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Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



A crew builds a fence. Photos Cynthia Brian

"Good fences make good neighbors." - Robert Frost

Growing up on a ranch we had all kinds of enclosures. Fences to keep the cattle in, fences to keep the deer out, coops for the chickens, hutches for the rabbits, paddocks for the horses, pens for the sheep, and extra corrals for the injured animals we would rehabilitate before release. What we didn't have were human fences.

While traveling to the East Coast and the southern states, I noticed a lack of fences between homes. Lawns rolled into one another, gardens meandered, play structures appeared to belong to no one or everyone. In the California sierras, the same mentality holds true for many homeowners. But in the cities and suburbs of California, strong fences create good neighbors, especially if you live near a house that reminds you of Miss Havisham's ruined mansion in Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations," albeit with abandoned cars on blocks, rusting washing machines, and a backyard piled high with trash. The sturdy redwood fence dividing your properties could be your sanity savior.

Here in our neck of the woods we experience a different kind of problem. Deer! With few predators and plenty of open space deer have been multiplying exponentially. This is not good news for gardeners. Of all the correspondence I receive from readers, the majority of the questions concern

these trespassing foragers.

"What can I plant that deer won't eat?"

"How can I keep the deer from breaking my sprinkler systems?"

"What can I do to keep the deer out of my garden?"

Over the years I have written articles about our dear deer and after three decades of trying literally every trick suggested, I am convinced that there is only one answer.

Build a fence!

I decided to call several fencing companies to find out if they have experienced a rise in requests for deer fencing. The answer was a resolute "Yes!" Ryan Collins, the estimator for C & J Fencing, informed me that 95 percent of the calls he had been on in the last month were all related to building deer fencing. Despite the fact that C & J builds custom decks, arbors, handrails and benches as well as offering ornamental iron and chain link, putting in redwood and galvanized wire

deer barriers has become an important part of protecting landscapes.

If you are considering installing a fence, repairing, upgrading or replacing an old one, as a homeowner, what do you really need to know? I interviewed Collins more in depth and also tagged along on an installation. Here are some tips that I gratefully learned through the generosity of C & J as well as through my own observations:

1. Get recommendations from friends, family, or neighbors you trust.
2. Invite two or three legitimate companies to look at your location and bid your job. Ask how long each has been in business. Make sure all are licensed, carry Workman's Comp Insurance, General Liability Insurance, and Auto Insurance.
3. To be fair to all, make sure each estimator is bidding apples for apples. Show each of the contractors exactly where you want the installation. Share your expectations, and your fears, if any. Be clear about how high you want your fence. To keep the deer and coyotes out of your garden, seven feet is the recommendation.
4. Ask and get in writing the materials that will be used. Will the fence be redwood, Douglas fir, pressure treated, metal, chain link, or something else? How deep will the posts be set? (Two feet or more is best.) How much concrete will be used? If using wood, are the posts to be set eight feet on center with 16-foot top rails? Where will gates be placed? Is the wire galvanized welded? Is there an up charge for the longer lasting black or green vinyl coated wire?
5. What is the experience and expertise of the crew who will handle the job?
6. How soon can the fence be started and completed?
7. Does the company contact the utility companies or is it the obligation of the homeowner to know where pipes, cable, electrical, and gas lines reside? If it is the homeowner's responsibility, call 811 to schedule a free inspection.
8. Is the leftover debris recycled? What happens to it?
9. Is there a warranty and, if so, how long?
10. When is payment due?

Costs vary widely between companies. Most fencing companies quoted an additional \$2 a linear foot for the upgrade to the green or black vinyl coated wire while another company quoted \$5 a linear foot. Some companies offered discount coupons; others were willing to negotiate within reason based on client needs. The key is to know exactly what you want and ask for it. Although a wood and wire fence could last 25 years or longer, warranties for the pressure treated posts and kickboards tended to be 15 years and gates one year. Other than special order items which required a deposit, payment for the structure is due upon completion, according to the companies I interviewed.

Once you have installed a redwood fence, should it be left natural, stained or painted? Collins indicated that this is a personal choice, however, staining or painting will extend the life of the wood because it will be better protected from the elements, especially moisture.

I watched C & J's crew chief, Lopez, with his six man crew as they were unloading trucks, digging postholes, hauling bags of concrete, cutting wood and erecting the fence. Every person was on his game, non-stop working until the job was finished and the area cleaned and cleared. Depending on the size of the job, a crew consists of two to four men, with a few more usually arriving the first day to unload. Lopez's crew were so impressive that I asked Collins if all of the 12 crews run by C & J were equally as hard working and diligent. He responded that because C & J is a family-run business, each crewmember is hand picked, resulting in a pride of ownership mentality. Many times

they hire siblings of a dedicated worker. Lopez, an eight-year veteran of C & J, brought his two brothers on board.

This information made me realize that asking about the expertise and work ethic of the specific crew assigned to a project is a critical part of hiring the right company for the job. I wondered if some companies were charging higher fees because of El Nino. (I had heard that roofing companies were known for that practice.) Collins responded that a company with integrity quotes the same fees year-round. Many people believe the misconception that winter is a time when fencing contractors scramble for work, but that is not the case. If you need a fence, do it when you want it. Don't wait.

To help you explore your options, here are four local companies to consider:

C & J Fencing

(925) 355-1380

www.CandJfencing.com

A & J Fencing

(925) 939-2105

www.AandJfencing.com

Borg Fence

(925) 290-8818

www.BorgFence.com

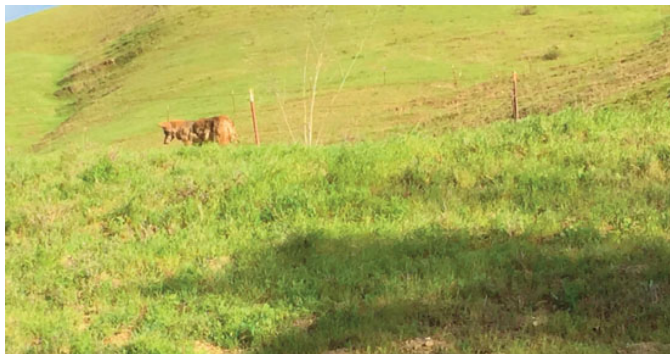
Burton Fencing

(925) 290-7840

www.BurtonFencing.com

Spring is around the corner and our trees are full of buds and blossoms. Enjoy the beauty and the fragrance.

Happy Gardening! Happy Growing!



A mangy coyote on the hill.



A pear tree in bloom flanked by a blooming camellia.



A magnificent tulip magnolia burst into bloom.



A spectacular white tulip stellata magnolia adds brilliance to the landscape.

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