

What to Expect During Concrete Foundation Removal

If you have an old foundation on your property that is cracked, settling unevenly, or simply in the way of a planned renovation, you are looking at a job that goes far beyond swinging a sledgehammer. Concrete foundation removal is a heavy, multi-stage process that involves careful planning, the right equipment, and an understanding of what lies beneath the slab. Having been involved in dozens of these projects across Southern Ontario, I can tell you that the difference between a smooth removal and a disaster often comes down to preparation and knowing when to call in the pros.

Why Concrete Foundation Removal Is Different from Other Concrete Work

Removing a foundation is not the same as driveway removal or patio removal. A foundation is typically thicker, reinforced with steel rebar, and often tied into the structure of a house or garage. That means the concrete slab you are dealing with may be eight inches thick or more, with footings that go below the frost line. In Ontario, where frost can reach four feet deep, those footings can be substantial. The weight alone makes this a job for heavy equipment, not just a few friends with a jackhammer.

Another factor is that a foundation often sits directly against the building it supports. You cannot simply drive a skid steer loader in and start prying pieces loose without risking damage to the remaining structure. That is where the planning stage becomes critical. You need to know where the load-bearing points are, how the foundation ties into the floor slab, and where underground utilities run before you break the first piece of concrete.

Step One: Utility Locates and Site Assessment

Before any equipment shows up, a utility locate is mandatory. In Southern Ontario, you can call Ontario One Call to have gas, hydro, phone, and water lines marked on your property. If you skip this step, you risk hitting a gas line or an electrical conduit. I have seen crews hit a buried hydro line with a skid steer loader, and the result is a dangerous arc flash and a costly repair bill. A proper utility locate ensures you know exactly where those lines run so you can avoid them during the excavation.

Once the utilities are marked, a site assessment follows. This involves checking the foundation for any signs of asbestos, which was common in older homes, and confirming the depth and reinforcement of the concrete. It also means looking at access points. Can a dump truck get close enough? Is there room for a skid steer loader to maneuver? If the foundation is in a tight

backyard, you may need to bring in a smaller machine or do more work by hand with a jackhammer.

Step Two: Saw-Cutting for Clean Edges

After the site is assessed and utilities are located, the next step is saw-cutting. This is not just about making the job look tidy. Saw-cutting creates a clean separation between the foundation and any adjacent concrete, like a patio or a walkway. It also helps control how the concrete breaks during demolition. If you simply start pounding on a slab without cutting it first, the cracks can run in unpredictable directions, potentially damaging parts of the driveway or the house foundation that you want to keep.

A good saw cut goes at least an inch deep, sometimes more, depending on the thickness of the concrete. For a reinforced slab, you may need a diamond blade that can handle rebar. The cut lines also help the operator of the skid steer loader know where to pry. It is a simple step, but skipping it leads to extra patching work and more hauling of broken pieces that could have stayed in place.

Step Three: Demolition with Heavy Equipment

With the cuts made, the real work begins. For most foundation removal jobs in Hamilton, Toronto, or Oakville, a skid steer loader is the machine of choice. It is compact enough to fit through a standard gate but strong enough to lift and carry heavy chunks of concrete. The operator uses the bucket to pry up sections of the slab, break them along the saw-cut lines, and load them into a dump truck. If the foundation has deep footings, a jackhammer may be needed to break those sections loose first.

This is where experience matters. A skilled operator knows how to work the machine without overloading it or damaging the surrounding ground. They also know how to separate the rebar from the concrete as they go, which makes the next step easier. If the rebar is left tangled in the rubble, it can jam the equipment and slow down the whole process.

Step Four: Recycling the Concrete

Once the concrete is broken into manageable pieces, it gets loaded into a dump truck and hauled to a concrete recycling plant. In Southern Ontario, there are several facilities that accept clean concrete rubble and crush it into aggregate for new construction. Recycling keeps thousands of tons of material out of landfills every year. It also saves on disposal costs because clean concrete is cheaper to dump than mixed waste.

Before the concrete goes to the recycling plant, the rebar needs to be removed. Most recycling facilities will not take concrete with exposed rebar longer than a few inches. That means

someone has to go through the pile with a cutting torch or a grinder to trim the steel flush. It is tedious work, but it is part of the job. If you are hiring a contractor, ask them whether they include rebar removal and recycling in their quote. Not all do, and the difference can show up in the final bill.

Step Five: Grading and Site Preparation

After the concrete is gone and the rebar is recycled, the site needs grading. This means leveling the soil so that the area is ready for a new concrete pour. Grading is not just about making the ground look flat. It involves checking the slope to ensure water drains away from the house and that the new slab will have a stable base. If the ground is too soft, a layer of compacted gravel may be needed first.

Site preparation also includes removing any debris that was buried under the old foundation. Sometimes you find old pipes, rocks, or even trash that was left behind during the original construction. All of that needs to be cleared out before any new concrete goes in. A good contractor will also compact the soil to prevent settling later. Skipping compaction is one of the most common mistakes I see. It leads to cracked slabs and uneven surfaces within a year or two.

Common Challenges in Concrete Foundation Removal

Every job has its surprises. In older parts of Toronto and Hamilton, foundations were often poured over existing soil without a gravel base, which means the ground underneath can be uneven or soft. In Oakville, I have run into buried tree roots that had grown through the footings. Those roots have to be cut and removed before the new pour, or they will rot and leave voids under the concrete.

Another challenge is access. If the foundation is behind a house with a narrow side yard, it may be impossible to get a dump truck close. That means the operator has to use a smaller machine to carry the concrete to the truck, which adds time and labor. In some cases, the concrete has to be hand-loaded into a wheelbarrow and carted out piece by piece. That is slow and expensive, but sometimes it is the only option.

Weather also plays a role. In Southern Ontario, the ground freezes solid from December through March, which makes excavation much harder. Frozen soil does not compact well, and the cold can damage hydraulic hoses on heavy equipment. Most contractors prefer to do foundation removal between April and November, but if the job is urgent, it can be done in winter with the right precautions.

Why You Should Not Try This Yourself

I meet homeowners every year who think they can save money by renting a jackhammer and doing [concrete foundation removal](#) themselves. Almost without exception, they end up calling a professional halfway through the job. The concrete is thicker than they expected, the rebar is harder to cut, and the dump truck rental costs more than they budgeted. By the time they add up the equipment rental, disposal fees, and the value of their own time, they have spent more than a professional quote would have been.

There is also the safety factor. A skid steer loader can tip over if the operator does not know how to balance a load. A jackhammer can cause repetitive strain injuries if used incorrectly. And breaking concrete creates silica dust, which is hazardous to breathe without proper respiratory protection. Professionals have the training, the insurance, and the equipment to do the job safely.

Preparing for a New Concrete Pour

Once the old foundation is gone and the site is graded, the real work of site preparation begins. The ground needs to be compacted, forms need to be set, and rebar or wire mesh may be needed to reinforce the new concrete. The concrete itself has to be ordered with the right mix for the climate. In Southern Ontario, that usually means air-entrained concrete that can survive freeze-thaw cycles.

The whole process, from the first utility locate to the final grading, can take anywhere from two days to a week, depending on the size of the foundation and the access conditions. It is not a quick job, but doing it right means the new concrete pour will last for decades without cracking or settling. That is the goal: a foundation that stays solid and level for as long as you own the property.

Concrete foundation removal is a gritty, physical job that requires knowledge of both demolition and construction. If you are planning one in Hamilton, Toronto, Oakville, or anywhere else in Southern Ontario, take the time to find a contractor who includes saw-cutting, utility locates, recycling, and grading in their scope. It will save you headaches and money in the long run.