If you have ever watched a fence go from crisp and straight to wobbly within a couple of winters, you already understand the real job of a good fence installer. The fence panels and posts matter, but the footing depth and footing construction are what decide whether the whole system stays planted when the ground gets moody. Every fencing contractor has seen it: the "it looked fine at first" build that struggles as soon as the soil shifts, water pools, or the wind loads increase.

Choosing footing depth is not a single number you pull from a generic rule. It is a decision based on soil conditions, frost and local climate, drainage, post size and material, and how the fence will be loaded over time. In places like Melbourne, you also deal with clay-rich soils, seasonal moisture changes, and heavy rain events. Get the depth wrong, and you can end up paying for repairs sooner than you expected, even if the timber or colorbond looks great in the first week.

Below is the way I think about footing depth as a practical fence contractor's guide, with the details that usually make the difference between a fence that holds its line and one that quietly sinks out of square.

What "footing depth" really means on a fence job

When people say footing depth, they often mix up three different things:

First is how deep the hole is for the post footing. Second is the actual depth of *fencing company Melbourne* concrete embedment around the post, which can be affected by how much the excavation sloughs in and how well the concrete is placed. Third is the effective stability of the foundation, which comes from the soil bearing capacity and the way water moves through the site.

Two fences can both have "800 mm holes" and still perform differently. One might be set in dry, firm ground with clean concrete around the post. The other might have been poured in a hole that filled with groundwater, leaving voids or weak concrete. That difference will show up later as movement, lean, or intermittent posts that feel loose even when the panels are still intact.

This is why a fencing contractor does not treat footing depth as a box-ticking exercise. It is part of a larger foundation approach.

Why depth matters more than almost anything else

Posts take load in several ways. Wind pushes on the fence face, and that force creates bending stress in the post. Posts also experience lifting and rotation if the ground around them expands and contracts with moisture changes or if water pressure builds in certain soils. If the post footing is too shallow, the soil can grab the post unevenly, or the post can slowly lose embedment as the footing settles.

Deeper footings generally do two helpful things:

They reduce the amount of seasonal ground movement that the post "feels." They bring the concrete into contact with more stable soil layers, instead of just the top layer that can be saturated, soft, or crumbly.

There is a practical trade-off here. Digging deeper often means more labour, more spoil removal, more concrete, and potentially more time on site. Fence company pricing might rise with deeper footings, but the alternative is usually worse, because fence repairs often require reinstating panels and aligning whole sections, which adds time and cost even when the posts are the only parts that failed.

The soil is the real boss of footing depth

In real fence builds, soil is rarely uniform along the length of the boundary. One corner might sit on firm, sandy ground, while another section is clay that swells after rain. In Melbourne, it is common to see variable ground conditions within the same property. If a Fence installer Melbourne team only measures one spot, they miss the range.

A fence contractor typically assesses soil by looking at the site context and, on many jobs, digging a test hole or evaluating existing levels. They look for:

How the soil behaves when it is excavated Whether it holds shape or slumps Whether it becomes waterlogged quickly Whether the material is compact or crumbly

Clay soils can change volume with moisture. That movement can lift or loosen a shallow footing. Sandy soils may drain well but can be prone to movement if the excavation is loose and concrete placement is poor. Even with the same footing depth, soil type affects the stability.

This is one reason why you should avoid assuming “the neighbour’s fence uses the standard depth, so yours will too.” Neighbouring fences can be built on different soil strata, and they can fail for different reasons. The smart move is to treat your site as your own project.

Climate effects you have to plan for

Footing depth decisions are often discussed in frost terms, but frost is not the only climate factor that matters. Water movement through the ground is a close cousin to frost effects. When the ground stays wet, it weakens. When it dries and shrinks, it can leave voids around the base. When it rains hard and drains poorly, the pressure changes the soil’s behaviour around the footing.

In Melbourne, you do not usually design around deep frost, but you do design around seasonal wetting and drying and around heavy rain and drainage patterns. If the site has poor fall, downpipes, or stormwater paths that cross the fence line, you can get repeated saturation. That can drive movement for posts even if the depth sounds “adequate” on paper.

The fencing contractor Melbourne reference point matters here, because local experience is what helps teams predict where problems show up: along low points, near retaining edges, and where services or previous earthworks have altered the ground.

Post type and size change what depth means

Footing depth is tied to post requirements. A smaller post with higher slenderness can flex more under wind loading, which increases the moment at the base. That moment increases the demand on the concrete embedment and the surrounding soil.

Timber posts, steel posts, and concrete posts each bring different behaviours. Timber can rot if moisture sits at the wrong place. Steel can be vulnerable if corrosion is accelerated by water contact near the soil line. The footing depth needs to align with the construction details that keep moisture controlled.

If you are choosing fence installer options, ask how the post is treated and fixed. For example, some systems rely on concrete around the post with a specific bottom clearance, while others use different methods that can change effective embedment. If the footing is shallow but the post method expects deep embedment, the fence will end up “working harder” at the base than it was designed to.

Also consider the fence style. A high, solid fence face catches wind differently from a more open picket style. A boundary line with gates experiences cyclic loads when gates are used frequently, especially when the gate is large.

Concrete quality and placement matter more than people think

You can dig the right hole and still get poor performance if concrete is placed poorly. A common problem on fence jobs is inadequate consolidation, meaning concrete placement does not fully surround the post or fill voids, especially if the excavation is irregular or collapses.

If water is present in the hole, placement becomes harder. Concrete poured into a wet excavation can end up with weaker zones or segregation. That does not always fail immediately, but over time it can allow small movements that later become obvious. That is when you see posts leaning, fence rails dropping lower on one side, or panels racking out of alignment.

A fence company worth hiring will treat footing pours like a structural step, not a “fill it up” task. They will also plan access and batching so the concrete placement is consistent across the fence length.

How to think about standard depths without becoming trapped by them

Many people ask for a simple standard, like “800 mm is fine.” Sometimes a standard depth works in a specific soil and post system, and sometimes it is too shallow. The right way to use “standards” is as a starting point for your contractor’s site assessment, not as a final answer.

When a fencing contractor provides a depth, the best questions are less about the number and more about the basis for the number. Ask whether they considered soil variability, drainage, and the fence height and wind exposure. Ask if they will adjust depth where soil conditions change. Good fence installer teams can often point to why depth increases near low points, near heavy loads like gates, or in clay areas.

The number matters, but so does the reasoning behind it.

A practical way to assess footing depth needs on your property

You do not need to become a civil engineer to make good decisions as a homeowner or site manager. What you need is a clear conversation with the Fence contractor and the ability to notice red flags in how the job is

proposed.

Here are the factors that consistently drive footing depth decisions, and that you should bring up before work starts.

First, look at the fence line and note any low spots, water paths, or areas that stay damp after rain. Second, check for ground disturbance history. If there were landscaping works, drainage works, or recent earthworks, soil density can vary. Third, consider fence height, panel type, and whether you have gates and how heavy they are. A single large gate can change the load pattern along a section.

Then there is post spacing and structural method. Wider post spacing and heavier panels usually increase the demand on each post. Tension and bracing also matter, because stronger lateral restraint can reduce the flex demand at the post base, but you still need the footing to resist the peak forces.

Finally, ask how the team will handle variable ground. A common mistake is assuming one depth fits the whole line even when excavation shows different material.

If your contractor is thorough, this assessment will show up in their proposal and site plan. If it is vague, you should push for more detail.

Questions to ask your fencing contractor before they dig

A good footing depth proposal feels specific. It should connect depth to site conditions and construction method. If your fencing contractor Melbourne is experienced, they will not mind answering these questions. In fact, the best contractors encourage it because it reduces misunderstandings later.

- What is the planned footing depth for each soil zone along the fence line?
- Will the depth change around gates, corners, and braced sections?
- How will you deal with water in excavations, including drainage or pumping if needed?
- What concrete mix and placement method will you use around the post?
- Can you show how you ensure full surround and no voids around the post base?

If you get answers that are confident and tied to your site, you are on the right track. If you get “it’s always the same” without explaining how they know it will be the same at your boundary, that is a signal to dig deeper with follow-up questions.

Where footing depth is commonly underestimated

Some failure modes are predictable, and they usually relate to specific situations. Based on what I have seen on real Fence company sites, these are the places where contractors are most likely to under-estimate the foundation challenge.

Low points and drainage paths are obvious, but not everyone treats them seriously. If water collects near the fence line, the soil can soften repeatedly. Shallow footings can start moving during the rainy season and settle awkwardly as the ground dries.

Another under-estimation happens near existing structures. Retaining walls, nearby footings, and service trenches can alter soil density. Even if the fence line looks level, the soil under it might be less compact than you expect.

Wind load is also underrated. A tall fence on a windy exposure can push posts harder than a shorter fence in the same area. If depth is set based on a less exposed reference, the fence can rack and lean slowly.

Lastly, gates are frequently treated as an afterthought. People choose a gate panel and hardware, but if the footing system behind the gate is not reinforced, the gate can cause post rotation. That rotation then spreads into the rest of the fence line through rail connections.

Trade-offs: dig deeper, or build smarter?

Digging deeper costs more in excavation and concrete. The question becomes: where is that cost actually buying you performance?

In some situations, going deeper is the cleanest solution. If the soil is consistently soft or waterlogged at shallow depths, increasing embedment can place the footing into a firmer stratum. That reduces movement and stabilises the fence.

In other situations, you might get better results by improving drainage and construction details instead of just increasing depth everywhere. For example, if water is pooling because of a specific fall issue, addressing drainage can reduce repeated saturation. Similarly, proper concreting technique, correct post alignment, and correct backfilling can reduce voids and settle.

The best fence contractor is not married to one method. They evaluate the site. They decide whether deeper footings are needed, or whether a combination of depth adjustment and smarter construction details gets you the stability you want without wasting money.

As a homeowner, you can ask for a rationale. A good answer sounds like, “We are increasing depth here because the excavations remain soft,” or “We kept depth consistent here because the ground was firm and drainage is good.” You should not be left guessing.

A quick comparison of common footing approaches

Not every fence build uses the exact same system, and not every system calls for the same depth assumptions. Here is the practical way to compare approaches, without pretending one method is automatically better in every soil.

| Footing approach (typical) | Where it tends to work well | Where extra caution is needed | What to ask your contractor | |---|---|---|---| | Deeper continuous concrete embedment | Stable firm ground exists below a certain level | Clay expansion zones, poor drainage | How they confirm soil firmness before final depth | | Standard depth with strong concrete placement | Soil holds shape during excavation | Wet holes, collapse, voids | How they ensure full surround around the post | | Modified depth around gates and corners | Gate posts take higher lateral loads | Sites with variable soil under the full line | Whether depth changes are mapped and documented | | Better drainage focus with moderate depth | Ground drains quickly, water is the main issue | Low spots, repeated saturation | How they manage drainage and prevent water returning to the hole |

This is not a universal “which is best” table. It is a way to frame the conversation with your Fence installer Melbourne or fencing contractor, so you can align the foundation method with the actual risks on your property.

When depth is not enough: bracing, rails, and alignment still matter

Footing depth is foundational, but it is not the only piece. If a fence has inadequate bracing, posts can still lean even if footings are deep enough to resist initial movement. If rails are not aligned, the system can rack under wind. If the fence line is out of square at install, minor movements can become obvious later.

In practice, I have seen fences that were installed with “okay” depth but poor construction details. Over time, the posts moved slightly, and the rails amplified that misalignment until the whole run looked crooked. Conversely, I have seen fences with modest depth but excellent workmanship, including careful concrete placement, correct post spacing, and good bracing. Those fences lasted longer than expected.

So when you choose between fencing contractors, pay attention to craftsmanship. Depth gets discussed first, but durability depends on the whole package.

Typical site scenarios and how footing depth decisions land

Let’s make this real with a few scenarios you might recognise.

If your fence line runs along a slightly damp garden bed and the soil feels cool and wet even when the rest of the yard is dry, you should expect deeper footings or a drainage and construction plan. The ground might soften after rainfall, and shallow posts will become “wobbly” before you notice visually.

If your fence includes a double gate with frequent use, footing depth tends to be deeper or reinforced at the gate posts, or both. The goal is to reduce rotation at the base, because gate movement is often the fastest path to fence-wide misalignment.

If your boundary is on clay with variable firmness, the contractor might plan different depths along different sections. The only way to justify that is through site observation and excavation that reveals soil conditions. You can request a mapped plan in the proposal, or at minimum, ask how they decide depth changes as they dig.

If your site has good drainage and firm ground, footing depth can often be more consistent. Even then, construction quality matters, because a well-placed footing in firm ground performs better than a mediocre footing in the same depth.

How to spot a footing depth proposal that is solid

A solid proposal from a Fence contractor often reads like an engineered plan, even if it is not a technical drawing. Look for these signs.

They connect depth to soil conditions and specific fence sections, like gates and corners. They mention how excavations are managed when they become wet. They clarify whether they will adjust depth based on what they find while digging. They also describe the concrete and how it will be placed around the post to avoid voids.

A less solid proposal might sound confident, but generic. It might quote one depth for the entire run without acknowledging soil variability, or it might avoid discussing what happens if water appears in the excavation. Water is common on many sites after rain, so “we only deal with dry holes” is not a realistic plan. Any good Fence company should handle normal on-site variability.

A homeowner’s reality check: how quickly problems show up

One reason footing depth disputes become stressful is timing. A fence can look acceptable right after installation, then develop issues within a season. Sometimes the first sign is a post that seems slightly loose by hand. Sometimes it is a rail that no longer sits level. Sometimes it is panels rubbing differently against the posts due to small rotations.

These symptoms often point to base movement. That is why it is worth paying for the initial build that resists movement, rather than trying to “tune” the fence later. Post adjustment can be done, but it rarely fixes the root

cause if the soil and footing system did not have enough stability to start with.

If you are in the market for fencing contractors Melbourne, it is worth asking about how the company approaches long-term performance, not just how they quote the job. The best Fence installer Melbourne teams will talk about footing depth and construction method as a performance decision.

The small details that protect the footing over time

Even with the right depth, footings can fail early if moisture management is neglected at the post level. Timber posts need protection against water contact. Steel posts need consideration of how soil and concrete contact will affect corrosion risk over time. Backfilling and compaction also matter, because poorly managed backfill can create pathways for water or allow settlement.

You can ask your contractor how they handle post set-up at ground level and whether the system includes measures to reduce moisture impacts. Often these details are where workmanship shows up.

Depth keeps the post in the ground. Details keep the footing healthy and the post stable while it is there.

Getting your job quoted properly

Footing depth influences concrete volume, excavation time, and sometimes permits and engineering input depending on site conditions. A Fence company quote can vary widely, and it is not always because of “expensive contractors.” Sometimes it is because one proposal assumes stable soil and another accounts for variable conditions.

If you are comparing quotes, make sure the depth is not the only line item. Compare how depth changes across the fence line, how concrete placement is handled, and what the contractor will do if they discover unexpected conditions during excavation. You want to compare like for like.

When a fencing contractor Melbourne team has a clear methodology, the quote usually reflects it. When the quote is vague, you may end up paying change costs later when the site forces adjustments.

Final thoughts from the field

Footing depth is one of those topics people talk about like it is a single technical number. It is not. It is a decision that sits at the intersection of soil, water, wind, and construction quality. A fence contractor who understands the local ground and the way Melbourne weather hits fence lines can often predict trouble spots before the fence is even built.

If you want a fence that stays straight, focus your conversation on the foundation reasoning. Ask how the contractor will confirm soil conditions, how they will handle water, how they will place concrete around the post, and whether depth will adjust for gates, corners, and braced sections. That is how you choose footing depth in a way that actually protects your investment, not just your budget for the first day of installation.

When you hire fence installers who treat the footing as the structural heart of the job, you get more than posts in concrete. You get a boundary that looks right, stands up to real weather, and does not keep you chasing small fixes every time the ground shifts.