

Flea Beetles

by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist

Fleas can jump and they are small. So, a beetle that is as small as a flea and can jump just as well is logically called a flea beetle. There are many different kinds, often named after the plant they feed on such as the potato flea beetle, the cabbage flea beetle, the rose flea beetle, the mint flea beetle, the horsetail flea beetle (plant, not animal!) and even one that feeds on poison oak.

The most serious flea beetle pests in our gardens are the potato flea beetle (*Epitrix subcrinita*) and the tuber flea beetle (*Epitrix tuberis*). They make their presence known when the potato plants first come up by chewing holes in the leaves. Potatoes grow fast and a few flea beetles will not do much damage, but if there are many flea beetles they will eat the potato leaves as fast as they grow and may kill the plants or weaken them so they will produce only a few small potatoes. If you have flea beetles on your potato plants, you can see them jumping when you touch the plant.

The potato flea beetle adult is what chews holes in the leaves. The larva lives in the soil and feeds on the roots of plants. The larva of the tuber flea beetle prefers to feed on the little developing potatoes and causes them to grow rough and irregular. Your potato plants need to be protected from these attacks in order to produce a good crop of large smooth tubers.

Flea beetles are commonly found feeding on weeds and they will migrate from weed patches into your garden. They overwinter as adults in the weeds and ground litter and will move into your garden early in the season to feed on succulent new shoots from seeds you have planted. Many factors such as temperature, moisture and predators and parasites will affect the population of flea beetles and you may not see them in your garden for several years. When all conditions are right for them they suddenly appear in large numbers and then you will need to do something to control them. There are common garden pesticides available which will do the job if applied correctly at the right time. Follow the directions carefully on containers that list flea beetles as a target. Most vegetable plants in the garden are not seriously damaged by flea beetles once they get six or more full-sized leaves, so if you can protect your plants for the first few weeks, you may not have to do anything about the flea beetles, at least not until next year.



Fig. 1. Adult tuber flea beetle.