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A Wood Fence Worthy of Compliment

By Tim Carter
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Q. DEAR TIM: Wood fencing is my next project. My wife loves wood fences, and I feel they are attractive. What do I need to know to ensure this project is a success? What is a good wood fence post? Should I pre-build fence panels or construct the fence in place? Is it necessary to embed the fence posts in concrete? -- Barry L., Columbia, S.C.

A. DEAR BARRY: My wife and I are suckers for a wood fence as well. I've had wood fencing at every house I've ever owned, and the fence at my current home still gets compliments. This fence has a gentle convex curve between each of the fence posts. Each fence panel is made from two horizontal, treated-pine 2-by-4s and vertical pickets made from rough-sawn cedar. Each picket has an arrow point to match the distinctive points on each of the treated-pine 4-by-4 fence posts.

There are many things you need to consider as you start this project, not the least of which is whether you are even allowed to build the fence in the first place. Many cities and towns have strict zoning laws that control wood fencing, including its location, height and design, just to name a few. I used to live in a village that prohibited fences in front yards and strictly controlled the height of fences so that the vista across multiple properties was not blocked.

If you get the approval and permits necessary to build your wood fence, the next thing you'll need to be concerned with are underground utilities. Electric, gas, water, phone and cable television lines can be lurking just below the surface of the soil where you intend to ram your post-hole digger. Call 811 from your phone to schedule an appointment from the service that marks the location of underground utilities.

To conserve natural resources, as well as your time and money, I would recommend wood fence designs that allow you to build your fence in a modular fashion. This means using wood materials in such a way that you have minimal or no waste. I did this with my own wood fence many years ago.

I've had fantastic success over the years with treated pine fence posts. My current fence has treated-pine 4-by-4 posts that are six feet long. I was able to get two posts from each 12-foot-long 4-by-4 I bought. These posts are buried two feet in the ground, so the top of the fence is four feet out of the ground. This 2:1 above/below ground ratio is a good one to adopt to ensure your fence withstands strong wind gusts.

It's not a bad idea to pre-build your wood fence panels, but keep in mind the total weight of each panel and how you will connect each panel to your wood posts. If you intend to stain or paint your wood fence, you'll get the best long-term results if you pre-paint or

stain each individual piece on all surfaces and cut edges before you assemble the parts. Paint that peels from wood fences often starts at locations where one piece of unpainted or unstained wood overlaps another. Rain gets into this confined space and soaks into the wood.

There are two schools of thought on placing fence posts in concrete. Each argument is strong and has good points. In my own experience, I've never placed a fence post in concrete. I couldn't see any advantages, just disadvantages. The primary issue is that if the fence post needs to be replaced because of damage or rot, it's a major ordeal. With no concrete to deal with, the old post comes out in a jiffy.

An alternative to concrete is crushed gravel. The sharp edges of the stone interlock and the stone mass mimics that of concrete, especially if the crushed stone comes with rock dust that fills all of the voids in between the stone.

Clay soil does a magnificent job of holding fence posts. That's what I have had at my past homes, and the dense clay provides plenty of lateral support to my wood fences. My father-in-law grew up on a farm with livestock that used to bump the fences and he said that they never used concrete to set fence posts.

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