

MARY McGRORY

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Throwing In the Trowel

YOU KNOW us by our dirty fingernails. We walk funny too. We are gardeners, and this is our time. The winter, though mild, was long, and we are out there on our knees, with our trowels in our hands and visions in our heads.

We understand as well as anyone about the importance of clipping, snipping, pruning, even the occasional uprooting. Properly done, these exercises can make plants stronger and cause them to put forth what the garden catalogues call "luxuriant blooms from June through October."

So the work of those other gardeners in the House Budget Committee is at least intelligible to us, at least part of it. It is just that the head gardener, Rep. John R. Kasich of Ohio, the Republican wonder boy, is not in all cases following the soundest principles of horticulture in the garden of government.

Too much cutting, and a green and growing thing becomes a dry stick. The deeper problem is that Republicans can't plant. As a party, they just don't like new growth.

They have tender shoots in their care, poor children who don't have anyone at home to read to them or talk to them or teach them to say,

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Mary McGrory is a Washington Post columnist.

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"Please," "Thank you" and "I'm sorry." Head Start has been a life saver for them. It nurtures them and guides them through the complexities of shapes and colors, numbers and letters. Kasich and his under-gardeners decided the program needed pruning. They are wrong.

Did they think about it? Did they tell themselves that the parents of these children (most often it's only one) would take up home education, a pet, a favorite right-wing pipe dream? Did they hope that a Ross Perot would rise up, open his wallet, as he has in Dallas, and privatize Head Start, Lyndon Johnson's most worthy heritage, the last best hope of poor children to avoid being humiliated into the ground in kindergarten? We don't know. But cutting down on Head Start is like sticking a plant into the soil without any water or peat moss for encouragement. It has small chance of prospering.

The oldsters must pull up their socks too. The House gardeners feel that seniors might be discouraged from getting sick and running up those huge Medicare bills. And funds for letting them stay home in familiar surroundings with nice neighbors have to be chopped too. If Uncle Sam has to send them to nursing homes, where they will be reminded every day and in every way how old and sick and alone they are, it will cost more. But maybe, being miserable, they won't live so long. If we're not going to baby babies, why should we baby old folks? Who ever promised them a rose garden?

As they munch on their dog-food lunch—who can afford both rent and prescriptions?—they might find solace in the realization that they are making someone happy, i.e., those who will benefit from the tax cut that Kasich has protected from the winds of revolution. Surely they will understand that House Republicans have to live up to their contract promise to cut taxes. Seniors are not too old to learn that they must not be selfish and must sacrifice for their betters.

We gardeners understand how all this happened. Gardening is nothing but a series of interruptions and false starts. For instance, you set out, trowel in hand, to plant some impatiens when you pass an errant strand of ivy. You go and get your clipper and fall on your knees and start snipping. You find there is more than you thought and you absent-mindedly drop the trowel in the ivy, and when you finally remember what you started out to do, you can't find it, and decide you must make yourself a cup of tea.

Budgeteers work more by night than by day, of course, and always indoors. But the same hazards exist. What if you are on your way to trim Head Start and you are diverted by the savings to be had uprooting the Department of Energy? Someone elated by the news sends out for pizza and soon the outlays for 2002 are covered in a blob of tomato and cheese, and a cup of coffee has been knocked over on the spreadsheets on the numbers on the unearned income tax, and someone suggests you call it a night.

Maybe members of the House Budget Committee would do well to follow Voltaire's advice to "cultivate your garden." They will surely do less harm, especially if someone wrestles the shears away and warns them that budget assumptions are no good as fertilizer.

Tell them the eavesdropping is much better in the garden world. If you go to Johnson's Flower Center and pass by a duo deep in dialogue amid the annuals, you can hear something really provocative, like "Verbena loves the heat." Doesn't that summon up the picture of a strumpet, topless on the beach at St. Tropez? By contrast, here's the kind of guff you'll hear from an economics adviser at an administration budget séance: "It exposes the macro-economy to considerable downside risk."

Republicans ought to think about it.