DECK BUILDERS OTTAWA

Footings & Foundations

Footing depth in clay and frost, the floating-deck exemption, Leda clay and engineered design, helical piles, and Ontario One Call before digging

5 Expert Answers from Deck IQ

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Q1

Do Ontario One Call locate requests cost anything?

No, there is no fee. The Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012 states that no fee is charged to an excavator for submitting a locate request, and Ontario One Call's homeowner page confirms it is free.

Anyone who digs, bores, trenches, grades or excavates is an excavator under the Act, and that includes a homeowner digging their own footing holes. The requirement is to submit a locate request and wait for each affected utility member to respond before starting to dig. Members have five business days to respond.

The locate covers public underground infrastructure. Private lines on your property are a separate matter: you are responsible for having those marked yourself before digging begins. Private lines to think about include a gas line running to a barbecue or pool heater, electrical lines to a shed or detached garage, outdoor lighting or signs, sewer and septic piping, and telecom or electrical lines feeding security cameras.

If you hire a builder to do the digging, the obligation still applies. Ontario One Call's homeowner page says to make sure your contractor contacted Ontario One Call before starting. You can also submit the locate request yourself on their behalf.

One practical note: we found no published figure for how long a locate stays valid, so confirm that with Ontario One Call when you submit your request.

If your deck footings will require digging, submit your locate request through Ontario One Call before any work begins, and if the deck will be attached to the house or its walking surface will be more than 600 mm (24 in.) above grade, look into the building permit requirement with the City of Ottawa's Building Code Services at the same time.

Q2

Does my septic system affect where an Ottawa deck can go?

Yes, your septic system affects both where a deck can go and what the permit drawings must show. The City of Ottawa's permit requirements ask for a site plan that dimensions the deck relative to "any septic system" on the property, so the septic system has to appear on those drawings.

Beyond the drawing requirement, there are two practical concerns that shape placement. First, zoning setbacks under both Zoning By-law 2008-250 and Zoning By-law 2026-50 apply to a deck as a structure, and the most restrictive provisions of both by-laws govern any application deemed complete on or after March 11, 2026. Those

setbacks are measured from lot lines, so the septic system and the setbacks are two separate checks. You should confirm the current rules for your specific lot with the City.

Second, footings. The 2024 Ontario Building Code sets footing depth requirements based on soil type, and where a foundation is on filled ground, peat or sensitive clay, an engineered design is required under Ontario sections 9.15.1.1(3) and (4) and 9.4.4.1(3). A designer or engineer reviewing your lot can tell you whether that applies.

A few things to sort out before the drawings are finalised:

- the septic system shown on the site plan, dimensioned to the deck
- where each footing sits relative to it
- whether the deck height triggers the permit requirement: attached to the house with a walking surface more than 600 mm (24 in.) above grade requires a permit, as does an elevated deck providing principal access to the building
- whether the deck is freestanding and over 10 square metres (approximately 108 square feet) with a walking surface more than 600 mm above grade, which also requires a permit

If any footing needs to be dug, the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012 requires that a locate request be submitted through Ontario One Call and that each affected member respond before any digging starts. That applies whether a contractor digs or you do it yourself, and private lines such as a septic system's own piping are yours to have marked separately.
The next step is to request a locate through Ontario One Call before any test holes or footing excavation, and then make sure the site plan shows the septic system with the required dimensions.

Q3

Who is responsible for digging safely under Ontario law?

Under the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012, the responsibility falls on the excavator, and that term covers anyone who digs, bores, trenches, grades, excavates, moves or breaks earth, or intends to. That includes a homeowner digging their own footing holes, not just a contractor.

Section 10(1) of the Act is direct: an excavator shall not start to dig unless they have submitted a locate request and each affected member has responded. Members have five business days to respond under section 6(3), so the locate request has to go in before work begins, not the morning of. Section 5.1(4) confirms there is no fee charged to an excavator for submitting a locate request.

Ontario One Call puts it plainly on its homeowner page: if you are building a deck or doing any project that requires digging, contact Ontario One Call at least five business days before to request a public utility locate. Their words are "it's free, it's easy, it's the law." If you hire a contractor, the obligation does not disappear on your end: Ontario One Call says to make sure the contractor contacted Ontario One Call before starting.

One thing the locate does not cover automatically is private lines on your property. Those are your responsibility to have marked separately. Lines worth thinking about before any footing work include:

- a gas line running from the house to a barbecue or pool heater
- electrical lines to a shed or detached garage
- sewer and septic piping
- telecom or electrical lines feeding security cameras or exterior lights

If a contractor is doing the digging, the legal duty sits with them as the excavator, but Ontario One Call still recommends that homeowners confirm the locate was requested before a shovel goes in the ground. There is no cost to you either way, and the five-business-day window means it needs to be part of the project schedule from the start, not an afterthought once the builder shows up.

When you get a deck quote, ask the builder to show you each line item separately: railings, stairs, removal of an existing deck, permit drawings, and the foundation, so you can see exactly what the price does and does not include.

Q4

Is 1.2 m the minimum deck footing depth in Ottawa clay?

In clay or soils not clearly defined, the 2024 Ontario Building Code table (9.12.2.2) sets 1.2 m, but not less than the depth of frost penetration, for a foundation with no heated space. The Code says frost penetration depth "shall be established on the basis of local experience," and we found no City of Ottawa page that sets a single number for the whole city.

What this means in practice is that 1.2 m is the table's starting point, not a ceiling. If local experience shows frost goes deeper than 1.2 m on your lot, the footing must go deeper. The Code also allows shallower depths where experience with local soil conditions shows they are satisfactory, or where the foundation is designed for lesser depths, but that is a site-specific determination, not a general rule.

When the depth rule does not apply at all

The 2024 Ontario Building Code includes a floating-deck exemption at section 9.12.2.2(7). If all five of the following hold, the frost-depth minimums in Table 9.12.2.2 do not apply:

- the deck is not more than one storey
- its area is not more than 55 square metres
- the distance from finished ground to the underside of the joists is not more than 600 mm
- it does not support a roof
- it is not attached to another structure, unless differential movement can be shown not to affect that structure

If any one of those conditions fails, the full frost-depth rules apply and the footing design goes back to Table 9.12.2.2.

Soil type adds another layer. Ontario's Building Code, at sections 9.15.1.1(3) and (4) and 9.4.4.1(3), requires engineered design where a foundation sits on filled ground, peat or sensitive clay, including Leda clay. We found no City of Ottawa map for homeowners, so the builder or a geotechnical engineer is the right person to confirm whether it applies to your lot. If it does, the footing design moves to Section 4.2 of the Code, which means an engineer sizes it, not a prescriptive table.

Helical piles are one foundation option. The City's permit submission requirements ask for a helical pile layout and specifications where piles are used. Because piles are deep foundations, they also fall under Section 4.2 engineered design.

Before any digging starts, whoever is doing the work must submit a locate request through Ontario One Call at least five business days in advance. That applies to homeowners and contractors alike, and there is no charge for the

request.

The permit drawings the City requires must show the footing or foundation type, size and location, so the depth question gets answered on paper before a shovel goes in the ground.

Ask the builder how they will determine the required footing depth on your specific lot, and whether they expect soil conditions that would require an engineered design.

Q5

Floating deck rules under the Ontario Building Code?

The 2024 Ontario Building Code includes a specific exemption for floating decks under section 9.12.2.2(7). It lets a deck sit on shallow or surface-level foundations, skipping the frost-depth rules that normally apply, but only when five conditions are all met at the same time.

The five conditions for the floating-deck exemption

- Not more than one storey
- Not more than 55 square metres in area
- The distance from finished ground to the underside of the joists is not more than 600 mm (24 in.)
- The deck does not support a roof
- The deck is not attached to another structure, unless it can be demonstrated that differential movement will not adversely affect the performance of that structure

Every one of those must hold. If your deck is attached to the house, the fifth condition is the one to read closely: an attached deck qualifies only if it can be demonstrated that differential movement will not adversely affect the performance of the house. Ask your builder or designer how they would show that, or whether the drawings use the table depths instead.

The exemption for post anchoring works the same way. Section 9.23.6.2 of the 2024 Ontario Building Code says posts on low decks must be anchored against uplift and lateral movement, but that requirement does not apply where the platform meets the same five conditions above.

A few things the exemption does not change. Zoning still applies: both Zoning By-law 2008-250 and Zoning By-law 2026-50 are in effect for Ottawa, and the most restrictive provisions of both apply to your lot. The 2024 Ontario Building Code's guard rules still apply: if any side of the deck has a drop of more than 600 mm within 1.2 m of the edge, a guard at least 900 mm high is required for a deck serving one dwelling unit at or below 1 800 mm above

finished ground. Stair rise and run limits still apply. And the permit rules still apply: a deck attached to the house with a walking surface more than 600 mm above grade needs a permit regardless of size, and so does any deck that is the principal access to the building.

On soil, the floating exemption removes the frost-depth requirement, but it does not remove the need to think about what is under those footings. Where the ground is filled, peaty or contains sensitive clay such as Leda clay, section 9.15.1.1 of the 2024 Ontario Building Code directs the footing design to Section 4.2, which means an engineered design. A builder or engineer can tell you whether that applies to your lot.

Before any footing holes are dug, even shallow ones for a floating deck, a locate request through Ontario One Call is required by the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012: submit it at least five business days before you plan to dig, and it is free.

If your deck will sit at or below 600 mm above grade and is freestanding, your next step is confirming the zoning setbacks with the City and checking whether your soil conditions are straightforward enough for the floating exemption to work cleanly.

Disclaimer: This guide is provided for informational purposes only by Deck Builders Ottawa. It does not constitute professional advice. Always consult qualified contractors and your local building authority (the City of Ottawa's Building Code Services) before starting any deck project. Decks in Ottawa are built under the 2024 Ontario Building Code (O. Reg. 163/24) and the City's permit and zoning rules. Information is current as of November 15, 2026 and may change. Visit **deckbuildersottawa.ca** for the latest answers.