids. While both the adults and larvae are predators, the adults supplement their diet with pollen from plants, making them minor pollinators.

To attract these good guys to your garden, plant good nectar- or pollen-producing plants such as like *Asclepias* (milkweed), or *Solidago* (goldenrod), and, while it's not well understood, they seem particularly attracted to hydrangeas.