Good fence projects succeed before the first post hole is dug. The most efficient fence contractor shows up to a site that is ready for work, with access clear, utilities marked, lines confirmed, and the homeowner's goals spelled out. When that groundwork is in place, the crew **Stand Strong Fencing** can focus on setting straight lines and sturdy posts rather than solving avoidable problems. Preparation also protects your investment. Posts last longer when drainage is planned, gates swing cleanly when grades are checked, and neighbors are happier when boundaries are crystal clear.

This guide walks through what professionals look for on day one, what can delay an install, and exactly how to get your yard ready. It draws from jobs that went off without a hitch and a few that learned lessons the hard way.

Start with the three big risks: property lines, utilities, and grade

Mistakes in any of these areas add cost and friction fast. A few hours up front can save days of rework.

Property lines come first because fences carry legal weight. If a fence crosses a boundary, you can be asked to move it, even years later. A site plan or survey pins down the line. Many homeowners have a mortgage survey from purchase, which is better than nothing but may not show improvements or true corners. When a lot is irregular, wooded, or there's tension with a neighbor, a new survey is worth the fee. On tight city lots I have seen a six inch encroachment trigger a full panel relocation after an angry email chain. That is not a fun conversation to have with a neighbor or a fence company.

Underground utilities sit a close second. Gas, electric, water, fiber, irrigation, and low-voltage lines rarely run in perfectly predictable paths. Every fence company I respect will require a utility locate ticket before digging. The service is typically free and fast, but it must be requested several business days in advance and lines need to be marked before crews arrive. Private lines, such as irrigation or landscape lighting, will not be marked by the public locator. Map those yourself and, if possible, expose them near fence lines so a post auger does not pierce a pipe or conduit. I still remember a Saturday spent pumping muddy water because a hidden 1 inch irrigation main sat 10 inches off the line where it was assumed to be. Ten minutes with a hand shovel would have prevented it.

Grade and drainage shape how a fence sits and how long it lasts. Flat yards are rare. If you have a slope, you and your contractor need to decide whether the fence should step or rack. Vinyl and aluminum systems can rack to match a gentle slope, where wood fence installation often steps for a clean top line. Water flow matters too. Posts set in wet pockets will heave and rot sooner, even on a vinyl fence installation where the actual post sleeve is PVC. The structural post beneath can still sit in water. Plan slight crowns around each post and avoid creating basins where runoff collects.

Confirm rules before you start: HOA, permits, and neighbors

Some jobs never begin because paperwork lags. Check city or county permit requirements early. Many jurisdictions require permits for fences above a certain height, for corner lots near visibility triangles, or for any fence along a public right-of-way. If a permit is required, a basic site sketch, material spec, and height note usually suffice.

Homeowners associations often impose additional restrictions on fence style, color, height, and location. Bring your intended material and color sample to the architectural committee, and allow a couple of weeks for approval. A professional fence company can usually provide spec sheets that make approval smoother. Without signoff, you risk fines or mandatory changes.

Let neighbors know the plan. A simple conversation about timing, location, and any temporary impact on shared driveways or parking takes friction out of the process. When I walk a job with a client and a neighbor together, we catch little details early, such as a vine they want saved or a preferred side for gate swing.

Walk the line with your contractor

A site walk is where plans become practical. Good fence installation services will want to meet on-site, even for straightforward layouts. You should walk the entire run together, on both sides when possible. Flag corner points and gate openings. Identify obstacles like tree roots, large stones, window wells, AC units, or septic components.

Talk through gate locations with real life in mind. Where do trash bins roll out? How do lawn mowers move from front to back? Is there a dog run that needs a self-closing hinge and a latch at a certain height? A 48 inch gate sounds large until you try to angle a snowblower through on a curve. I've often recommended two 42 inch gates rather than a single 60 inch span because it carries better and needs less reinforcement.

Measure twice. On stepped or curved lines, snap a chalk line or pull string to visualize how the fence will look. For curving property edges, agree on whether the fence will follow the exact curve or create gentle chords between points. Gentle chords usually look cleaner and are simpler to build, but a tight radius may force panel-by-panel adjustments.

Clear the path: vegetation, debris, and access

Vegetation removal is the most underestimated prep task. Crews can cut through small brush, but heavy growth slows everything and adds cost. Trimming shrubs 12 to 18 inches back from the fence line gives room for post digging and panel fastening. For vines or brambles woven through an old fence, cut them free a few days ahead so they wilt and pull away more easily.

Tree roots are common along property edges. Expect an extra charge if the crew must chop through large roots, and understand that cutting major roots can stress a tree. If protection is a priority, push the fence offset slightly, then add a privacy screen or plantings to fill the gap. I've worked with arborists on sites where a 6 inch move spared a critical root flare and saved a mature maple.

Access matters just as much. A crew needs clear routes for augers, wheelbarrows, and material pallets. If you have a narrow side yard, measure it. A 36 inch gate will not accept a typical powered auger, so the team may switch to handheld tools, which slows the job. Consider removing a short section of old fence or a gate temporarily to allow equipment in. If your driveway is steep or fragile, flag that upfront so the fence contractor can plan staging elsewhere.

Yard readiness checklist

- Confirm survey or property line markers, and discuss any gray areas with neighbors.
- Request public utility locates and mark private lines like irrigation and lighting.
- Trim vegetation along the fence route and clear debris or stored materials.
- Identify and mark gate locations with stakes, verifying widths against actual equipment like mowers.
- Create equipment access by unlocking gates, clearing driveways, and noting any weight limits.

Plan for drainage and soil, not just straight lines

Drainage is the quiet enemy of fence longevity. Even vinyl systems rely on sound footings. Set posts in well-compacted gravel or concrete that sheds water. In clay-heavy soils, bell the base of the hole slightly and add 4 to 6 inches of clean gravel below the post for drainage. In sandy soils, a deeper hole and wider base improve pull-out resistance. If the yard holds water after a rain, consider small grade changes before installation. Bringing in a few yards of topsoil to build a gentle swale away from posts often outlasts a fancy post mix.

Frost depth matters in cold regions. Posts should be set below the local frost line to reduce heave. Your fence company should know the depth standard for the area, but you can ask directly. When a client calls about winter shifting on a line where the posts were only 18 inches deep in a 36 inch frost zone, the fix usually means digging again in spring.

Rocky ground is a special case. Hidden ledge or cobble fields chew up time and blades. In these conditions, crews may switch to smaller diameter holes, break out rock with a bar, or use a core drill. If you suspect rock, raise it during the bid so the contractor can factor options and costs. I have had rural sites where one slope was sand and the next hill was granite under six inches of loam. We staged extra blades and slowed production by half on that stretch.

Decide on material details early, especially with vinyl and wood

Different materials have different prep sensitivities. Vinyl looks crisp, resists rot, and installs cleanly, but it is less forgiving on layout. Panels have fixed widths, and posts must land within tight tolerances to align rails and lock tabs. If your property has bends or jogs, plan where to use adjustable brackets or cut panels. Talk through how to handle that last short span near a house corner so it does not look like an afterthought. Good vinyl fence installation teams will pre-plan cut panels to keep cut ends out of the most visible areas.

Wood is flexible and traditional, well suited to custom contours and odd angles. It also asks more from owners after installation. Lumber has moisture and will shrink or cup slightly as it seasons. Allow for that movement in tight areas. If you are staining, decide whether to pre-stain or finish on-site. Pre-staining panels and pickets reduces mess but requires space and dry weather. On windy lots, I often recommend board-on-board styles for privacy without turning the fence into a sail.

When you already have a fence but only part of it has failed, a targeted fence repair may be smarter than a full replacement. Vinyl fence repair sections can be matched if the profile is still made, but color fade is real. Ask your fence company to bring a scrap of new material to compare against your existing panels in daylight. If the mismatch is glaring, replacing a full stretch to the next corner can look more intentional than patching a single panel. The same logic applies to wood: species, milling, and age all change the look. A short run replacement with a clean break often reads better than a piecemeal fix.

Coordinate removal of old fencing and site cleanup

Removal sounds simple until you meet concrete. Many older fences have large, irregular footings that flare at the bottom. Extracting those can leave craters that need backfill and compaction. Decide if you want to reuse the same line exactly or shift slightly to avoid old holes. If you are paying for haul-off, clarify whether that includes concrete and whether the crew will fill and compact voids as they go. On a tidy townhouse job, I watched a budget crew leave 20 open holes after pulling chain link posts because haul-off did not include concrete. The client found them with an ankle. That should never happen.

If vegetation or shrubs are intertwined with an old fence you plan to remove, cut them well before demo day to make removal safer and faster. For chain link, ask if the top rail and fabric can be reused temporarily as a pet barrier during a multi-day install. A thoughtful crew can stage work to maintain containment.

Think through pets, kids, and security

Fence projects disrupt routines. If you have dogs, plan a safe area during installation. Temporary fencing panels or an exercise pen in another part of the yard solve stress before it starts. Dogs love to inspect post holes. Close supervision saves calls to the vet and emergency fills. For very busy streets or tight urban sites, consider a brief boarding stay during the most open period of the project.

Secure gates, shed doors, and exterior outlets before work begins. If there is a pool, maintain code-compliant barriers at all times. Good crews will prioritize pool-side sections first and set self-closing hardware immediately, but they need clear marching orders.

Communicate about hardware, heights, and details that affect daily life

Hardware choices are small on paper, big in use. Latches that can be operated with gloves matter in winter climates. Self-closing hinges are common near pools and helpful when kids run in and out. Locking options vary from simple padlock hasps to keyed levers. If you use a lawn service, decide whether they need a lock code or whether a combination lock is easier.

Gate clearances are another place to get specific. On gravel or pavers, leave a bit more swing clearance. On a slope, a double gate may need one leaf hung slightly higher to avoid dragging. Confirm swing direction at the walk-through with doors open, not just in your head. I carry bright tape on site walks and let clients physically walk through the planned gate swing path. That small step prevents daily annoyance later.

Stage materials smartly and protect what should not be touched

Your fence contractor will want a level area near the work to stage posts, panels, and concrete. If you have new sod or delicate plantings, ask for staging on the driveway or a less sensitive area. Mark septic lids, sprinkler heads, and landscape lighting with flags. Move vehicles and grill carts if they sit near the line. If the job is more than one day, plan where materials will be stacked overnight and whether you want a temporary barrier for safety.

For commercial sites, staging often involves pallets, skid steers, and deliveries timed with other trades. A commercial fence company will coordinate with site supers to prevent crane paths from crossing staging or scissor lifts from parking on newly set lines. On mixed-use projects I've seen fences built in phases tied to paving schedules and utility cutoffs. A short daily check-in avoids conflicts.

Weather and timing: when to press pause

Fence work happens in all seasons, but not every day is equal. In heavy rain, post holes collapse and concrete weakens. In deep cold, concrete sets slowly and can freeze if not protected. High winds make handling large panels risky. If you're not in a urgent rush, watch the 7 to 10 day weather window with your contractor and be open to slight shifts that improve results. I've rescheduled more than one start by 48 hours to dodge a soaking storm, and it paid off in cleaner holes and straighter lines.

If your ground is saturated from snow melt, give it a week. Tracked equipment turns sod to soup, and post holes become wells. A dry spell saves cleanup and compaction issues.

What installation day looks like

A prepared site makes the first morning efficient. Here's a simple sequence that many crews follow when the groundwork is set:

- Confirm final layout with string lines and stakes, adjusting for any obstacles found that morning.
- Mark utilities and private lines again, then paint or flag post centers along the string.
- Dig or auger holes, setting corner and gate posts first for alignment, then line posts.
- Set posts in gravel or concrete, checking for plumb and height with string lines, then allow initial set time.
- Hang panels or rails, install gates and hardware, and finish with caps, trims, and site cleanup.

Expect some noise and dust. Crews that use vacuums for soil spoils or bring tarps for mixing areas keep things tidy. Ask the foreman where they plan to wash out concrete tools. That water should never run onto lawns or into storm drains. A small plastic tub is enough for rinse water that can be disposed of properly later.

Special cases: hills, curves, and tight setbacks

Hills require a decision between stepping and racking. Racking follows the slope, keeping the bottom of the fence snug to the ground. Many aluminum and some vinyl systems rack nicely within a limited angle per panel. Stepping creates level panels that descend in short drops. On steep grades near sidewalks, stepping often looks cleaner and keeps the top line consistent. If you need privacy on a slope, consider taller panels at the high end so that stepping does not open sight lines.

Curves introduce panel geometry. Many systems allow slight angle adjustments at posts. For tight curves, shorter panels or custom rails solve the fit without big gaps. With wood, custom angles are straightforward. With vinyl, plan more posts and train your eye to accept a faceted curve instead of a perfect arc.

Tight setbacks near property lines or easements limit where posts can go. If your city requires fences to sit a certain distance from sidewalks or alleys, measure and mark that zone. On alleys with utilities, I have had to place posts behind a shallow communications duct bank, adding a few inches of offset but saving a lot of headache.

When repair is smarter than replacement

Not every project needs a full tear-out. If 10 percent of a wood run has failed due to a sprinkler leak that rotted a few posts, a targeted fence repair can restore function for years. The key is matching structure, not just appearance. Replace bad posts to the proper depth with gravel or concrete, tie rails in with proper fasteners, and seal cut ends. For vinyl fence repair, cracked pickets or a broken rail can often be replaced if the profile is still stocked. If a storm took down one bay because a limb fell, replacing that bay and checking adjacent posts for movement is often enough.

Good contractors will tell you when repair dollars start chasing bad money. If most posts are shallow, the panels are fine but the backbone is weak. In that case, full replacement or a staged rebuild makes more sense.

Budget clarity and scope control

Preparation helps the budget too. Ask for a written scope that lists linear footage, number and size of gates, post spacing, footing details, and material specifications. Clarify what is included for removal, haul-off, and site restoration. If there are potential change orders, such as rock excavation or large root mitigation, get the rate or unit cost in writing.

A small contingency, 5 to 10 percent of project cost, covers unknowns discovered during digging. On a 150 foot backyard run, that might be a few hundred dollars, which is reasonable considering the blind nature of underground work.

Final walkthrough and aftercare

Before the crew leaves, walk the fence. Sight down the top line for smooth flow. Check gate swing, latch catch, and clearances. Confirm caps are secure and fasteners are seated, not overdriven. Look at the bottom of the fence against the ground. Small, intentional gaps prevent rot and make trimming easier, but you do not want accidental large openings that a small pet can slip under.

Ask about cure times before heavy use. Concrete reaches most of its strength within a few days, but avoid leaning ladders or hanging heavy planters immediately. For wood, discuss sealing or staining timing. Fresh pressure-treated lumber needs time to dry, often a few weeks to a few months depending on weather. A quick water bead test tells you when the surface is ready to accept finish.

Plan maintenance. Rinse vinyl occasionally to keep mildew off. Tighten hinge bolts annually. Keep soil and mulch pulled back an inch from wood pickets to improve air flow. Quick checks each season prevent small issues from becoming repairs.

Choosing the right partner

A reliable fence company brings more than materials and labor. They bring judgment. Ask about crew experience, warranty terms, and scheduling. A solid local reputation, clear communication, and detailed estimates count more than the absolute lowest bid. If you need a specialized setup, such as bollards for a loading dock or high-security mesh around equipment, a commercial fence company will have hardware and procedural know-how that residential-only outfits may lack.

References help too. Drive by a couple of recent installations and look for consistent post height, even spacing, and clean transitions around grade changes. Straight lines tell you a lot about pride in work.

The payoff of proper prep

When you prepare your yard well, install day feels almost calm. The crew focuses on craftsmanship instead of triage. Posts set true, panels align, and gates click just right. The line you imagined weeks earlier appears exactly where you flagged it, and you do not spend the afternoon chasing a dog through an open side yard or calling a utility about a cut line.

Give yourself a week to handle the big three, trim back growth, mark gates, and arrange access. Communicate your needs in plain terms, and invite your fence contractor to advise where it counts. Whether the project is a clean vinyl fence installation along a pool deck, a custom wood fence installation shaping up to a sloped garden, or a straightforward fence repair to restore a storm-damaged section, the same preparation principles apply. Thoughtful planning anchors strong fences.