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## Mending fences

By Jim Hurley



Large postholes are needed for sturdy fence post installation. Photos Jim Hurley

To paraphrase Johnny Cash, "Because you're mine, I fence the line." If you are building a new fence or replacing an old one on a property shared with a neighbor it would be wise to have a surveyor come and mark the property line from corner to corner. Your neighbor should be willing to share the expense of the new fence. Talk to your neighbor before you start and decide on the style of fence you want and how to split the cost. If you and your neighbor strongly disagree, California has laws regarding fences between properties, but let us hope it does not come to that.

After building several miles of fence in my time, I have come to this conclusion: Hire a fencing company for long lengths of fence. They will give you a fixed bid (get two or three bids, if you like to negotiate). They can bid low because they hire cheaper labor, get their materials at bulk rates, and are motivated to get the job done quickly. If you have a small repair or a short span to replace, then call a handyman service. The fencing contractors will bid high on little jobs to cover their overhead and a handyman might charge by the hour. If you are feeling vigorous and enjoy digging postholes, the DIY route is your option.

Use stakes and a sturdy string line to mark a straight fence line. The fence posts should be at equal intervals whenever possible.

Make your design decisions before you start. Your first option is to copy the fence nearest the one you are building for continuity, considering cost, availability, design esthetic, and your neighbors. If you do not care for that style, Google "fence images" to find a style you like. There are a large variety of fence materials.

Digging postholes can be a challenge. I just spent four hours pounding out four postholes for my new replacement fence. The original fence was built in 1974 and from the look of things, it was never replaced. Instead, whenever the old posts rotted out, the owners would attach another post next to it, called "sistering," which is like putting a splint on a broken limb. At this point, our fence is no longer a candidate for patching and replacing a few posts. So, I was digging out lots of old concrete to put in new posts.

The first tool you need to dig a posthole is a clamshell digger. But the most valuable tool for digging a posthole is a digging bar. A steel digging bar is like an eight-pound pick in a straight line. My favorite (yes, I have several) has a point on one end and a chisel wedge on the other. The clamshells are excellent for pulling dirt out of the posthole, but they are not strong enough to break concrete. The digging bar is your best friend for loosening hardpan soil and breaking up old fence post concrete.

The digging bar technique takes a little practice; you lift the bar just slightly over the hole and pitch it down, then give the bar a wiggle from side to side. Let the weight of the bar do the work. Use the bar to loosen soil in the hole and then use the clamshells to clean the loose soil out.

To remove old concrete, use your digging bar to attack the corners of the square opening the rotted post left behind. If you are lucky the block will split at the corners and you can break up whole sections to pull out in big chunks.

There are several schools of thought on setting the perfect fence post. I have tried them all with varied results. Pick a method that you are comfortable with and do not spend too much time worrying about it. Just make sure it is in line with the other posts and level.

If you have the luxury to choose a time, the best time of year for digging is in spring. The ground should be soft but not too wet and the air will be cool. There are some who recommend soaking the area with water prior to digging, but I prefer to avoid slogging through the resulting mud. Also, the Lamorinda area soil has a high clay content and sticks to the clamshells when wet. You will find yourself fighting to get wet, sticky mud off the diggers with every scoop.

With the right tools and favorable weather, building your own fence can be satisfying exercise with a visible reward. With perseverance and perspiration, your new fence will provide a solid line on your property for years to come.



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Jim Hurley is an independent handyman with over 25 years of experience in residential repairs. Hopefully this free advice is helpful to someone attempting Do-It-Yourself home repairs. The information presented is intended for informational purposes and for use by persons having appropriate technical skill, at their own discretion and risk.

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