

First Class Fence

Low Maintenance Privacy Fence Solutions for Community Associations

by John Homan



Wood privacy fences just don't last the way they used to! Posts that used to last 12-20 years now rot in as few as 6-12 years, depending on soil and moisture conditions. Cedar posts that used to be cut from the heartwood of old-

growth trees are being replaced by farm-raised or rapid growth trees. This lumber has less tannic acid content—the “good stuff” that gives cedar its rot resistance. While this is great for the environment, it causes more headaches and expense for managed properties. The life and appearance of cedar fences can be extended by periodic applications of a good quality stain. While staining helps to prevent the fence boards from drying out and showing a weathered look, the major problem with cedar privacy fences is the posts.

One of the most cost-effective solutions is to use steel posts in lieu of cedar or wood posts. Steel posts will add years to the lifetime of a wood fence. They can either be galvanized or powder coated, and several manufacturers offer an engineered post that can be “hidden” by the use of covering boards. Existing wood fences can be taken down and reinstalled on steel posts to economically increase the life of existing fences.



Another alternative is to substitute pressure treated lumber. Pressure treated fence posts will last up to thirty years without rotting, and pressure treated fences are generally less expensive than cedar. But there are some drawbacks to this material for use in fences:

1. The most common pressure treatment is CCA, or chromated copper arsenate. CCA-treated lumber has a characteristic greenish color, which some find unattractive.
2. The most common treated species is Southern yellow pine, which is less stable than cedar. Unlike cedar, pressure treated pine will warp, “cup,” and twist, causing the structure and appearance of the fence to possibly deteriorate. Care must be taken using pressure treated pine posts because they can warp, causing eventual problems with the fence.
3. There have been environmental concerns about the arsenic and copper content of CCA-preserved lumber.



An effective way to provide privacy fences is vinyl. Vinyl privacy fences have evolved through the years and now come in a variety of styles, heights, and colors. Most vinyl fences are lighter in color, usually white, tan, or khaki. This is because the plastic material absorbs heat from the sun and softens.

Quality fabricators of vinyl fences now include a reinforcing rail of galvanized steel or aluminum in the bottom horizontal rail to minimize sagging. Recently, some manufactures have developed fences that simulate stone, wood, or stucco in texture and color.

Vinyl fences are usually warranted against chipping, peeling, and differential fading. A great advantage to these fences is there is very little maintenance—they shouldn't need to be stained or painted, and they can be rinsed with a garden hose when they get dirty. Vinyl fences are about 20-30% more costly to install than cedar, but they never need to be stained and will last many years.

Composites combine wood fiber with organic resins to make extremely long-lasting fences. Most composite fences are composed of at least 75% recyclable materials and may be eligible for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. Composite fences also come in many styles and colors. While significantly more expensive than some other materials, composites offer a no-maintenance “green” solution for privacy fences.

Pre-cast concrete fences are no-maintenance fences that are stamped and colored in brick, fieldstone, and boulder finishes. Panels are usually two inches thick and are “stacked” between the posts. Concrete privacy fences are solid and provide a higher degree of noise suppression. Concrete fences are a good solution for community associations that border noisy streets and roads.



Most community associations' boards of directors have an eye toward future maintenance. One of the most visible features of your community association is the perimeter fence. With forethought and careful planning your privacy fence should provide many years of service with little or no care.

John is a 35-year veteran of the fencing industry. He can be reached anytime at 847-736-3375.