OTTAWA STONEWORK

Brick & Stone Garden Walls

Freestanding brick and stone garden walls: when one may count as a fence under the City's Fence By-law, heights near lot lines, and repairs

4 Expert Answers from Masonry IQ

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Q1

Brick wall on my front lot line in Orleans, how high?

A freestanding brick wall along a front lot line may count as a fence under the City's Fence By-law (2003-462), and if it does, the height limit in a front yard is 1 m, measured from grade at the base of the wall.

A few details matter here. Where the grades on each side of the wall differ, height is measured from the higher grade. If the wall sits within a corner-lot triangle of 3 m along the lot lines, or within a 2 m driveway triangle, the limit drops to 75 cm. In any other yard the limit is 213 cm, but a front lot line is a front yard.

The by-law defines a fence as any freestanding structure, wall or barrier erected at grade to delineate a property boundary, restrict access, or provide security or protection. A brick wall along your front lot line may fit that description; confirm with the City before work begins.

One more thing worth checking: if the wall holds back soil on one side, it becomes a retaining wall rather than a garden wall, and that is a different scope of work; ottawapatios.com covers retaining walls.

Before you sign a quote, ask the mason what footing depth they plan and how they will confirm the wall meets the City's fence height rules for your lot.

Q2

Why is my old brick garden wall leaning in the Glebe?

A leaning garden wall needs a mason to look at it in person before any work is planned. A mason standing at the wall can tell you what is causing it.

What a mason will examine includes the base of the wall, the condition of the mortar joints, whether the lean is uniform or concentrated in one section, and whether any of the brick or stone units have cracked or shifted.

A few things shape what the repair involves. If the wall runs along a lot line, it may count as a fence under the City's Fence By-law (2003-462), which sets a height limit of 1 m in a front yard and 213 cm in any other yard on residential property. If the wall is holding back soil on one side, that is a retaining wall, which is a different scope of work; ottawapatios.com covers retaining walls. If the lean is in a section that has to come down and be rebuilt, that can raise a structural question, and it is worth asking the City whether a permit is needed before work starts.

There are too few published prices for garden wall repair or rebuilding to quote a range. Ask any mason you speak with for a written quote that covers the area of wall involved, whether any sections need to be taken down and

rebuilt, how the base will be addressed, what happens to the removed material, and what the mortar type and joint profile will be on the rebuilt sections.

Ask the City whether the rebuilt wall counts as a fence under the by-law before work starts.

Q3

How tall can a brick garden wall be in Ottawa?

The City of Ottawa's Fence By-law (2003-462) is the main rule to know. A freestanding brick or stone wall along a lot line may count as a fence under that by-law, and if it does, the height limits on residential property are 1 m in a front yard and 213 cm in any other yard.

There are also reduced heights near corners and driveways. Within a triangle measured 3 m along each lot line at a corner, and within a 2 m triangle at a driveway, the maximum is 75 cm. Height is measured from grade at the base of the wall, or from the higher grade where the ground is not level on both sides.

A wall built inside the yard that marks no boundary may not count as a fence under the by-law at all. If you are not sure whether your wall falls under it, confirm with the City before work starts.

One other thing to sort out: a wall that holds back soil on one side is a retaining wall, not a garden wall, and that is a different scope of work; ottawapatios.com covers retaining walls.

The City's hardscaping licence by-law names retaining walls, steps, walkways and patios, excludes "pools, decks and fences", and does not say where a freestanding garden wall falls. We found no definition of "minor repairs or minor alterations" in the by-law, so ask the contractor whether the job needs that licence, and ask the City whether a small repair or rebuild counts as a minor alteration.

Ask the contractor how the wall's height will be measured on your lot before work starts.

Q4

Does a garden wall job need Ottawa's hardscaping licence?

The City of Ottawa's hardscaping licence (Licensing By-law 2002-189, Schedule 36, as amended by By-law 2025-415) covers businesses that install or alter hard landscaping features on private property, and it names steps, walkways, patios and similar features made of brick or flagstone. A freestanding brick or stone garden wall is not named in the by-law, but it is also not excluded, so the by-law does not say whether a particular wall job falls under it.

The by-law lists exclusions, among them "the installation or alteration of pools, decks and fences" and "performing minor repairs or minor alterations". We found no definition of minor repairs or minor alterations in the by-law, so a small patch or joint repair on an existing wall may or may not fall within that carve-out.

Two things are worth sorting out before the work starts. First, ask the contractor directly whether they hold the City hardscaping licence and whether they believe this job requires it. Second, check the City's published list of hardscaping licence holders to confirm. If you are unsure whether a small repair counts as a minor alteration under the by-law, the City can say. One more point: if the wall runs along a lot line, it may count as a fence under the City's Fence By-law (2003-462), which sets height limits of 1 m in a front yard and 213 cm in any other yard on residential property, measured from grade. Confirm with the City whether your wall triggers that by-law.

If the wall is meant to hold back soil rather than simply stand on its own, that is a retaining wall, which is a different scope of work; ottawapatios.com covers retaining walls.

When you compare quotes, check that each names the wall length and height, the stone or brick, the footing, the mortar or dry-laid method and the disposal.

Disclaimer: This guide is provided for informational purposes only by Ottawa Stonework. It does not constitute professional advice. Always consult qualified contractors and your local building authority (the City of Ottawa) before starting any fence project. Fences in Ottawa must meet the City's Fence By-law, and a free locate is required before digging any post hole. Information is current as of November 15, 2026 and may change. Visit **ottawastonework.com** for the latest answers.