**Mulches for Weed Control**

Mulch is any kind of material applied to the soil surface for protection or improvement of the area covered. Mulches contribute to weed management in organic crops by reducing weed seed germination, blocking weed growth, and favoring the crop by conserving soil moisture and sometimes by moderating soil temperature. Where a mulch layer is sufficiently deep, few weeds will grow. There are various types of mulches available and may be divided into synthetic and organic mulch.

**Advantages and Disadvantages of Mulching**

Advantages and disadvantages in using mulches for weed control are as follows:

**Synthetic Mulches**

Synthetic mulches like black polyethylene film (the most widely used plastic mulch) are laid on a prepared seedbed just before transplanting or seeding a vegetable crop through holes or slits cut into the mulch. Mechanization, with equipment such as tractor-drawn bed shapers, mulch layers, and planters, allows the farmer to mulch and plant a field (See Figure 14.2). Black plastic, other opaque materials and infrared-transmitting (IRT) mulch effectively block weed emergence, and promote soil warming and early crop growth.

**Organic Mulches**

Organic mulches cover the soil and provide many of the same benefits as cover crops, especially the prevention of soil erosion. **Many organic materials,** such as straw, leaves, pine needles, and wood chips, can be effective mulches. Straw and other materials that are easily decomposed are applied to strawberries and vegetables during the growing season. The mulch can be tilled in at the end of the season, where it will quickly decompose.

**NOP Guidelines for Mulches and Weed Barriers**

NOP has developed guidelines to help producers understand organic standards as they relate to the use of mulches and weed barriers. USDA Organic Regulations define mulch as any material that serves to suppress weed growth, moderate soil temperature, or conserve soil moisture. Mulches and weed barriers are production inputs on organic farms. All mulches and weed barriers, synthetic or non-synthetic, must be included in the producer’s annual Materials Inventory.