Is there a season for fencing?

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Paul Morris thinks winter is a good time!

On a visit to a local farmers merchants, the conversation went something like this -

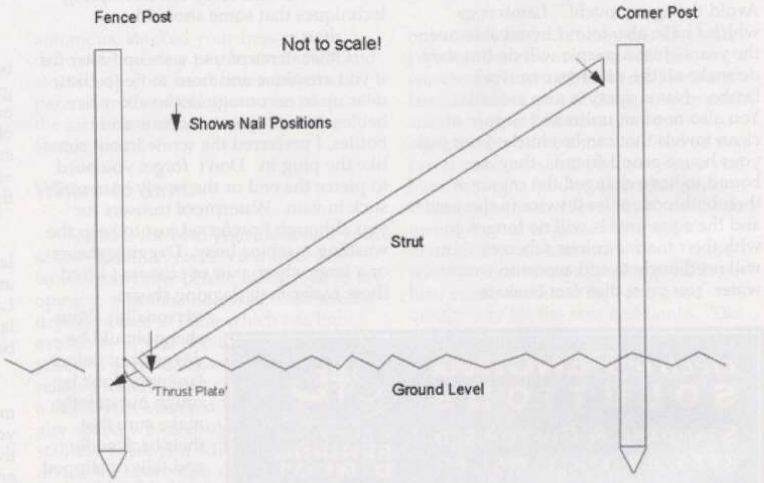
"Do you stock fencing posts?"

"Yes, but we don't have much in stock at the moment, it's not the season."

"Er..., I didn't realise there was a season for fencing."

"Oh yes, it is between lambing and silage making."

Well, unconventional thing that I am, I do fencing when I have the chance, and the best time is autumn and winter as the garden and animals take up too much time in spring and summer. Mind you, it can get to be a bit of a grind when the pouring rain is running down the back of the neck and the waterproofs are making me sweat so there is as much water inside as out!



This picture shows the 'Thrust plate' in position'

There are many books and videos that cover the subject in a great depth (I found the BTCV one excellent) but, in true smallholder fashion, I have adapted and learnt to suit my own needs and ground conditions. Here I will show you a technique that I use that may be of interest and help you on your holding, but like many things, what works for one doesn't for another, so these techniques are offered in the spirit 'here is an idea that may work' rather than 'here is the standard way of doing things' - in fact some of what I do does not meet the required standard for some grants. Our ground has between 3" and 12" of quite soft topsoil over a layer of hard bolder clay (I know it is boulder clay because we still dig the boulders out. They come in 3 sizes,

This (dx-04) shows the thrust plate with the stay placed on top

This (dx-05) shows the finished stay in position

medium, large and hernia).

Although I do most of the fencing work together with my wife, I get a local contractor to knock in the large (7"-8") corner and gate posts in with a tractor. I can just manage a 5" post using a large rubber maul. I started with an aluminium maul but this tended to damage to top of the posts. A neighbour lent me his old rubber maul (which is heavier) and I find this a lot better as the posts do not get so much damage.

Gate and corner struts.

The purpose of these is to help take the strain so that the fencing wire, when tensioned, does not pull the gate or corner post over. The problem I first had was what to do at the bottom of the strut so it does not push into the soil. A video we saw only mentioned trimming the top (with a chain saw!), but nothing on the ground end. The BTCV book talks about thrust plates buried in the ground, but what they were showing did not suit me. So, what I do is use the next fence post as a support for a thrust plate - This shows how:

Step 1.

A week or more before I start, I cut the pointed end off the posts that I am using for the stays. The cut is at about 45 degrees which suits the amount of tension I am putting on the wire, but for more tension it would be better to cut closer to 60 degrees (so that the strut makes an angle of 30 degrees to the ground. I also cut up some half-round posts (known hereabouts as 'splits') into lengths of about 6-8 inches - these form the thrust plates. The diagram shows what it looks like. All the cut ends then get a soaking in creosote and are left to dry.)I used to think that the treatment timber posts gets soaks all the way through, but I read a little while ago that it only penetrates about half an inch - looking at the colour of the cut ends seems to verify this.)

Step 2.

I use a rope line to stretch between corners to give the line. At the corner post a strut is lent into position resting against the post marking the place for the 'thrust plate'. At this point I put the next fence post in. Then right next to it, I use a mattock to cut a small trench about the size of the 'thrust plate' (enough so that it is mostly below the level of the soil) across the line of the rope - see the diagram).

Step 3.

The wooden 'thrust plate' is then placed in position with the curved edge against the post and angled so that the flat side is square to the base of the strut. Using 4 inch galvanised nails, I then nail through the 'thrust plate' into the post. This forms a base to take the strain. The strut is placed into position and a nail is driven down through the bottom of the strut into the 'thrust plate'. The top of the strut is then nailed to the corner post.

Voila! That is it. Writing this in words makes it make more complicated than it is, but the diagram and pictures should clarify the explanation.

The book I found of great use is 'Fencing - a practical handbook' published by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (available from Smallholder Bookshop).