The henhouse:

Hens have a swingin' good time in the poultry yard

By Lisa Steele
As explained by Jennifer Connell, owner of Fowl Play Products

I recently had the pleasure of speaking with Fowl Play Products owner Jennifer Connell, inventor of The Chicken Swing. It turns out that she and I are kindred spirits, in that we worry about our chickens being bored. Okay, so maybe that isn’t something that keeps you up at night, but when Jennifer started talking about feeling badly keeping her chickens locked up in their run (to keep them safe from predators), I could relate. I, too, want my flock to be busy and productive, and most of all happy. And believe it or not, swinging is an activity that chickens really seem to enjoy.

Jennifer spent hours watching her chickens’ behavior and even more hours watching them swing on various swing prototypes she came up with before developing and patenting The Chicken Swing. She shared with me some pointers if you are considering making your chickens a swing to keep them busy on long winter days when they can’t get outside.

Lisa: Hi Jen! Your swings are great! I have one and our little chicks especially love using it. For those who are DIY-types and more inclined to try making a swing than buying one, I’m sure you can impart some of your lessons learned. Let’s start with the basics — materials. What are some of the swing materials you would recommend, and which should be avoided?

Jennifer: PVC piping and metal pipes should all be avoided because they are too slippery. Our swing is made of plastic, but there is a textured surface and a special shape, that allows their feet to get a good grip. Your chicken needs to be able to grip the swing in order to feel safe swinging. A board such as a 2 x 4 is also not recommended because it’s too wide. A branch or log with smooth cut edges is probably best for a DIY project. One disadvantage of using a log is that it will be heavy and not only make it harder for the chickens to actually move the swing (it will become sort of a hanging perch instead), but when the chickens kick off the log, it can create a lot of force and possibly knock another hen in the head, which you clearly don’t want! If you do choose this type of design, please check it often for wear and hang it in a large outdoor coop. It is best to provide stability to the perch. If it rolls too much they will not use it. Picture kids using the backyard swing, we have hands that grip on
to the chains, and although cute in a cartoon, chickens do not grab on with their wings, so you will need to add stabilizers to the perch of your swing to help them balance. A good way to do this is to use long eyebolts that extend up from the perch about four-inches. Then attach your rope or chain to the eyebolt. Putting a flex point above the perch of the swing will help them keep the swing moving. For added safety you could cut a 10"-12" piece of tubing to go cover the rope or chain to prevent it from looping, which could entangle your chickens.

Lisa: How about the rope? Any advice about the type of rope? Can chain be used instead?

Jennifer: A lighter weight chain can be used, I prefer a durable marine quality rope with UV protection of at least 1/4-inch diameter with a weave resistant to wear. It’s also a good idea to regularly check your rope to be sure it’s not wearing or fraying. A rope not made to handle outdoor conditions can wear out pretty quickly. Also check the swing itself. ‘Green’ wood will naturally dry and shrink as it ages and you run the risk of your eyebolts pulling out, or knotted rope slipping through, if you don’t use large washers on the underside. Chain can add unnecessary weight.

Lisa: Are there different size swings or is it a one-size fits all?

Jennifer: I designed my swing to be an appropriate size for days old chicks all the way up to full-grown hens and everything in between. A long-hanging swing in a brooder will fill up with baby chicks all swinging in a row and is just the cutest thing to see! As far as having a swing for two or more adults, they tend to get the push me/pull me thing going on and are not able to really swing. It is better to add another swing. So, a perch of about 15"-18" long will work best for
average sized chickens. I like using the same swing from chick to adult. Some chickens can be cautious of new things, and this strategy helps them swing on through adulthood. But any swinging or toy exposure at all with chicks will increase their interest in swinging as adults.

**Lisa:** How about placement of the swing? Is it best for indoor use inside the coop or outdoors?

**Jennifer:** The swing can be used inside the coop or outside in the run. I like to have one inside for inclement weather and one outside. One caution though, when you position your swing, allow room for the swinging motion but also consider the dismount your chickens make, because there is a fair amount of “kickback.” Your design and placement need to consider this. Several good smacks against the back wall can damage a poor design. I think the goal of some of my birds is to make a big impression on dismount. The materials and your design, should handle the conditions of the coop and provide an activity without harming your flock or equipment. Poor placement, unstable design, rough edges, heavy, slippery, poorly shaped perches will affect the ability of your chickens to swing happily and safely. Be sure to maintain your DIY swing to avoid injury or frightening your chickens out of swinging all together.

Let’s look at the design elements of my swing. I know the average DIY person does not use molded plastic, but I think the explanation of its elements will help those of you with time and a tool belt, make one for your coop that is successful.

The Chicken Swing’s perch is made out of a high quality UV resistant molded plastic. The patented mailbox shape and texture of the perch provides maximum pumping ability that allows chickens to get a big swing. I like the safety and swing ability of the light weight design, especially in smaller coops and with chicks in brooders. The strength and durability of the engineered plastic holds up to repeated “kickbacks” that end up hitting a wall or fence. It also provides the ability to meet USDA cleaning regulations. The tongues provide the stability and proper torque point with the shape and weight of the perch. The rope is custom made to meet the demands of the coop and the color hides dirt from fly poop. Other design extras in my swing are the safety side ties to add protection from a looping rope, the cross-member keeps it from twisting and the rope buckles make it easy to hang, level and adjust.

I choose to use high quality materials that would last a minimum of five years. Though my patents protect this design from being reproduced to sell, the elements of this design can help the DIY-minded person make a true chicken swing, not just a hanging perch, or one that fails to work properly and safely in their coop.

**Lisa:** I am so glad to have had the chance to speak with you about chicken swings. I have both a Fowl Play Products swing and a “home-made” log swing and I can attest to the fact the log is too heavy for the chickens to really swing it and it has become just a hanging perch for them. You have provided some good pointers here if someone is thinking about making their chickens a swing.

**Jennifer:** It was wonderful speaking with you as well. I appreciate the information, tips and inspiration your books, articles and blogs bring to my backyard. And thank you for letting me share my experience with swinging chickens. I love the silliness of a swinging chicken and the way it makes people smile. I hope one day a swing in a coop, whether it be a DIY swing or one made by Fowl Play Products, will be just as common as a swing in a parakeet cage. Check out Fowl Play Products for more information, photos and to purchase a Chicken Swing at www.fowlplayproducts.com.

**Lisa Steele** is the author of Fresh Eggs Daily: Raising Happy, Healthy Chickens...Naturally (available from the Countryside Bookstore). A fifth-generation chicken keeper and herbalist, she lives on a small hobby farm in Virginia which she shares with her husband, two horses, a flock of assorted chickens and ducks, their two dogs and a barn cat. She is an avid gardener, baker and knitter. A frequent contributor to various chicken keeping publications, she writes about natural chicken keeping online at www.fresh-eggs-daily.com and on her Facebook page Fresh Eggs Daily.