



FENCES, WALLS AND HEDGES AT SINGLE FAMILY RESIDENCES (Bellingham Municipal Code 20.30.110)

1. HOW HIGH CAN I HAVE A FENCE, RETAINING WALL, OR HEDGE?

Fences, walls, and hedges that are located within a required yard* shall not exceed the following height limits (see also Figure 1.):

- Front yard on an interior lot: 54”(4'6”)
- Front yard on a corner lot: 42”(3'6”)
- Side yard on a flanking street: 42”(3'6”)
- Interior side and rear yards: 72”(6')
- Vision Clearance Triangle: 36”(3')

Height is measured from the ground level adjacent to the outside edge of the wall or fence. When fences are constructed on top of walls, both are included in the calculation of height.

* The zoning code sets height limits for fences, walls (including retaining walls), and hedges when they are located between a property line and a setback line. This area is called a required “yard”. See the “Yards and Setbacks for Single Family Homes” handout if you need to determine the required yards for your lot.

2. WHAT IF I WANT A TALLER FENCE, RETAINING WALL OR HEDGE THAN IS ALLOWED?

You may submit a request for an over-height fence or wall (a building permit may also be required, see question 4). An over-height fence request is subject to joint approval by the Planning and Public Works Departments.

Application forms and fee information are available in the Permit Center. You will need a site plan showing the location of the proposed fence and all buildings within 50' and an illustrative drawing of the fence, type of construction material, and the proposed height. The application also requires the written consent of all property owners abutting the proposed fence, wall or hedge.

Tip: Over-height retaining walls are discouraged. Terraced retaining walls separated by at least a five-foot (5') wide planting area are preferred when higher slopes must be supported. The heights of retaining walls that are separated horizontally by at least five feet (5') are not added for the purpose of determining total allowed height under the zoning code (inquire with Building Services to determine whether the terraced retaining wall will require a building permit.)

Tip: Sight obscuring over-height fences that extend across the full width of a lot on the street side are also discouraged. If a taller fence is desired for privacy, it should only enclose a portion of the front yard or the side yard on a flanking street.

If you are not able to obtain approval, you may consult with Planning staff to determine whether there are other options through variance or appeal.

3. HOW CLOSE TO THE PROPERTY LINE CAN A FENCE, RETAINING WALL OR HEDGE BE PLACED?

There are no setback requirements if your proposed fence, wall, or hedge does not exceed these maximum height limits and does not require a building permit.

4. WHEN DO I NEED A BUILDING PERMIT FOR MY FENCE, RETAINING WALL, OR HEDGE?

Fences: A building permit is required for fences over 6 feet high.

Retaining walls: A building permit is required for retaining walls if they are either over 4 feet in height measured from the bottom of the footing to the top of the wall, or supporting a surcharge (like a building or a parking area) or certain liquids.

5. WHERE DO I GET A BUILDING PERMIT?

Building permits are applied for with Building Services in the Permit Center. You may submit your building permit application at the same time as your over-height fence request, but any changes required to be made to the building permit submittal by the over-height fence review are the applicant's responsibility.

6. DO I NEED ANY OTHER PERMITS FOR MY FENCE, RETAINING WALL OR HEDGE?

An encroachment permit is only required for the construction of a fence in the right-of-way since block or rock walls and hedges are considered landscaping and do not require a permit. However, in the event the right-of way is needed for public improvements the fence, wall or hedge will need to be removed at the owner's expense. Poured in place retaining walls, or any wall that would require a building permit, are not allowed to be constructed in the right-of-way and any trees to be planted in the right-of way require a Street Tree Permit. If you are not sure where your property lines are, Permit Center staff may be able to help identify them. If not, a survey by a Professional Land Surveyor (PLS) may be required.

7. HOW CLOSE TO THE EDGE OF THE ROAD OR BACK OF THE SIDEWALK CAN A FENCE, RETAINING WALL OR HEDGE BE PLACED?

- No sidewalks present - a **10'** (ten foot) setback from the paved edge of the road is required (per City of Bellingham Development Guidelines 4-13, Construction Specifications) for clear-zone distance.
- Only a curb and gutter present - a **10'** (ten foot) setback from the face of the curb to any fixed object is required (per Development Guidelines 4-11, Lateral Clearance) for clear-zone distance.
- Sidewalk is present - a **3'** (three foot) setback from the back edge of the sidewalk is required for potential use of other street side features such as traffic signs or for access for sidewalk maintenance.

*IMPORTANT: Utility locates are required prior to any digging per RCW 19.122.030 and although setbacks are required and they will be determined on a case by case basis. Fences are not permitted to be constructed on top of water, sanitary sewer or storm sewer mains or any other pipelines; however landscaping is permitted, but at the owner's risk and responsibility in the event maintenance or repairs are required. Contact Public Works Staff at the Permit Center for assistance.

8. Figure 1. Fence, Wall and Hedge Height Limits when located in Required Yards

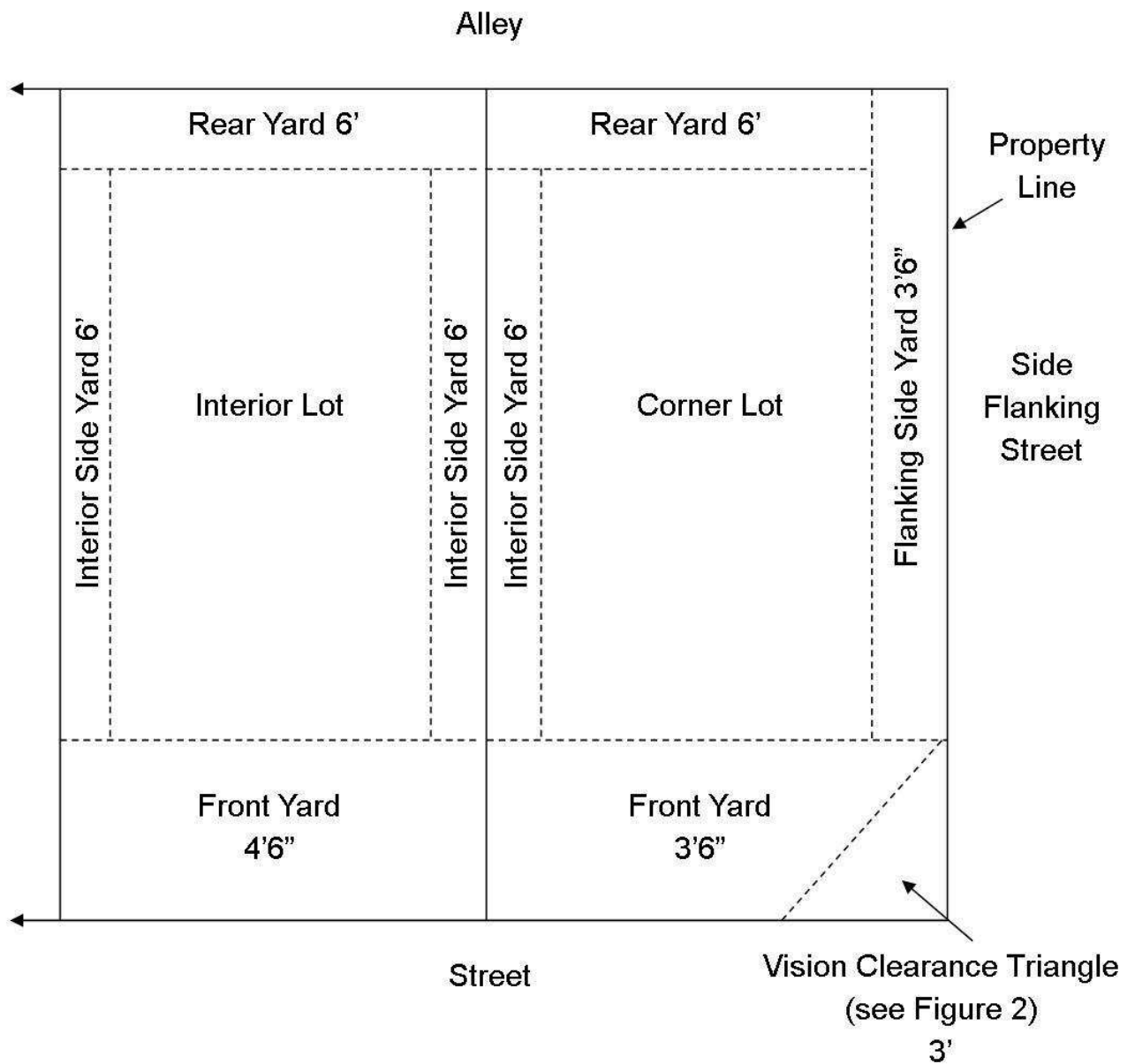


Figure 2. Vision Clearance Triangle

