

Grading Permit Homeowner Guide

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WHAT IS A GRADING PERMIT?

A grading permit authorizes earthwork — moving, cutting, filling, or regrading soil on your property. It is a separate permit from the building permit that covers structural walls. Many homeowners don't know grading permits exist until a contractor mentions one mid-project.

A grading permit focuses on: volume of soil moved, drainage changes, slope stability, and erosion control. A building permit (for retaining walls) focuses on: structural adequacy of the wall itself, footing design, and code compliance.

WHEN IS A GRADING PERMIT REQUIRED?

Trigger	Common Threshold	Notes
Volume of soil moved	50–100 cubic yards (CY)	Most common trigger. Combined cut + fill in many jurisdictions.
Grade change near property line	1–2 ft change within 5–10 ft of line	Triggers permit even below volume threshold in many areas.
Work near environmental features	Any volume	Within floodplain, wetland buffer, or ECA — any grading needs permit.
Accompanying retaining wall	Any volume	Many jurisdictions auto-require grading permit with any retaining wall permit.
Slope steepness	15–25%+ slope	Steep slope overlays trigger permit requirements at lower volumes.

WHAT IS A CUBIC YARD? (QUICK REFERENCE)

1 cubic yard = 27 cubic feet = a cube 3 ft × 3 ft × 3 ft

Project Type	Approx. Cubic Yards	Permit Likely?
Minor leveling, reseeding	< 5 CY	No
Raised garden bed, small patio base	5–15 CY	No
Single retaining wall + footing	15–50 CY	Check locally
Major backyard resloping	50–150 CY	Yes — most jurisdictions
Standard swimming pool excavation (16×32, 5 ft deep)	95 CY	Yes
Large retaining wall system + terracing	100–300 CY	Yes

GRADING PERMIT VS. BUILDING PERMIT — KEY DIFFERENCES

	Grading Permit	Building Permit
Covers	Earthwork: cut, fill, drainage, slope	Structures: walls, buildings, footings
Issued by	Public works or building dept. (varies)	Building department
Inspects	Volume of soil, erosion control, drainage	Structural adequacy, code compliance
Required together?	Often yes — retaining wall projects frequently require both permits concurrently	

CITY-BY-CITY GRADING PERMIT THRESHOLDS

The threshold at which a grading permit is required varies significantly by jurisdiction. This table shows the combined cut + fill threshold for major U.S. cities and counties.

City / Jurisdiction	Threshold (CY)	Calculation Method
Nashville, TN (Metro)	100 CY	Combined cut + fill
Los Angeles, CA	50 CY	Combined cut + fill
Most California cities	50 CY	Some cities lower — verify locally
Denver, CO	50 CY	Combined cut + fill
Portland, OR	50 CY	Standard residential
Atlanta metro (Gwinnett, Cobb, etc.)	50 CY	Varies by county
Phoenix, AZ	100 CY	City of Phoenix
Dallas, TX	50 CY	City of Dallas
Houston / Harris County, TX	100 CY	Harris County unincorporated
Charlotte, NC (Mecklenburg)	100 CY	Combined
Seattle, WA (standard areas)	500 CY	Outside environmentally critical areas
Seattle, WA (ECA zones)	25 CY	Environmentally Critical Areas
Virginia (most jurisdictions)	50 CY	Combined cut + fill
Florida (most counties)	50 CY	Varies by county
Raleigh, NC (Wake County)	100 CY	Combined
Columbus, OH	50 CY	Combined cut + fill

THE GRADING PERMIT APPLICATION PROCESS

Step 1: Determine your jurisdiction

Grading permits are issued by cities (inside city limits) or counties (unincorporated areas). Search '[your city/county] grading permit' or call the public works or building department main line.

Step 2: Calculate your volume

Estimate cubic yards moved: $(\text{length ft} \times \text{width ft} \times \text{depth ft}) \div 27 = \text{cubic yards}$. Add cut and fill volumes together. Use the free grading calculator at RetainingWallPermit.pages.dev/tools/grading-calculator.html

Step 3: Prepare a grading plan

Shows existing and proposed contours, cut and fill volumes, drainage routing, and erosion control measures. For smaller projects near the threshold, some jurisdictions accept homeowner-drawn plans.

Step 4: Erosion control plan

Required with most grading permits: silt fencing, construction entrance, slope stabilization, and timing restrictions. Your contractor typically prepares this.

Step 5: Submit application and pay fee

Fees typically \$100–\$500 for residential projects. Submit grading and building permit applications concurrently when both are required.

Step 6: Schedule inspections

Grading permits typically require a progress inspection during grading and a final inspection after erosion controls are stabilized.

EROSION CONTROL REQUIREMENTS

Most grading permits require an erosion and sediment control plan. Standard required measures:

Silt fencing: Installed around the perimeter of all disturbed areas before grading begins. Must be properly trenched in and maintained throughout the project.

Construction entrance (gravel pad): A gravel-covered entrance prevents soil from being tracked onto public streets. Required at all vehicle access points.

Temporary seeding / straw wattles: Disturbed slopes must be stabilized within a specified time (typically 14–30 days) after grading using seed, straw, or erosion control blanket.

Timing restrictions: Many jurisdictions prohibit grading during heavy rain seasons or require that disturbed areas be stabilized before rain events forecast over 0.5 inches.

Inlet protection: Storm drain inlets near the work area must be protected from sediment using filter bags, rock socks, or other approved devices.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR BUILDING / PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

1. Does your jurisdiction issue grading permits for residential properties?
 2. What is the cubic yard threshold that triggers a grading permit here?
 3. Do you measure cut and fill separately or combined?
 4. Is a grading permit also required when I have a building permit for a retaining wall?
 5. Does a grading permit require a licensed civil engineer to prepare the grading plan?
 6. What erosion control measures do you require?
 7. Are there timing restrictions on grading in this jurisdiction?
 8. What inspections are required and how do I schedule them?
 9. Is my property in any environmentally critical area, flood zone, or steep slope overlay?
 10. What is the current review time for residential grading permit applications?
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Disclaimer: This guide provides general educational information. Grading permit requirements vary significantly by jurisdiction and change over time. Always verify current requirements with your local building or public works department. RetainingWallPermit.pages.dev is not affiliated with any government agency.