# Fences and Gates

By Jason Miller

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**Ensure success with planning, scale, and craftsmanship.**

We Americans have a thing for fences that dates back to Colonial times. We surrounded our forts with them, protected our food stores from wild and domestic animals alike, and defined our homesteads.

These days, we build them not so much for defense, but to mark property lines, provide privacy, and complement our homes. Whether it's a split rail, traditional white picket, or a design of your own making, a well-planned, appropriately scaled, and carefully crafted fence can lend a beautiful blend of form and function to your landscape.

## Plan first

Fences are structures; their construction needs to be thought through before you dig that first post hole. So, first, think through what you want your fence to accomplish, and prioritize accordingly. Possible considerations include:

- Privacy
- Property line delineation
- Aesthetic appeal (materials and design)
- Pet or livestock containment
- Proportion and scale
- Traffic noise reduction

**Privacy fences deliver exactly that, but they can also provide cover for burglars and a tempting target for graffiti "artists."** Photo by Jason Miller

Privacy fences are a double-edged sword, because with total privacy comes a potential opportunity for criminal activity. A 6-ft. privacy fence often shields first-floor windows from view, giving burglars all the time they need to gain entry. And, privacy fences are blank slates for spray paint can-wielding vandals to leave their mark.

Get out and walk the area where the fence is to be built. Note changes in topography that may affect your design, and think about where you'll want to locate your gates (see sidebar). Are there trees or rocky outcroppings that will thwart your intended fence line? Is there a face of bedrock lying inches beneath the soil in one area? Does the land dip into an area where the water table is close to the surface? Knowing the physical attributes of your property will help to ensure your project's success.

Have a conversation with your city's building and zoning officials. Find out the parameters surrounding required easement and setback distances.

Give some thought to your budget and what it can accommodate, too, with regard to design and materials. I've always had a reputation for having champagne taste and a beer budget, so my fence design, which includes treated wood posts and stringers, bamboo stakes, stainless steel screws and birdhouses, is being realized slowly, over a period of years. Problem solved!

Take a moment to analyze what materials your design will require. When considering your options, think about each material's appearance, maintenance requirements, durability, cost, and availability. Here in Concrete, durability needs to be a priority, because we get about 16 inches more rain than Mount Vernon during the winter!

**This three-board fence defines a property line while keeping sight lines open.** Photo by Jason Miller

**Time to execute**

Got all your ducks in a row? Good—grab that post hole digger. But first, use your Mason's line (or any kind of tough string) to create a straight edge a few feet above ground level, and against which you'll place your posts. What do you tie the string to? This may be a little low-tech, but if I don't have some kind of structure to use, I just stick a 2x4 in a 5-gallon bucket and fill it with gravel. This gives me a movable, sturdy point to which I can attach the string.

Next, I dig post holes 2½ feet deep and locate them beneath the string but slightly off-center, so that one edge of the post will touch the string. I pour 6 inches of gravel into the holes for drainage, then set a chunk of flagstone on top of the gravel to create a solid base for the post to sit on. Next, the post goes in the hole and I attach a post level near its top. I line up the post with the string, check for level on two sides, and pour gravel in the hole to hold the post steady while I fine-tune it with a long pry bar. When the post is perfectly vertical, I pour in more gravel till it's about 6 inches from ground level. I then fill in the rest with cement.

**To plant your posts, dig a hole 2½ feet deep, add 6 inches of gravel, and place a chunk of flagstone on top of that to provide a sturdy base for your post.** Photo by Jason Miller

That cement “cap” is a point worth lingering on. When pouring and forming that cement, mold it into a “crown” at the base of the post: Shape it so that it slopes away from the post. This will help move rain water away from the base of the post, because the best way to shorten the life of any fence post is to allow water to pool at its base.

When all your posts are in place and you’ve allowed a couple days for the cement to harden sufficiently, it’s time to add your stringers. Stringers are those horizontal pieces between the posts. Depending on your design, they could be almost anything. My current fence project uses standard 2x4 treated wood, for example. Use your level and space your stringers appropriately for your pickets.

The pickets are mounted to the stringers. Use screws; nails will pop out a bit over time. And please, fasten your pickets to the outside of your stringers; that is, the side of the fence that faces your neighbors. This is called “privacy-side manners,” and it’s the appropriate way to build a fence.

**“Crown” the cement at the base of each fence post, shaping it so that it slopes away from the post. This will help move rain water away from the base of the post.** Photo by Jason Miller

Once the pickets are up, you’re technically finished, but remember, you live in western Washington, so you might want to think about covering the tops of your posts with something to shed water. I prefer copper caps, which are just three bucks apiece, do the job well, and look sharp.

*Now* you’re done. I think a glass of lemonade is in order.

**The right tools for the job**

Building a fence properly requires the proper equipment. Here are some of the crucial tools you’ll need to build your fence.

- Post hole digger
- Levels (straight and post)
- Tamping/prying bar
- Sledge
- Measuring tape
- Mason’s line
- Combination square
- Pencil
- Drill (cordless is nice)
- Drill bits
- Miter saw and/or circular saw
- Ear protection

Depending on your project’s design, you may require other, more specialized tools. Include an inventory of tools in your planning process to streamline your project once construction begins.

**What's a fence without a gate?**

Most fences require some kind of gate, and, while an entire article could be written on gates alone, I'll keep this brief and mention some quick tips for success.

- Match the gate materials to the fence. It seems like a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised how many chain-link gates I've seen on cedar privacy fences.
- Make sure the gate is square. Measure from corner to corner both directions before you start fastening the gate members together. Be patient and get it right; you'll thank me when you go to hang the gate.
- One word: bracing. Make sure the gate is braced adequately or it will start to sag out of shape over time. You're fighting gravity, here, so brace it well. I've been accused of overkill with my bracing, but you know what? My gates don't sag. Ever.
- Note the direction the gate will *swing* before you start building it.
- When building the gate, lay your pieces with any imperfections facing up, and put all your fasteners and bracing on that side. When hung, your gate will then show its best face to the world.

Photo by Jason Miller

**The materials used to construct this arbor and gates will complement the fence that will eventually be built on either side of them.** Photo by Jason Miller

**Plenty of bracing helps to ensure this gate will never sag. Note the hinges, which are placed on the back side of the gate to allow an inward swing.** Photo by Jason Miller