



J&A Deck & Fence Reveals How Summer Drought Affects Deck Footings and Fence Post Stability

September 02, 2026

GERMANTOWN, MD - September 02, 2026 -

J&A Deck & Fence is drawing attention to how one of the driest and hottest summers on record in the Mid-Atlantic is affecting the soil that supports decks and fences, and what property owners can watch for as conditions persist into late summer.

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor, roughly 71 percent of Maryland was under active drought as of mid-July 2026, with portions of the state classified in severe and extreme drought categories. National Weather Service records place this summer among the five warmest starts in 155 years of Washington-area observations, with rainfall running below average for the period. The Climate Prediction Center has forecast above-normal temperatures continuing through late August, suggesting the pattern is unlikely to reverse quickly.

Those conditions matter to outdoor structures because of what happens below the surface. Soils across Montgomery County belong to the Piedmont group and are generally clay-heavy, formed from weathered

igneous and metamorphic rock. Clay holds moisture when wet and hardens and cracks as it dries. That volume change is what places stress on the ground surrounding footings and posts. Once cracks open at the surface, water from later rainfall travels deeper into the soil profile than it otherwise would, and the shrink and swell cycle tends to repeat rather than settle.

"Most homeowners assume winter is when the ground causes problems, because that is when frost heave gets talked about," said Josh Arrington, Owner of J&A Deck & Fence. "A long dry stretch moves soil too, just in the opposite direction. The fence post that starts leaning in August has usually been working loose since June."

Deck footings across the region are set below roughly 30 inches, which is the frost depth commonly applied in Maryland. At that depth, footings bear on soil that stays comparatively stable through seasonal swings. The soil closer to the surface is the layer that responds most sharply to a prolonged dry spell, expanding and contracting as moisture content changes. Fence posts sit within that active zone more directly than deck footings do, which is a large part of why fence lines often show visible movement before decks do.

Arrington added that shrink and swell behavior is not uniform across a service area or even across a single neighborhood. Soil series vary over short distances, and two properties on the same street can respond differently to identical weather. Slope, natural drainage patterns, tree cover, proximity to downspouts and grading changes, and the age and construction method of the structure itself all influence how much movement appears and how quickly it becomes noticeable.

"There is no single answer that applies to every yard," Arrington said. "What we look at is how water moves across that specific property, what is already showing signs of movement, and how the structure was built in the first place."

Signs worth noting on an existing structure include new gaps opening in the soil around posts, a gate that has stopped latching cleanly or now drags at one corner, fence sections that no longer line up along the run, deck stairs or a landing that has settled unevenly, or railing that feels less rigid than it did earlier in the season. None of these confirms a structural problem on its own. Each indicates that the ground has moved and that a closer evaluation is a reasonable next step, particularly on structures that are already a decade or more old.

The pattern also has implications for repairs completed during a dry stretch. Soil that has hardened and cracked behaves differently during excavation and backfill than the same soil would in spring, and material that is compacted while unusually dry can settle further once normal moisture returns. Work performed under drought conditions benefits from accounting for the ground returning to its typical state later in the year.

The same considerations apply to projects still in the planning stage. Site drainage, soil behavior, footing

depth, post-setting method, and the way water is directed away from the structure are decisions made before construction begins, and they largely determine how well a deck or fence handles seasonal ground movement across the decades that follow. Structures built without attention to those factors tend to reveal the shortfall gradually, through cumulative small movements rather than a single obvious failure.

Forecasters have pointed to a strengthening El Nino pattern bringing higher humidity and more frequent thunderstorm activity to the Mid-Atlantic later in the summer. Rain arriving on hardened, cracked clay does not absorb the way it would into soil at normal moisture content, which can produce standing water and surface runoff near structures where water would ordinarily soak in. The transition between the two conditions, rather than either condition alone, is often when movement becomes most apparent.

Founded in 2020 and based in Germantown, Maryland, J&A Deck & Fence designs, builds, and repairs decks, fences, patios, porches, and outdoor living spaces for residential and commercial property owners across Montgomery County. Owner Josh Arrington has worked in the trade for 12 years.

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J&A Deck And Fence

J&A Deck & Fence is a Germantown, MD deck builder serving Montgomery County and the Washington Metro Area. Founded by Josh Arrington with over 10 years of Central Maryland experience

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