



# The Grassroots Community Ecosystem

**Ian Solomon-Kawall** shares how he's used permaculture to design an ecosystem that helps local people to grow food, connect with the Earth, learn new skills and eventually find employment

Ian Solomon-Kawall aka KMT Freedom Teacher is a guide who uses art [hip-hop] for social awareness and social cohesion. He is co-founder of the May Project Gardens which connects people to nature through personal, social and economic transformation.

New Microphone Cyphas was his main project which provided safe spaces for UK hip-hop and international artists to perform and come together in a format called a Cypha. The Cypha was the opposite of an MC battle, where artists compete to see who is the best, instead being a real community cohesive format for hip-hop artists to come together to hear and express their lyrics usually in freestyle format. It is no surprise that MCs gather in a circle (the shape we see in Nature) to perform at these events. This format became popular almost decades later with MTV Cypha and UK Beatboxer Beardy Man and Leen.

Ian has spent over 20 years leading positive social change and raising awareness for a multitude of social issues through the powerful words and rhythms of hip-hop music and a non-exhaustive passion for the environment and conservation.

Using permaculture design principles, Ian has created a grassroots community ecosystem, which is working for the community, with the community.





## How has your own experience shaped the projects you're involved in?

There are four main aspects that I've focussed on over the last 15 years:

**MENTAL HEALTH:** The majority of my youth I cared for my Mum who suffered from a multitude of illnesses, including bipolar. She passed away in 2005. Sixteen years later I'm still working on my personal healing with counselling, martial arts and meditation.

**EDUCATION:** In 2017, I discovered that I'm dyslexic. My test results were in the 90% range. I went through all my schooling and work life without a diagnosis. I have just secured a professional admin / PA to alleviate this burden.

**HOUSING:** My home is the hub and base for all the projects; it carries a lot of responsibility. Grant funding isn't an option for me, so I have created a methodology that places people care at the centre of a living economy.

**EMPLOYABILITY:** I've applied for about eight jobs in the last three years, the latest being Head of Activism for Eco Talent at an organisation called Feedback. Despite navigating my way into some consultancy work for the same company, I was not even shortlisted for this role. As a consultant, compared to my counterparts, I'm not paid the full rate of other consultants. I would like to have the space to invest more resources developing a Consultancy and Training course, which increases racial justice and awareness in organisations, so that others in my community and beyond are given equal opportunities.

## Can you tell us about your grassroots ecosystem?

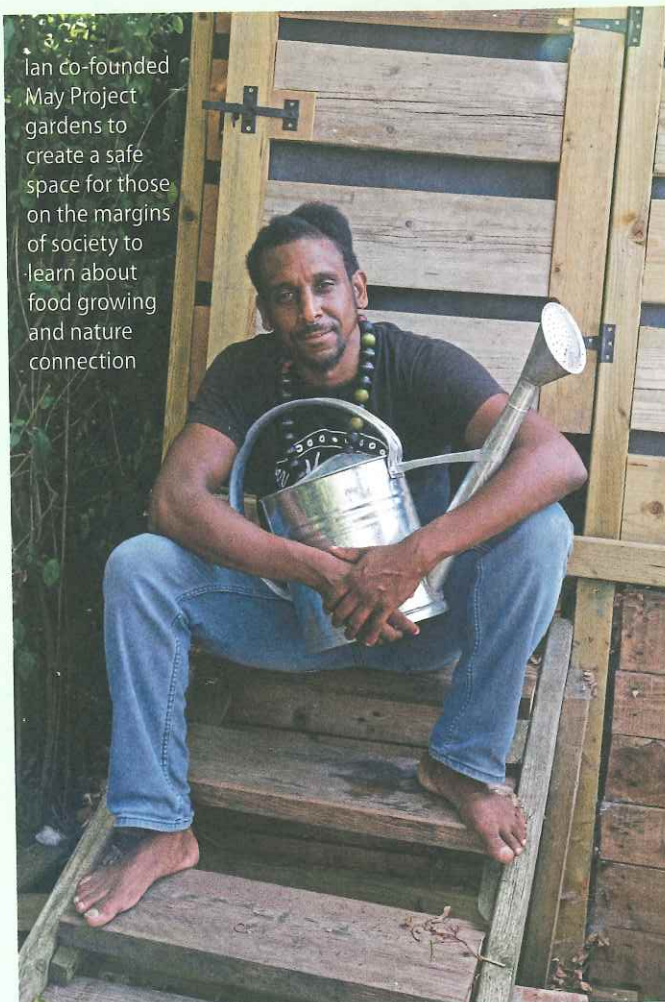
I'm one example offering an alternative vision to 'Build Back Greener'.<sup>†</sup> Over 15 years I've demonstrated this locally in Morden, London, by creating a Grassroots Community Ecosystem, consisting of:

- May Project Gardens MPG (Community Hub)
- Hip-Hop Garden (Transformative Youth Program)
- Come We Grow (Outreach and Fundraising Event)
- KMT Freedom Teacher (Eco Artist for Social Change), [www.3kmt.co.uk](http://www.3kmt.co.uk)
- Bee Rooted Consultancy (Environmental and Biodiversity Inclusion Trainer and Consultant)

Although COVID-19 disproportionally affects the most vulnerable in society, like me, it has allowed me time to reflect and bring into focus the important aspects of my work.

## Please tell us about May Project Gardens (MPG), which we featured in PM93

MPG was established in 2006 from the derelict garden of my mother's council house. I wanted to create a legacy for her with a community space, open to the public. For nine years it was self-funded through working several part-time and freelance jobs. It is a safe space, a brave space, and is open to the public 2-3 days a week. The project allows people to connect, learn about food growing and permaculture.



Ian co-founded May Project gardens to create a safe space for those on the margins of society to learn about food growing and nature connection

The garden itself was designed using permaculture by co-founder Randi Mayers. He is a Jedi of permaculture with a particular focus on Earth Care and when he departed to start his own family, I had no idea how I was going to maintain and manage what he had created.

I spent the first year observing and living in the garden, which enabled me to understand its seasons, microclimates and how it changes throughout each day. This gave me a fundamental understanding before implementing my own design elements.

Although I've made numerous mistakes within the garden (see panel) and the project itself, they have been my greatest teacher, transforming myself and how I look at the world.

## Working for the community

Half of England is owned by 25,000 landowners, so it was important for me to provide a space for the landless. The open days are for anyone to come to learn about food growing and permaculture in an experiential and participatory way. The garden gives examples of simple methods that others can adopt, such as rainwater harvesting systems, a compost toilet, herb spiral and urban forest garden, ponds and a mini orchard. A straw bale outdoor classroom provides a year-round space for the Hip-Hop Garden programme, which I set up to support young black men (but not exclusively) who are struggling to find work.





Ian in the veg garden

## Lessons Learned

- \* I used compost from the compost toilet to feed and mulch fruit bushes and trees, but I think the compost was too 'raw' and it led to disease.
- \* We recently created a straw bale classroom and the lime from the structure may have leached into the pond, which has caused many problems for the amphibians.
- \* Giving some people too much responsibility for the maintenance and management of the garden when they lack experience in permaculture has led to damage across the site.
- \* Thinking that I knew as much about permaculture and Earth Care as Randi – I don't think I ever will. My expertise is People Care, and I am constantly learning.
- \* Putting others first in order to create, maintain and further the project. This has often led to me being burnt out and the direction of the project becoming unfocused.
- \* Not identifying that I was dyslexic earlier and not being able to explain the vision of the project and gain support, especially with funding.
- \* Giving people within the project too much power when I was diagnosed with dyslexia (2017) and needed support. This often led to a conflict of interest as they did not recognise the power of my dyslexia and my ability to think holistically.

## AQA accredited modules

**WELLBEING:** addressing trauma from racism and developing resilience. Much of our delivery is in natural environments which boost immunity (vitamin D) to fight against COVID-19. We advocate social workers, foster parents and participants of their right to be outside at least once a day and provide socially distanced work experience at May Project Gardens.

**HIP-HOP:** using music to educate young people about permaculture, nature, and create confidence and literacy and verbal skills.

**EVENT MANAGEMENT:** young people working together and gain skills from what they enjoy as opposed to getting a job. Several of the participants DJ and provide customer service at our events.

**ENTERPRISE/EMPLOYMENT:** addresses challenges of entering the increasingly competitive labour market. Presents enterprise (especially green enterprise) as a viable alternative to employment. One participant has gained an apprenticeship at Sutton Community Farm, a community-owned mixed crop vegetable farm growing veg according to organic principles.

**FOOD GROWING AND COOKING:** 60% of illness comes from poor diets. The food industry thrived during COVID-19, but it is one of the least diverse industries. One of our young participants got work experience at Haven Coffee, a pop up coffee shop set up by refugee Usman Khalid, with each coffee sale helping to support and raise awareness for refugee communities across the UK.



Come We Grow is an immersive fundraiser for the project, bringing together musicians, MCs, performers and activists to collaborate and awaken their eco-consciousness through music, dance and song



The May Project Garden team



The project engages urban youth with Nature through hip-hop; it transcends language and cultural backgrounds. Five AQA accredited modules are taught (see panel).

The more recent project, Team Away Days, focuses on wellbeing, mental health and helping people adjust to the return to work after the COVID-19 outbreak. We believe that looking after the wellbeing of staff will result in happier, healthier and more productive work-spaces.

Our Come We Grow events are an immersive celebration of our creative approach to environmentalism. Acclaimed musicians, DJs, artists and activists come together to awaken the eco-conscience through music, dance, art and collaboration.

### How do you use permaculture design in your projects?

Environmental health and proximity to Nature also plays a key role in marking differences in experiences between ethnic groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. People of colour are more likely to live in urban areas with a 'deficiency of access' to green spaces, defined by the London Plan in terms of how far households need to travel to access a space, but also its quality and size.

So my role is to find ways to make visitors feel welcomed and safe in the garden. This is a massive opportunity to learn about myself and people. Through communication and interacting with visitors we learn how the garden can work best for them but also what doesn't work so well, which allows us to accept feedback, and adapt. My focus has always been on People Care, so we make sure that everyone who visits is given the attention they need.

My approach embodies permaculture and its principles.

Diversity reduces vulnerability to a variety of threats and takes advantage of the unique nature of the environment

in which it resides. Hence why there are so many different elements of the ecosystem. Whenever I was blocked with the project, I created alternative strands which have now become the ecosystem, i.e. when Randi the co-founder left, I spent a year in the garden, literally following his footsteps. I soon realised I could combine my own skills within community education and creativity to create the Hip-Hop Garden.

In permaculture we know that edges and interfaces are where the most interesting events take place. These are often the most valuable, diverse and productive elements in the system and the same applies to people; receiving more resources and support would make these strands more resilient. This runs through all elements of the ecosystem, from the community garden where I pioneered making green space accessible and safe for people on the margins of society, including people from African, Caribbean and Asian backgrounds, women, people with mental health issues and refugees, etc.

More recently we launched a mentor scheme to provide a six month program for Black, African, Caribbean and Asian employees, providing a pathway for senior management positions for those who are underrepresented in the business. This was done through my training organisation, Bee Rooted Consultancy, and with my business partner and mentor Ian Philips from Lush UK.

† The UK Government has set out a 10 Point Plan for a 'Green Industrial Revolution', pledging a £3 billion spending package titled the 'Build Back Greener' initiative.

**Ian Solomon-Kawall** has over 20 years of leading positive social change and combines his love for music and Nature in all his work, including May Project Gardens ([www.mayproject.org](http://www.mayproject.org)). He mentors young people, offers safe spaces for learning and raises awareness to a multitude of social issues.