

Khari Diop on Community Composting: A Georgia Climate Digest Interview

Summary

Do you think of composting as something magical and majestic? If not, this conversation with expert community composter and urban farmer Khari Diop will change your mind. In this interview, Khari, of Think Green, Historic Westside Gardens, and Truly Living Well, joins host Eriqah Vincent to talk about his 27-year career in community organizing and urban agriculture, how a Drawdown Georgia grant helped launch Westside Compost, and why he believes composting connects directly to food sovereignty and community self-sufficiency.

Key Takeaways

- Khari has worked in community gardening and urban agriculture since 1997, and currently manages the Food Well Alliance's community composting lab at Truly Living Well, in addition to co-founding the Westside Compost Project with Historic Westside Gardens.
- A Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions & Equity Grant helped upgrade the community composting lab's infrastructure and launch Westside Compost, which picked up a ton of food waste from community members in a single month.
- Khari co-authored Drawdown Georgia's "How to Compost at Home in Georgia" toolkit alongside Carol Hunter, former executive director of Truly Living Well, and Rosario Hernandez, current executive director of Historic Westside Gardens.
- Khari connects his work to the concept of Sankofa, an Akan term meaning "to go back and fetch it," describing his generation's work reclaiming traditional foodways that were stigmatized through slavery.
- Khari's advice for beginners: check out the toolkit, start small with a pile or a small bin, and don't get discouraged, because once you see you have the power to create new earth, your life will never be the same.

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Eriqah Vincent: Thank you all once again for joining us. I'm so excited, because I'm joined by Khari Diop with Think Green — but I also love the work of the organizations you're working with, Historic Westside Gardens and Truly Living Well. So I'm really glad you're here with us, thank you so much for being here, Khari.

Khari Diop: I appreciate it, it's my pleasure, thank you for the invitation, it's good to be here.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely, so let's jump right in. I have a couple of questions I want to cover, but I know our conversation should flow organically — I know how I am, so I'll probably have more

questions inside of it. Tell us about yourself, and about all the work you're doing around composting and urban agriculture in Atlanta.

Khari Diop: Good afternoon to all of the viewing or listening public. My name is Khari Diop, I'm a native Atlantan, and I've been involved in community gardening and urban agriculture, really the whole community greening movement, since '97. I've designed and built out home gardens, and gardens and farms at preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, community gardens, urban farms, composting systems, and I've offered education, support, and guidance for growers all across metro Atlanta, for really the past 27 years, all of my working career.

So I currently manage the Food Well Alliance's community composting lab at the Truly Living Well Center for Natural Urban Agriculture, and I have a couple of urban farms I'm working on developing. I'm also proud to be a co-founder and member of the Westside Compost Project, alongside the great team at Historic Westside Gardens.

Eriqah Vincent: Awesome, yeah — I also love Historic Westside Gardens, I don't know if I've ever been on the property, I think I mostly watch the reels and things you all have online, but I have been to Truly Living Well, so I'm familiar with those two organizations you work with. Sounds like you do a lot when it comes to urban agriculture and composting — what does a typical day look like for you?

Khari Diop: It varies from day to day, you know, probably like most of us. But Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I'm mainly helping the team over at Historic Westside Gardens build out their operation over at Elm Street Farm on Inghams Avenue, in the morning and early afternoon. Then I usually head over to the compost lab at Truly Living Well, to check in with my co-manager, Walter Davis III, and finish up whatever tasks we have over there, whether that's processing the incoming food scraps, screening the finished compost, cleaning up, or meeting with people.

Then Tuesday and Thursday, I try to dedicate time to get into my own farms — one at Atlanta Good Shepherd Church over in the West End, and one at Hunger Has No Color in Oakland City — getting those in order. And then the weekends, I'm playing catch-up with whatever I didn't get to during the week. I'm also a father of four, I've got two adult children, an eight-year-old, and a toddler, so I'm doing my best to keep all of that family and work-life balanced.

Eriqah Vincent: Yes, sounds like you've got a lot of moving parts on your responsibility wheel, which I do understand, as also a parent myself. So we know that urban agriculture is so important on so many levels, crossing so many different avenues when it comes to food justice, when it comes to environmental justice. Why are you particularly so passionate about composting and urban ag, and what got you interested in this type of work, especially as a native Atlantan?

Khari Diop: I mean, we all gotta eat, right, that's one thing we all have in common, everybody eats. And for me, composting is life, it's death, and it's everything in between. As a grower, I've been practicing sustainable and organic methods since before those were even common terms, and I've always been a consumer of compost, since I was a youngster helping out in my family's gardens — every summer, my mother would have me hauling sand and black cow manure, and adding compost to the soil, to enrich it, so she could grow flowers, ornamentals, herbs.

But I really became fascinated with the science and the art of composting back in 2011, when I was building a community garden and an urban farm in the East Lake community. I was working with an organization called the Southeastern Horticultural Society — they'd been hired on by the

East Lake Foundation to build a community garden, with the goal of connecting folks who lived in East Lake, formerly East Lake Meadows, with the surrounding community. That community was changing rapidly with gentrification, and they were really focused on making sure there were tangible ties between everybody who lived in the community, and a garden is a perfect place to do that.

During that time, we had a weekly farmers market on-site, and our farmers market manager, a woman named Corrine Coe, was a compost guru, and really opened my eyes to the magic and majesty of composting. She recruited me and a couple of other urban farmers, some beautiful brothers by the name of Chris Edwards and Eugene Cook, to found this compost cooperative called Terra Nova, and the rest is kind of history. But to answer your question a bit more deeply, I've wanted to be a farmer since I was a teenager, and when I came into political consciousness, one of the basic concepts that stuck with me was the necessity of community self-sufficiency, which included food, clothes, and shelter.

I went to school for carpentry, learned how to sew, and in '97 I went through an AmeriCorps program called Eco Watch, where I met some of the pioneers of the local community gardening and urban ag movement — like Bobby Wilson, from Metro Atlanta Urban Farm; Fred Conrad, who was with Atlanta Community Food Bank at the time, and has since been doing stellar work with the Food Well Alliance; Sheldon Fleming, who was also one of the early pioneers, and had an amazing community garden and urban farm in DeKalb County, in Decatur; and Cashawn Myers, who was the founder of an organization called HABESHA Inc. All of those folks were some of my early comrades and teachers, and really impacted the person I am today.

Eriqah Vincent: Fantastic, and you definitely mentioned some people whose names I recognize, but also whose work I recognize. I'd love to hear more about the urban growers in Atlanta — I think it's very easy for folks to not recognize the work that especially people in the Black community are doing when it comes to growing, being outside, being in farming, and certainly we know there's a lot of historical context around the stigma of those pieces. But Black people have always grown, have always composted, have always been sustainable, before, as you said, those words were buzzwords in the work we do today. I love to see that brought into the modern age, really Black people embracing the history, the tradition, and the culture around those pieces, and bringing that in and uplifting a lot of the work that urban growers and urban farmers are doing. I think that's really phenomenal, super important work, so thank you for the work you do.

Khari Diop: Yeah, well, you're probably familiar with the term Sankofa — it's an Akan term, which means "to go back and fetch it," or "return and fetch it." So many of us who are involved in this are doing exactly that, going back and fetching those old traditional foodways, and ways of providing for ourselves, our families, and our communities. I love to see it — I think, sometimes, it's easy, as you said, to take for granted all of the groundwork, all the many years that have gone into creating this movement that's really blossoming now, which I love to see. We're definitely involved in that Sankofa work of bringing our people back to the consciousness of where our sustenance, where our lives come from, which is the land.

Eriqah Vincent: And really fetching that knowledge that was stigmatized based on — I have to say it — the transatlantic slave trade. That thing that was stigmatized, like you said, going back to get it because it was stolen from us, and almost demonized in such a way because of the ways we were exploited. But that is the work that is inside of us, and so that's so important — I really appreciate the work that you're doing. I am not a grower myself, although I'd love to be.

Khari Diop: That's healing work — it's healing work. And you've got a couple houseplants around, so you are a grower.

Eriqah Vincent: I am keeping some houseplants alive, thankfully, so I am a grower, I try to. I just really, really admire this work — what is something that might surprise us about the work that you do?

Khari Diop: Probably the diversity of skills that I get to use on a daily basis — of course there's production, agriculture, but also mechanic work, business development, accounting, community organizing. Oftentimes I think we get a certain idea about what it is that an urban farmer or agriculturalist does, but really, we're small business owners, and we're community stewards. So, if you name it, I probably do it.

Eriqah Vincent: This question is somewhat obvious, in many ways, but I think there are many answers that might not be, so I'd love to hear your thoughts on it. How does your work connect to the issues of equity and food justice — which you touched on a bit — but also climate and environmental justice, in the state of Georgia specifically?

Khari Diop: Right, so, I've lived and worked in predominantly Black and Brown communities for all of my life, so those issues have been intrinsic in my daily existence since the get-go — I'm almost like a fish in native water, so much so that I don't even call them out much anymore, they're just woven into my every waking breath. But a long time ago, I recognized the necessity of ensuring that our communities were food secure. Many people are familiar with the terms "food desert," or even "food swamp," and the need for us to try to move toward food sovereignty, where we're controlling the production, the distribution, and the recovery of the resource, and the blessing, that is food. So each and every one of those very important issues is infused into everything I do. I know that oftentimes our communities — the newest term I've heard is "frontline communities" — are most affected by the negative aspects of climate change that we're all living through, so I'm honored that I'm able to institute some solutions on the ground, right in these communities.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, a lot of the communities you're working in, I'm very familiar with, having gone to school in Atlanta — I'm from New Jersey originally, but you're a Spelman graduate too, right?

Khari Diop: Yeah, but you're a Spelman graduate, right?

Eriqah Vincent: I am a Spelman graduate, yeah, I've been in Atlanta for almost 20 years now, it'll be 20 years in two years.

Khari Diop: It flies by, doesn't it?

Eriqah Vincent: It does, it flies by, I can't believe I've been here 20 years. But yeah, I remember when I was at Spelman, we had a Publix that I went to, to get food on campus, and then we didn't — okay, that's right — and then we had a Walmart, and then we didn't. And then that area did become — I think "food apartheid" is another terminology we're using now — but it did become a space where we couldn't get fresh food. And so I think another reason why the work you all are doing at Historic Westside Gardens, at Think Green, at Truly Living Well is so important, and I'm so glad to have seen you all get the recognition you deserve, both from a media standpoint and a communication standpoint, but also resources pouring in to the work

you're doing, because I think it's so valuable, important, and necessary, from an equity perspective.

Khari Diop: Well, you'd probably be happy to know, you may know already, that Spelman has a wonderful food studies program.

Eriqah Vincent: I did hear that, yes, that's beautiful.

Khari Diop: Yeah, your Spelman sisters are heavy, heavy in the movement, and got their feet on the ground trying to create and sustain some of these solutions.

Eriqah Vincent: Yes, that does make me very, very proud, and I'm very glad to hear it. So, speaking of Truly Living Well, Think Green, and Historic Westside Gardens — you all received a Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions and Equity Grant. Congratulations. Tell us more about how that grant has helped expand the work being done by these organizations — I can only imagine, but I'd love to hear some examples from you.

Khari Diop: Yeah, this grant has been such a boon, such a blessing — from being able to improve the infrastructure of the community composting lab, to now creating this whole new community-based and led enterprise, Westside Compost, which, I'm proud to say, has picked up a ton of food waste from our community members in the past month. It's grown exponentially, and it's really one of my proudest accomplishments of the past few years, to see this team that has grown and really reached into the community, met our people where they were at, and changed the paradigm for what we're doing with what was formerly considered our food waste, but is now recognized as our food resource.

None of it would have been possible without these critical funds — from the amazing Ray C. Anderson Foundation, and the whole Drawdown Georgia movement. So we're feeling especially blessed and optimistic. We've actually partnered with ECO-Action, which is another sort of legacy community uplift organization, and they're now spreading the gospel of community composting to all the communities they're working in — we're working hand in hand with them to bring more people into the fold.

Eriqah Vincent: Fantastic, we love ECO-Action, we love Dr. Yomi Noibi. Absolutely, I love to see when the community organizations are working together, that's beautiful. What are the goals for the future of these organizations, and the future of the work you all are doing in the community composting space?

Khari Diop: Well, we're going to keep on educating our folks about the power they hold to combat climate change, by keeping food out of the landfills, and pushing the envelope on the homegrown solutions of local food production and community composting. Pedal to the metal, we're not letting up, we're going to keep on keeping on.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, absolutely — and a follow-up question for that would be, how do you all want to inspire more communities? Atlanta is ripe for this type of inspiration when it comes to urban ag — how are you looking to inspire more communities, both around the state and around the country, and are there ways you've already done that, that you'd like to uplift and highlight in this moment?

Khari Diop: Yeah, we're going to continue to grow our membership base — right now we're doing residential pickups, where we're actually going to folks' homes and picking up buckets of food

scraps from them on a weekly basis. Our goal was to reach 100 families by the end of this year, and we're on track to do that. We also have a couple of businesses we pick up from as well, and we want to continue to grow that, and just serve as an example of a way this can increase the economic mobility of the community, the environmental sustainability of the community, and the cohesiveness of the community. Because as we're growing together, and composting together, we're really coming together, getting to know our neighbors, and educating each other.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely — y'all make sure you reach out to the folks over at Think Green, Truly Living Well, and Historic Westside Gardens, get them at your table to speak, or resource them, and make sure you're reaching out, so we can share a lot of this really beautiful information and wisdom, because I think so many communities, both around metro Atlanta — I certainly know my own community, I live in DeKalb County — could definitely benefit from some of that wisdom, but also urban communities around the country can benefit from it too. So I'm hoping people from other places also see this and are inspired.

Khari Diop: Yeah, for sure — just to sort of edify what's going on in DeKalb County, I just heard that the City of Clarkston is going to be doing a residential composting pickup program, they're going to be trialing that, so be on the lookout for that. The movement is definitely growing.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, it definitely is. So, speaking of Drawdown Georgia, speaking of the grant you all received — you coauthored Drawdown Georgia's Composting Toolkit. For everyone watching, Drawdown Georgia's website has lots of toolkits, in lots of different ways you can reduce your carbon footprint and be part of some of these climate and equity solutions. You coauthored Drawdown Georgia's "How to Compost at Home in Georgia" toolkit, free to the public — tell us a little more about that toolkit, and why Georgians should take a look at it.

Khari Diop: Yeah, I did — I coauthored that along with the former executive director of Truly Living Well, Carol Hunter, and the current executive director of Historic Westside Gardens, Rosario Hernandez. It's a basic primer for anyone interested in learning about the power and impact of the process of composting, in all its forms, from backyards to small farms. I think it really gives folks an eye-opening education about what it is they can do, right in their own homes, to combat climate change, by keeping food waste out of landfills. So I'd encourage everybody to check it out — if you're looking for a starting place, for information you can trust, believe in, and that's verified, check out that toolkit.

Eriqah Vincent: Yes, please do, I have it open on my computer, I will be checking it out for my own home — I live in DeKalb County, in the Stonecrest area, so I'll be checking that out. And, as someone who — you told me I'm a grower, so I appreciate that, I'm going to take that to heart.

Khari Diop: We need as many as we can get at this point — Black farmers make up 1% of farmers nationally, so we want to encourage as many people to dig in the dirt again as possible.

Eriqah Vincent: For sure, for sure — we have a backyard we're trying to get ready, and I'm like, I see a space where I'm like, I feel like that could be a garden.

Khari Diop: You can do it. It's gonna happen in divine time.

Eriqah Vincent: Yes, amen to that. So what advice do you have, for me selfishly, but for others too, for anyone who wants to start composting or even growing in their own home? What starting advice do you have for us?

Khari Diop: For sure — I'd say check out the toolkit first and foremost, get engaged, educate yourself, there's a world of knowledge online and out in the community. Metro Atlanta is really blessed to have community gardens all over the place. As far as composting, I'd say build a pile, or buy a small bin if you can afford it, and start small, start manageable, don't get discouraged, you can do it — it's not rocket science, but it is addictive, and once you see that you have the power to create new earth, your life will never be the same.

Eriqah Vincent: That's powerful. That's powerful, I feel like there's some divine messaging in that, that's really, really cool. So thank you so much for sharing all your knowledge and wisdom with us today. As we close, my last question for you is — I think it's easy, I'm a Northerner, but I do love the South, and I love being an Atlanta resident, a metro Atlanta resident, now, but I think it's very easy, and I often have to correct people from home, because I think it's very easy to write off the South as a place where, whatever your political affiliation, a lot of us are trying to do things, and it's like, oh, can you do something like that in the South? And it's like, yes, there are people doing all — insert climate thing here, insert environmental justice thing here — there are folks doing that work, and doing it successfully. So I think it's really powerful and important for us to end these interviews on hope — what is giving you hope around climate solutions in our state of Georgia?

Khari Diop: I get inspired by all the work that I see and learn about in the Drawdown Georgia newsletters that come out regularly — I'm just amazed at everything going on in every corner of the state. I mean, we really got it going on in Georgia, and the movement is growing so fast, I feel like people are finally getting it, and getting active. And, Eriqah, I believe in us — I honestly believe we can create the solutions together. I think together we can solve this problem, and create a better future for ourselves, and for all those generations to come.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah. Absolutely, thank you so much, Khari. Thank you for your work, thank you for your wisdom, thank you for what you shared with us today, thank you for calling me a grower — I'm gonna tell everybody. I really appreciate you, and good luck, God bless on all the work you all are doing, and I hope you can continue to do it, and I hope folks continue to see the power, and continue to want to resource and support the work you all are doing, because I think it's really, really important. So thank you again for being with us.

Khari Diop: I appreciate it, thank you.

Eriqah Vincent: Thanks, everybody, for joining us — we'll see you next time.