

A late-August afternoon in Mississauga, and a fence crew is halfway through a cedar job on the lot next door. The homeowner leans on her side of the property line while one worker trims pickets to length and the other drives screws into a rail. The posts are already up, their concrete collars still damp. Nothing about the scene looks dramatic. That is exactly the problem: the details that decide whether a fence lasts fifteen years or forty are all right there, and most owners never learn to read them.

Checking workmanship and materials is a skill you can practice before you spend a dollar. You do not need to be a builder to catch the tells. You need a process: what to ask on the phone, what to look at on a finished fence, and how to watch a crew work without getting in the way. This guide walks you through that process, from the first search for a fence contractor to the day you sign.

Start With the Phone Call

Your first filter costs ten minutes. Call three or four contractors and ask the same questions in the same order, then compare the answers. The goal is not to trap anyone. It is to separate crews who think about materials and methods from crews who quote whatever is cheapest at the yard that week.

Ask what they install most often. A contractor who can talk for a full minute about cedar grades, pressure-treated pine, steel, and vinyl knows the products. One who answers "whatever you want" may be genuinely flexible, or may be telling you that the material decision will be made for you later. Keep listening for which.

Ask about posts specifically. Posts carry the whole fence, and a useful answer covers post species, whether they are set in concrete, and how deep they go. Depth depends on fence height and soil, and a crew that works in your area should have a feel for both. Much of the GTA sits on clay that swells and shifts through freeze and thaw, and a post set too shallow will heave out of line by the second spring.

Ask about the crew and the schedule. Two experienced people usually do cleaner work than five people hurrying. Ask how long the job should take and what happens if the crew hits rock or buried debris, a genuine question on many Toronto lots where old foundations and tree stumps hide under the sod.

Verify Before You Shortlist

Insurance and licensing sound like paperwork, but they are the difference between a dispute you survive and a claim you eat. Ask for proof of liability coverage and confirmation that anyone working on your property is covered. Requirements vary across Ontario municipalities, so verify the current rules with your local licensing office and your insurer before work begins. A contractor who hesitates to show certificates is telling you something; one who hands them over without being asked is telling you something better.

References matter less than addresses. Any crew can produce three happy customers. Ask instead for fences they installed a year or more ago, then drive by and look. A fence that has carried a full GTA winter, complete with heavy snow loads and ground heave, tells you more than any album of photos.

See the Work Before You Sign

The single most reliable test is standing beside a finished fence and looking at it the way a picky buyer looks at a used car. If the contractor has a job running nearby, ask to visit. Most crews are happy to show work, and the ones who are not are usually the ones you should skip.

Use the same inspection list every time so you are comparing fairly. It takes about ten minutes per fence. By the third fence you will notice that one crew's posts are plumb and another's lean, that one contractor spaces pickets with a spacer block and another eyeballs the gaps.

Checking Workmanship and Materials on a Finished Fence

1. Posts. Sight down the fence line. Posts should stand plumb at even spacing with no obvious lean, and their tops should be cut clean rather than split or chewed.
2. Post bases. Concrete should come to grade and slope away from the post so water runs off. Wood should not sit in standing water or against soil that holds moisture.
3. Pickets. Tops should be cut uniformly, with no split ends and no boards so knotty that a knot has already fallen out. Check the back side too; that is where shortcuts hide.
4. Fasteners. Every picket should be fixed to both rails with corrosion-resistant screws or nails, not stapled or toe-nailed with whatever was in the truck. Fastener quality shows up here before anywhere else.
5. Spacing. Gaps should run consistent from top to bottom. A fence that pinches in one spot and yawns in another was assembled by eye.
6. Rails. Rails should run straight with no bows and attach to the posts with proper brackets or notches, not simply nailed to the face.
7. Gates. A gate is the most complicated part of a fence. It should be square, swing freely without scraping, and carry hinges rated for its weight. A gate that sags on day one only gets worse.
8. Clearance. The bottom of the fence should clear the ground or follow it evenly, never burying wood in soil or grass. Buried wood rots from the bottom up.

None of these checks needs a level or a laser. Your eye, trained by looking at two or three fences, is enough to separate careful work from rushed work.

How to Read a Crew in Action

If you can watch an installation in progress, look for the habits that never show up in finished photos. The crew should lay out the line with string and stakes before digging rather than eyeballing the property edge. They should protect your lawn and your neighbor's, and they should warn you in advance if the work will damage anything. They should mix concrete properly and pour it around a braced, plumb post instead of dumping dry mix into a hole and hoping for the best.

Watch how materials are handled. Boards stacked flat on wet ground take on moisture and warp before they are ever installed. A careful crew keeps stock off the soil, covers it when rain is forecast, and tidies the site, running a magnet over the grass when the workday ends to pick up dropped nails.

Watch the rhythm too. One worker measuring while another cuts, boards pre-cut in batches, fasteners loaded into pouches, nobody walking back to the truck every five minutes. Good crews move steadily and quietly. Disorganized crews move in bursts.



The Material Conversation You Should Be Able to Have

You do not need to become a lumber expert, but you should know the handful of things that separate grades. Western red cedar is prized for rot resistance and stability, yet not all cedar is equal: tight grain and few knots indicate a better grade, while wide grain, loose knots, and wane indicate a lower one. Pressure-treated pine is a legitimate and budget-friendlier choice, but anything that touches soil should be rated for ground contact. Steel and aluminum give straight lines and low maintenance, and the difference between them shows up in gauge thickness and finish quality. Vinyl is easy to clean and resists denting, but cold weather makes it brittle and color fade is a genuine complaint.

For most GTA properties, the single most important material decision is the post. Posts rot first, heave first, and carry everything else. If the quote lists the same species for posts and pickets, ask whether the posts are rated for ground contact. The answer tells you a great deal about the rest of the job.

Red Flags That End the Conversation

- A refusal to put the scope in writing, or an estimate that lists only a total with no material detail.
- Pressure to pay in cash, pay a large deposit, or "start tomorrow before prices go up."
- A blanket "no permit needed" from someone who has not seen your property. Bylaw and permit requirements differ across GTA municipalities, so confirm with your local building department.
- An inability to name the material grade, the post species, or the fastener type on the spot.
- A price far below every other estimate, with no explanation of what was left out.
- No addresses of completed work, only photos.

Any one of these is reason to keep looking. Two together are a sign that the low number is the only number that will stay low.

From Shortlist to Decision

By the time you have made the calls, verified coverage, and stood at two or three finished fences, the decision mostly makes itself. Compare estimates line by line rather than by the total at the bottom. A slightly higher price that buys a better post species, corrosion-resistant fasteners, and a written scope is cheaper than [fence installers near me](#) the low bid that leaves those things out.

Give every shortlisted crew the same information so the quotes are comparable: the same footage, the same height, the same gate count, the same access conditions. Then trust the evidence of your eyes. The crew whose work you inspected is the crew you are hiring, and the fence you inspect is the fence you get.

Checking workmanship and materials takes an afternoon of your time spread across a week, and it pays for itself in the first winter. Fences are one of the few home improvements where the difference between good and bad installation is visible from the street and measurable in years of service. Look closely before you sign, and you will not need to look again for a long time.